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Anarchy and the coronavirus

Anarcho

March 18, 2020

I thought I would discuss the current coronavirus crisis and how an anarchist society would deal with it. This will be speculative but hopefully convincing as far as any discussion of a future society can be – although I do end with a few demands that should be raised now. I should note that, for those looking for something to read when self-isolating, the *An Anarchist FAQ (AFAQ)* appendix on the Kronstadt revolt of 1921 has just been revised – lots to read there! I should note that I’ve not proof-read this as much as I tend to do so be prepared for more typos than usual.

Before starting, I should mention that a leading British “primitivist” was once asked what would happen about epidemics in his ideal world. He replied that there would not be any because the tribes would be so small and isolated that any which did catch such a disease would be dead long before the possibility of meeting other humans and infecting them would have arisen. This was given as a serious answer – but this idiot also said that he would prefer mass starvation than mass society (which he later denied saying this in an exchange of letters with me – one of the many people to whom he said it to at a public meeting – in the pages of *Anarchy: A7ODA*).

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Hopefully, I am right in thinking primitivism has more-or-less disappeared from the movement – it was never big in the first place but it was loud for a time (particularly, and ironically, on the internet) and had to be addressed and given its obvious problems it could not really stand the exposure.

With that example of how *not* to address a serious issue and the concerns it generates in the general public (i.e., people we want to become anarchists) out of the way, I now turn to some general points on Anarchy and the coronavirus.

There may be a tendency for some anarchists – as with “crime” – to simply say that a free society would not have any. This, as with crime, is not very convincing and, for example, Kropotkin did not suggest that – he argued, like others, that crime (i.e., anti-social behaviour) would be vastly reduced in a decent society and any which remained would be dealt with humanely as an illness would be (the *AFAQ* section on crime echoes this by not suggesting that everyone will be perfect all the time).

The same here – for a free society would be one based on workers’ control and so it is unlikely that it would be lacking in safe and hygienic working conditions. It would not have the same pressures from bosses to cut corners to maximise profits (and in non-mutualist anarchies there would be no market pressures to do likewise). It would not see the hollowing out of society neo-liberalism has produced so it would be lacking people with insecure jobs who have to drag themselves into work because they have bills to pay but by so doing, they spread the virus. It would not have obscenities like this: “Virgin founder Richard Branson has a net worth of £4bn. The cost of paying the 8,500 workers has been estimated at £34 million over eight weeks.” (source) I must also note that the key workers being mentioned do **not** include highly paid bankers, CEOs, politicians and such like – they could all self-isolate and we would somehow manage ...

and the austerity opportunistically imposed by the right in its wake which stalled the recovery. As someone writing in the Guardian notes:

“Just over 10 years ago, the banking crisis was resolved with vast amounts of public cash. The public was repaid for its support by seeing its social contract with the state and with employers ripped up. We got lower pay, fewer rights and the slashing of our public realm. That cannot happen again. This crisis has revealed the flaws in our political-economic system: insecure work, a cruel welfare system, businesses that expect the public to keep them afloat while doing little for the public good (look in the mirror, Richard Branson), and a government that will only drop its laissez-faire laconicism when confronted with the prospect of hundreds of thousands of deaths.”

We cannot let the powers that be do the same this time. Given the balance of forces, we may not be able to make much of an impact but we need to try where possible. It will undoubtedly help that the Tories have found the “magic money tree” (well, it was *their* jobs on the line rather than our living standards so no surprise there).

With mutual aid we can get over this – and listen to those with medical expertise rather than politicians or the media (i.e., those *with* authority on this subject rather than *in* authority).

Until I blog again, be seeing you...

Also, without the profit machine we would not have the extra worry of an economic collapse due to firms going under due to lack of income as customers stay indoors or because workers are self-isolating and so not coming into work (and so not being paid). More, an anarchist society would not suffer from the irrationalities of the stock market (and the impact of financial crisis on the real economy in spite of nothing changing in terms of workplaces, workers, etc. as millions are “lost” there) or the short-termism of the market economy. There would be no concerns about workplaces having enough custom to survive – “economic” activity (the provision of goods and services) would decrease in an anarchy affected by an epidemic (as people get ill and self-isolate) but this would not have the devastating effects they have under capitalism as firms would not be going bust, workers would not be made redundant and then evicted because they cannot pay their rent, etc. The same comments made about economic crises and the extra uncertainty markets create made in *AFAQ* are applicable here.

Likewise, the centralised, industrial food creating – as described in *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser – would not exist and so the vast – and potentially fragile – chains would not be rare (i.e., limited to those which need it rather than driven into all areas by profit and market power considerations). Likewise, resources would be available as many of the wasteful things created today (the arms industry, armies, nuclear weapons, etc.) would not exist – resources would be utilised for real social and individual needs (like decent health). So the social and economic context would be better. We would not have a compliant media interested in bolstering private power and its minions – so information would not be spread based on how best to make Trump or Johnson look best. Nor would it be concerned about the authorities using the crisis to their own ends as there would be no authorities (the difference between *being* an authority and *having* authority mentioned in *AFAQ*

is very clear now with numpties like Trump and Johnson in office).

