Heretical constructions of anarchist utopianism

This paper examines a relationship between heresy and utopianism forged in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century socialist histories to reveal a significant and pervasive fault-line in the ideological construction of anarchism. I look at Marxist narratives which trace the lineages of socialism to medieval religious dissent and show how the sympathetic assessment of European heretical movements was moulded by a critique of utopianism, understood as the rejection of materialist ‘science’. I argue that strands of this narrative have been woven into anarchism by looking at three accounts: E.V. Zenker’s Anarchism (1897), James Joll’s The Anarchists (1964/1979) and Saul Newman’s From Bakunin to Lacan (2001). Their dominant theme is that anarchism promises the transformation of corrupted nature, typically achieved though ecstatic violence, cataclysmic revolution and future perfection. I describe this Millenarian anarchism as a ‘straw man’ but rather than jettison ‘heresy’ as an investigative tool, I refer to a conception of heresy as choosing to present an alternative account. Using Martin Buber’s analysis of utopianism in Paths in Utopia (1949) and Michael Bakunin’s critique of political theology, I pair utopianism with the rejection of perfection and heresy with faith. This reframing of heresy corrects a deep-rooted, long-standing distortion of anarchist ideas.

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The Heretical Construction Of Anarchist Utopianism

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Abstract

This paper extracts two conceptions of heresy from nineteenth and twentieth-century socialist histories to develop an analysis of anarchist utopianism. I argue that socialist historians identified with earlier historical movements to promote an idea of heresy as the denial of orthodoxy. Applied to anarchism, this conception supports a critique of ‘blueprint utopianism’. As a heretical creed, anarchism is said to promise a perfect future and the transformation of corrupted human nature, usually though ecstatic violence and cataclysmic revolution. E.V. Zenker’s Anarchism; A Criticism and History of the Anarchist Theory (1897), James Joll’s The Anarchists (1964/1979) and Saul Newman’s From Bakunin to Lacan (2001) advance this reading. I set this conception against an idea of heresy as choosing, using Martin Buber’s discussion of anarchist utopianism (Paths in Utopia, 1949) and Michael Bakunin’s subversive narrative of the Genesis story and critique of political theology. I argue that Bakunin’s anarchist heresy rejects utopian perfection and that his conception is more deeply embedded in anarchist political thought than commentaries indicate. The contrast between these two conceptions of heresy thus reveals a pervasive fault in the historical construction of anarchism and recovers a current in the history of anarchist ideas to correct it.

Keywords: anarchism, Bakunin, utopianism, heretical politics, Martin Buber, political theology
Introduction

Heresy is an established but latent theme in European socialist histories. It barely registers in twentieth-century accounts of socialism and although it features prominently in nineteenth-century narratives, its analytical force derives from the evaluation utopianism. Understood as a form of anti-oppression politics and linked to medieval resistance movements, heresy seemed to offer a positive model for socialists and a hope for the future. Yet re-theorised through the lens of utopianism, these traditions and movements highlighted the limits of pre-socialist struggle, alerting socialists not to look back to the past or operate within the same parameters. In both cases, heresy helped pinpoint socialism’s precursors, but the latter provided the enduring conceptualisation.

The rich historical flavour of nineteenth-century socialism helps explain the conjunction of heresy with utopianism. Stung by anti-socialist critiques of socialism’s alien character, leading figures in the European socialist movement produced a series of histories which, in different ways, attested to socialism’s deep, popular roots. William Morris’s fictionalised account of the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, *The Dream and John Ball* (1888), Eduard Bernstein’s English history, *Socialism and Democracy in the great English Revolution* (1895) and Karl Kautsky’s *The Forerunners of Socialism* (1895) were some of the notable results. This was a diverse literature, but the constancy of the aspiration for liberation from exploitation and oppression was a dominant theme. The assertion provoked two related secondary questions. The first was about the duration of socialism’s gestation and the second about its possibility in modern conditions. Addressing the first, socialist historians usually found the explanation for socialism’s protracted development somewhere in the interplay between economic conditions and intellectual critique, organisational strength and political resolve, though there was considerable disagreement about the primacy of material and ideational factors at work and the relative weighting of the elements within each category. Having investigated the complexities of socialism’s pre-history, nineteenth-century intellectuals turned to the second question of possibility. Here, they confronted directly the tension between their forebears’ inability
to realise the human aspiration for socialist freedom and their own increased capacity, thus pinpointing the changes that had occurred in the course socialism’s evolution.

