

relationship of the two doctrines as, in the words of one authority cited, “brothers and enemies.” Where the two traditions diverge, and oppose one another, is over what is called Marxism’s “statist model” of revolutionary change, most centrally, but also as a result of anarchist rejection of vanguardism and its embrace of prefiguration instead; its focus on the expanded and broader understanding of “domination” (of which exploitation is only one form) as the crucial issue; and, also, of a relatedly expanded understanding of class; and, finally, of the Soviet Union and other actually existing Marxist regimes as authoritarian and “state-capitalist.” In contrast to Marxists, (left “revolutionary”) anarchists hold out for a society without a state of any kind, and *without any transitional formation or period*, as being the only legitimate approach to creating a society that is truly free of all oppressions.

While much of the core doctrine of anarchism reviewed above may seem familiar to readers of this journal, this reader gained considerably in my understanding of anarchism from this volume. Readers interested in detailed philosophical presentation of the core of anarchist thought, or in a philosophical justification of specific strategic and tactical approaches, should look elsewhere, however. And, because this is a set of philosophical essays rather than historical ones, there is virtually no consideration of specific concrete struggles here. The strength of this collection lies in its display of the variety of anarchisms and of the concerns of those identifying as its advocates, and in its particular attention to some of the major figures in the tradition. Its weakness is the absence of any sustained philosophical argumentation concerning the basic positions of anarchism, which its title seems to promise.

JOHN P. PITTMAN

Department of Philosophy
John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY
524 West 59th Street
New York, NY 10019
jppittman@msn.com

Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below, by Dario Azzellini. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016. Paper. Pp. 303 + xi.

Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela combines an examination of the experiences of grassroots bodies involved in neighborhood and workplace decision-making with theoretical analysis of the role of state institutions in

the transition to socialism. The author champions “the idea of a communal socialism” (54), while detailing the ways that the old state’s bureaucracy during the presidencies of Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro has impeded the full development of a new state based on popular participation. Azzellini points to the “centrality of territory in the Venezuelan struggle” and adds that “the most active agent of change” in the nation has been *barrio* and rural inhabitants. In contrast, industrial workers are “frequently privileged” and have largely been led by corrupt trade unionists “co-opted by the political system,” while “the building of workers councils” has proven to be particularly “difficult” (32).

Azzellini relies heavily on a 2008 study from the Jesuit think tank *Centro Gumilla* to refute “liberal critics” who warn that communal councils undermine the existing institutional system of checks and balances. On the contrary, the *Centro*’s data showed, in its words, “a low level of state interference in the dynamics of the communal councils” (112–113). The study also demonstrates that, contrary to the allegations of these same academics, 80% of the councils “admit differing political positions” (115), and that there was no “difference in financing between different socio-economic areas (which also tend to correspond to different political preferences)” (107). Finally, the academic “liberals” criticize the communal councils for being dependent on the central government and bypassing the municipal government. Nevertheless, according to Azzellini, councils that respond to the central government are more likely to promote popular participation than those “under the responsibility of local and regional authorities” (108).

In some ways, but not others, Azzellini’s analysis of socialist transformation coincides with Lenin’s concept of dual power in which a new structure eliminates (“smashes,” in the words of Marx and Lenin) the old state. The old state in Venezuela includes the bureaucrats who have resisted and sometimes sabotaged the efforts of the communal councils (some of which are now grouped in economically productive “communes”), which are the embryo of the new state. Nevertheless, Azzellini defends the Chavista scheme of the old state’s “gradual substitution by the communal state” (53), as opposed to the abrupt change produced by the Soviet revolution of 1917. Furthermore, Azzellini recognizes that in spite of the bureaucracy’s restraining role in the process, the relationship between the old and new state in Venezuela is “complicated” (78). He thus shares with Lenin the thesis that the revolution involves a rupture in which the old state is replaced rather than transformed. Unlike Lenin, however, he does not view the old state in its entirety as counter-revolutionary.