The historical and theoretical investigations that these questions prompted stimulated particular interest in the relationship of socialism to the early Christianity and unorthodox Christian movements. Engels’ ‘On the History of Early Christianity’ provided a framework. Like the workers’ movements, Christianity was ‘a movement of oppressed people’ a ‘religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed’. Admitting that Christianity was otherworldly and that socialists were fixated on enjoying earthly material changes, Engels noted that both preached ‘forthcoming salvation from bondage and Misery’. Moreover, socialists and Christians were alike ‘persecuted and baited’ for their trouble. Their adherents were ‘despised and made the objects of exclusive laws, the former as enemies of the human race, the latter as enemies of the state, enemies of religion, the family, social order’. Overcoming these perils, Christianity and socialism were also transformative movements. In this respect, Christian endurance was a source of revolutionary hope. Indeed, Engels’ brave prediction was that the march of socialism would be greatly accelerated. It had taken three hundred years for Christianity to become the ‘recognized state religion in the Roman World Empire’. It had taken ‘barely sixty years’ for socialism to achieve a position ‘which makes its victory absolutely certain’.

Engels’ analysis sparked some finicky debates about the characterisation of early Christian movements, but these only deepened the impression of its main lines. Indeed, the broad consensus on Engels’s analogy extended across sectarian boundaries. Even while socialists took up traditional republican charges against Church domination and clerical hypocrisy, fuelling a steady stream of often vitriolic exchanges in the socialist press, they frequently promoted the association with religious dissent and egalitarian, ascetic Christianity served as their primary model. This was true of some of most anti-clerical, resolute free speech campaigners. In America, Moses Harman’s *Lucifer the Light-bearer* was an example. This anarchist journal, the scourge of Christian conservatism,
refused alignment with ‘any sect, party, “ism” or organisation’, but described its work in evangelical terms, proudly advertising that its “mission” was ‘to preach the gospel of discontent’.¹

At the same time, the attention that socialist historians gave to the thwarted aspirations of their forebears trained a bright light on the utopian character of pre-socialist oppositional movements. Analysis pulled in two main directions. On the one hand, the idea that socialism was linked to an enduring hope of liberation encouraged a positive embrace of utopianism as a redemptive vision or unfulfilled desire. On the other, the impetus to explain pre-socialist weakness encouraged caution. The evaluation of pre-socialist resistance turned on the possibility of escaping the ideational constraints imposed by material reality and the futility or otherwise of conjuring socialist ideals from within the body of capitalism. Kautsky and Morris’s independent studies of Thomas More’s *Utopia* indicated that there was very little latitude here. Kautsky declared More a socialist forerunner on the grounds that he stood at the cusp of the shift from feudalism to capitalism and therefore had an inkling of the coming transformation. Morris pronounced him ‘the last of the old’ rather that ‘the first of the new’ for largely the same reason, deciding that his historical location rendered him unable to contemplate fully the nature of the old world’s impending destruction. Whereas Kautsky believed that More’s historical location enabled him to produce a proto-socialist critique of commerce, Morris concluded that he was locked into a pre-modern past. *Utopia* could not be regarded as socialist, even if it gave socialists comfort that their present could be transformed.

With the re-fracturing of the European socialist movement in the Second International (1889-1914) the argument about socialism’s utopian possibilities became particularly testy. Engels’ popularisation of ‘scientific socialism’ in the 1880s formalised the conceptualisation of utopianism by grounding it in the wilful denial of materialist history and the rejection of the revolutionary strategies that orthodox Marxist social democracy prescribed. Much of this debate was rehearsed by positioning late nineteenth-century socialists in relation to the utopians identified in *The Communist
Manifesto, Charles Fourier, Henri St. Simon and Robert Owen, rather than pre-socialist Christian dissent. Nevertheless, the findings were generally applicable to all historical and contemporary movements. Like the trio active in the early decades of the century, egalitarians fighting for social change before the discovery of Marx’s science were utopians in good faith: their projects were flawed and their strategies were hopeless but they knew no better. Those who continued to play with imaginative visions in the latter decades, after Marx had uncovered the levers of social change, worked in bad faith.

Not uncommonly, European pre-socialist dissidents emerged as noble but naive idealists, doomed to failure but capable of wresting moral victories. Accepting both conceptions William Morris veered strongly towards this positive view and his normative embrace of utopianism was mirrored in his warm assessment of John Ball’s unconventional Christian preaching. In The Dream of John Ball *** Yet the balance of opinion probably tended towards anti-utopian utopianism. In his study of the sixteenth-century Radical Reformation Morris’s comrade Ernest Belfort Bax paid lip-service to the decency of the movements’ martyrs to advance an anti-utopian appraisal of pre-socialist lack.

Those who look forward to a higher and better organisation of society in our time no longer have visions of a “New Jerusalem,” of a divine “Millennial Kingdom” brought about by the dispensation of a supernatural Providence. They base their hope and expectation ... on the great facts of historic evolution and on the analysis of the material basis of human life to-day ... and while the old beliefs and dreams as to how, when, and where, they should be brought about, have been long set aside for ever, modern science sees another way opened for their realisation, a way necessarily undreamt of four centuries ago ... Thomas Münzer, Jan of Leyden, Jan Matthys, and the rest of those who sought the re-vindication of social justice in the early 16th century, have, together with their aspirations, passed away forever. But foolish as their ideas seem to us to-day,
who regard the problem from so totally different a standpoint, let us not forget that with all their follies and shortcomings, they were, in a sense, the forerunners of Modern Socialism, and, as such, let us spare them a passing tribute of recognition!

https://www.marxists.org/archive/bax/1903/anabaptists/ch11.htm

In the 1890s leading Marxists wielded the scientific anti-utopian critique as an ideological tool to discredit non-Marxists as misguided dreamers who would sabotage socialist advance. Anarchists were the primary target and the caricature was drawn even though P-J Proudhon had led a highly influential critical change against the utopians of the 1820s. At the same time, the comparison of socialist struggle to Christian dissent also laid the foundations of a powerful conception of heresy. The concept it described had two dimensions. The first, applicable both to the pre-socialist movements like the Radical Reformation and anti-scientific deviations like anarchism, was that heresy was contrary to orthodoxy. The second identified a progressive aspect in heresy but put a cap on it. This conception dovetailed with the thinking of the evolutionist and agnostic T.H. Huxley, according to whom heresies were ‘new truths’ initially rejected as profane and subsequently

2 Heresy – opinion contrary to the orthodox doctrine of the Christian Church or to the accepted doctrine on any subject. Concise Oxford dictionary of current English

https://archive.org/stream/con00ciseoxforddicfowlrich#page/384/mode/2up/search/heresy

Webster 1828

1. A person under any religion, but particularly the christian, who holds and teaches opinions repugnant to the established faith, or that which is made the standard of orthodoxy. In strictness, among christians, a person who holds and avows religious opinions contrary to the doctrines of Scripture, the only rule of faith and practice. = orthodoxy, norms

2. Any one who maintains erroneous opinions. = Truth

https://www.websters1913.com/words/Heresy
endorsed ‘as superstitions’. The significant difference between this and official view to emerge from the debates about utopianism in the Second International was that heresies represented steps to new truths which science could evaluate to determine the legitimacy of their departure from orthodoxy. In the first sense, heresy meant contrary to norm, in the second, it meant contrary to truth. Heresy was schismatic but not always malignant or abominable.

Twentieth-century scholarship has made creative use of the heretical frame both to identify sub-currents within the nineteenth-century socialist scene and to explore the nature of socialist utopianism. The guiding thread of Max Nomad’s *Political Heretics* (1963), a history of socialism from Thomas More to Mao, was that ‘the history of human progress’ could be written ‘in terms of revolts against the status quo prevailing at any given time’. This understanding of heresy qualified Huxley’s progressivist view and in doing so disputed the nineteenth-century anti-utopian Marxist analysis. History did not point to increasing enlightenment, catalysed by subversion or revolt as Huxley suggested. The record instead indicated that heresies were as likely as not to result in a ‘change from one form of minority rule to another’. Yet they exercised some power and this attached to the memory of crushed revolt. In heresy there was a possibility of ‘real advancement for the bulk of the human race’. Without it, futures were necessarily bleak. Indeed, the international politics of the early 60s suggested that heresy was the only route out of the impasse created by the entrenchment of Leninist and free market orthodoxies. It was the only reasonable response to the choice between welfare provision and cultural conformity or economic insecurity with personal freedom.

Warren Sylvester Smith’s *The London Heretics* (1967), a history of Victorian and Edwardian secularism, used heresy to highlight the spiritual dimensions of positivist and socialist thought and review the record of secularist success. In brief, his argument was that utopianism was distorting. Seen through this prism, Annie Besant, Frederic Harrison, Stuart Headlam and others were easily dismissed as ‘fools’. They burnt themselves out, were driven from their Churches and, quarrelling amongst themselves, failed to form common front. ‘Their ostentatious organizations fell apart’ and those that survived ‘were engulfed in great wars’. Heresy told a different story. The question it
begged was how this band of reformers ‘changed the established mind of the Western world’. And in this respect, despite the record of disaster, they were victorious: taking Parliament by storm they changed prevailing power balances and social mores and permanently altered ‘the nature of orthodoxy’.