In his discussion of specific communal councils and worker management arrangements based on his field work, Azzellini faults state bureaucrats for shortcomings and setbacks, while expressing faith in the capacity and commitment of the rank-and-file. In the process, he plays down the positive role

played by the old state in promoting popular participation. One example of a “top-down” process of change originating from the old state was the activist role played by the Popular Participation Ministry following the passage of the “Law of Communal Councils” in 2006. The Ministry contributed to the proliferation of communal councils throughout the nation by sending representatives into low-income communities to inform inhabitants that financial support was contingent on the creation of a council.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter 8), Azzellini appears to be more insistent than in the rest of the book on the complex and dialectical relationship between the old and new state. The chapter refers to a “two-track construction” in which the old state “makes many processes possible” but at the same time “makes them hard to accomplish, restrains them, and derails them.” He goes on to describe the relationship between the governing powers from above and the emerging powers from below as one of “cooperation and conflict” (263).

Several key issues regarding the role of the old state are pertinent. First, is the old state basically an obstacle to the achievement of change or does a struggle play out within it, as envisioned by Nicos Poulantzas who referred to it as a “strategic battle field”? In Chapter 8, Azzellini reinforces Poulantzas’ thesis by arguing that “the government and its institutions are riddled with contradictions and class struggle” (274). Second, is the emerging new state also subject to internal class struggle? Azzellini argues that the communal councils are a “social relation,” as opposed to an “administrative entity” (83). The use of the term would imply that the communal councils are neither class-neutral nor simple class instruments. Chapter 8 implies that Poulantzas’ battlefield metaphor is applicable to the new, emerging state by pointing to the “risk that the new from-below entity will reproduce the logic and forms of constituted power, such as hierarchical structures, representative mechanisms, division into leaders vs. led, and bureaucratization” (276).

Third, is the problem of bureaucratic interference and inefficiency to be placed in the same category as bureaucratic corruption? While Azzellini basically considers the leftist government bureaucrats a major obstacle to change, may their differences with the rank-and-file be considered at least in some cases “contradictions among the people”? In contrast, corruption in Venezuela has undoubtedly become a major impediment to the revolutionary process. Fourth, what is the larger context in which transformation is taking place? In any analysis of a revolutionary process, the insurgent actions against the government (which is part of the “old state”) carried out by an opposition aided from abroad and with immense resources need to be taken into consideration as they tend to limit options, a factor Azzellini largely ignores.

Finally, were subjective conditions partly responsible for the failure of numerous worker cooperatives and communal councils and the resultant

squandering of government revenue allocated in an effort to jumpstart these bodies? In his analysis of individual cases, Azzellini generally places the entire blame on state bureaucrats. However, many of these failures were due to overly lenient terms of state support and lack of state controls, not excessive state interference. The weakness of subjective conditions also contributed to the failure of worker management schemes. In his chapter “Workers’ Control, Workers’ Councils, and Class Struggle” Azzellini describes how a Chavista union movement tied to the allegedly corrupt governor of the state of Bolívar sabotaged the tenure of a worker-chosen president of the state aluminum company Alcasa. Azzellini mentions all too passingly that the union faction, the “M21,” which according to him was the true champion of worker management, was “divided into three tickets” (225), thus allowing the anti-Chavistas to gain control of the union.

These critical comments are not meant to place in doubt the usefulness of Azzellini’s study. The book presents considerable specific information on grassroots democracy stemming largely from the author’s field work. Furthermore, the theoretical analysis in the book’s concluding chapter frames issues that are fundamental for any Marxist analysis of the state in Chavista Venezuela. The same discussion illustrates that the mixed record of cooperatives and communal and worker councils in Venezuela defies simplistic and romantic notions of grassroots democracy. The examination of these cases demonstrates how much we can learn from concrete experiences and how important it is to theorize on the basis of such studies, and to resist the opposite tendency: to impose preconceived notions and theories on concrete situations.

STEVE ELLNER

Apartment T-1 / 4910 Fran Place
Alexandria, Virginia 22312
sellner74@gmail.com

Red International and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919–1939, by Margaret Stevens. London: Pluto Press, 2017. \$28.00. Pp. 303.

Margaret Stevens’ *Red International and Black Caribbean* is an exciting and in many ways groundbreaking addition to the recent surge of new scholarship on radical black internationalism. Unlike much of the new work, Stevens centers her study almost entirely in the Western Hemisphere, tracing the relationships and reciprocal exchanges between black radicals in the Americas,