Nomad and Sylvester’s conceptions of heresy – foreground to anarchists.

As probed socialist utopianism, frequently discussing the ideological divisions that emerged within the socialist movement, particularly during the Second International (1889-1914) when the Intellectual historians have also examined the movements and writers socialists studied to better understand the complexities of their political theory and/or to theorise Christian socialism. Yet less attention has been given to the socialist construction of heresy, even though heretical movements had a prominent place in the nineteenth-century imagination. that socialist historians also smaller current focuses on heresy, adapting the broad nineteenth-century socialist interest in early and deviant Christian movements, to provide an analytical frame for socialism. While nineteenth-century socialists offered a range of explanations, the or of the dominant themes of these studies was the studies was argued that the lineages of socialism were deeply embedded in local cultural traditions.

However, the more familiar arguments socialists turned back to their prehistories in order to establish the distinctiveness of their doctrines.

Socialism, the Prophetic Memory

By Victor Kiernan
Heresy

Kautsky

Heresy and utopianism – link in Engels, Kautsky,

Histories – Nomad, Smith

Heresy used to highlight subversion of orthodoxy:

. ‘They that approve a private opinion, call it opinion; but they that mislike it, heresay: and yet heresy signifies no more than private opinion.


Winter’s Tale ‘Tis the heretic that makes the fire, not she which burn in it’.

Spencer Complaints: ‘Doubts ‘mongst Divines, and difference of texts, From whence arise diversity of sects, And hateful heresies’.

<h1>Heresy</h1>

Her"e*sy" <tt>(?)</tt>, <tt>n.</tt>; <plu>pl. <plw>Heresies</plw> <tt>(#)</tt></plu>. <ety>

[OE. <ets>heresie</ets>, <ets>eresie</ets>, OF. <ets>heresie</ets>, <ets>iresie</ets>, F. <ets>h'82r'82sie</ets>, L. <ets>haeresis</ets>, Gr. </?> a taking, a taking for one's self, choosing, a choice, a sect, a heresy, fr. </?> to take, choose.]</ety>

<h1>Heresy</h1>

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1. <def>An opinion held in opposition to the established or commonly received doctrine, and tending to promote a division or party, as
in politics, literature, philosophy, etc.; -- usually, but not necessarily, said in reproach.

[blockquote]
New opinions
Divers and dangerous, which are <b>heresies</b>,
And, not reformed, may prove pernicious.
<i>Shak.</i></blockquote>

Hobbes Leviathan ch. 11

[blockquote]After the study of philosophy began in Greece, and the philosophers, disagreeing amongst themselves, had started many questions . . . because every man took what opinion he pleased, each several opinion was called a <b>heresy</b>; which signified no more than a private opinion, without reference to truth or falsehood.
<i>Hobbes.</i></blockquote>

https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230107496_5

<p><b>2.</b> <fld>(Theol.)</fld> <def>Religious opinion opposed to the authorized doctrinal standards of any particular church, especially when tending to promote schism or separation; lack of orthodox or sound belief; rejection of, or erroneous belief in regard to, some fundamental religious doctrine or truth; heterodoxy.</def></p>

[blockquote]Doubts 'mongst divines, and difference of texts,
From whence arise diversity of sects,
And hateful <b>heresies</b> by God abhor'd.
<i>Spenser.</i></blockquote>

[blockquote]Deluded people! that do not consider that the greatest <b>heresy</b> in the world is a wicked life.
<i>Tillotson.</i></blockquote>
An offense against Christianity, consisting in a denial of some essential doctrine, which denial is publicly avowed, and obstinately maintained.

A second offense is that of heresy, which consists not in a total denial of Christianity, but of some its essential doctrines, publicly and obstinately avowed.

When I call dueling, and similar aberrations of honor, a moral heresy, I refer to the force of the Greek, as signifying a principle or opinion taken up by the will for the will's sake, as a proof or pledge to itself of its own power of self-determination, independent of all other motives.

One who holds to a heresy; one who believes some doctrine contrary to the established faith or prevailing religion.

A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject.
2. (R. C. Ch.) One who having made a profession of Christian belief, deliberately and pertinaciously refuses to believe one or more of the articles of faith "determined by the authority of the universal church."

Addis & Arnold.

Syn. -- Heretic, Schismatic, Sectarian.

Usage: A heretic is one whose errors are doctrinal, and usually of a malignant character, tending to subvert the true faith. A schismatic is one who creates a schism, or division in the church, on points of faith, discipline, practice, etc., usually for the sake of personal aggrandizement. A sectarian is one who originates or is an ardent adherent and advocate of a sect, or distinct organization, which separates from the main body of believers.

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