All this is would be the case, I am sure, but the very nature of life is that we cannot predict the future and even the most unlikely events can occur. So how would an anarchy deal with a crisis like this?

The most obvious thing to note is that a free society would still have scientific experts (and their federations) as well as emergency and health services (and their federations). and as these would be volunteer associations, many more people undoubtedly would have taken part in them compared to our society which is marked by extreme division of labour. So there would be a social and economic infrastructure in place – including federations of communities and productive associations along with health, science and emergency ones– which will make decisions and plans. These would not have to deal with needless hierarchies and the fragile egos of those in charge as is now the case. Malatesta put it well in *Anarchy*:

“But let us even suppose that the government were not in any case a privileged class, and could survive without creating around itself a new privileged class, and remain the representative, the servant as it were, of the whole of society. And what useful purpose could this possibly serve? How and in what way would this increase the strength, the intelligence, the spirit of solidarity, the concern for the wellbeing of all and of future generations, which at any given time happen to exist in a given society? ...

“What can government itself add to the moral and material forces that exist in society? And so the rulers can only make use of the forces that exist in society – except for those great forces which governmental action paralyses and destroys, and

the hands of capitalists, corporations and companies. Obvious ones which raise (libertarian) communist ideas are:

- Free healthcare responses – free testing, treatment, etc. if not already the case (as in the UK). As for America, remember that if there is money for war (Space Force!) then there is money for health.
- Guaranteed income for those called upon to self-isolate or are ill – decent sick pay for all (Denmark seems to be going down this path).
- Suspend all rent, mortgages, loans, etc. payments – we should not have to worry about that at any time but now more than ever.
- Involve workers and unions in the response – politicians and bosses can do us all a favour and self-isolate now.
- Any firms which are bailed out by public money should be owned by the public and turned into co-operatives – or, better, the workers should just seize them and run them if they are needed by the community.
- Squatting should be decriminalised – how can you self-isolate at home if you don't have one? So homeless people should squat empty buildings – or hotels.

I am sure there are more – people on the ground will see needs and opportunities better than I or anyone else can (and definitely more than any one at the top of a distant hierarchy with no links to or interest in the masses they claim to represent). We must also be aware that, as in any crisis, the ruling class will seek to utilise it for their own ends – bailouts for the few and not the many, augmenting State powers due to the emergency and not revoking them afterwards, etc. Indeed, the system has still not recovered from the financial crisis of 2008

more informed population would help ensure the science is understood and followed – calls for a lock-down would be more easily agreed and believed.

In short, an anarchy would have a social organisation which would not have the shackles of authority placed upon it – whether that authority is economic (capital) or political (state). While the State is one form of social organisation, it is not the only kind and as can be seen from the response to this crisis its hierarchical and centralised nature can stop the information and initiative needed to respond quickly to issues. Indeed, the notion that state-socialism with its centralised planning could handle a crisis like this is an optimistic claim – given that the virus was unexpected, the planning machinery (bureaucracy) would have to adjust to it and rip-up all its decisions and continually start again (assuming its personnel are not affected by the virus along with those commanded to implement the changes). Only a federal system rooted in autonomy and initiative from below would be able to change the complexities of this challenge – or, indeed, a complex modern society in normal times.

Does this discussion of crisis management in an anarchist society seem a bit vague? Of course it is, as who am I to lay down how a free society would operate? All anarchists today can do is sketch the outlines and apply our principles in the organisations and struggles we take part in. We are all shaped by the hierarchies we are born into and it is only by fighting against them are we able to free ourselves from them both physically and mentally. Only the struggle for freedom will make people able to be live freely. Faced with a crisis like this, I am sure that a free people and their associations and federations will manage – and do so far better than waiting for a few politicians or bosses to act for them.

We should, though, be raising demands – for we can be sure any governmental action will be to primarily put money into

those rebel forces, and all that is wasted through conflicts; inevitably tremendous losses in such an artificial system. If they contribute something of their own they can only do so as men and not as rulers. And of those material and moral forces which remain at the disposal of the government, only a minute part is allowed to play a really useful role for society. The rest is either used up in repressive actions to keep the rebel forces in check or is otherwise diverted from its ends of the general good and used to benefit a few at the expense of the majority of the people ... Social action, therefore, is neither the negation nor the complement of individual initiative, but is the resultant of initiatives, thoughts and actions of all individuals who make up society; a resultant which, all other things being equal, is greater or smaller depending on whether individual forces are directed to a common objective or are divided or antagonistic. And if instead, as do the authoritarians, one means government action when one talks of social action, then this is still the resultant of individual forces, but only of those individuals who form the government or who by reason of their position can influence the policy of the government ...

“Even if we pursue our hypothesis of the ideal government of the authoritarian socialists, it follows from what we have said that far from resulting in an increase in the productive, organising and protective forces in society, it would greatly reduce them, limiting initiative to a few, and giving them the right to do everything without, of course, be-

ing able to provide them with the gift of being all-knowing.”

I must note that Malatesta went back to Naples in 1884 – while released pending appeal of a three-year prison sentence – to help during a cholera epidemic for he was introduced to Mazzinian Republicanism while studying medicine at the University of Naples. He was expelled from the university in 1871 for joining a demonstration and as a result of his enthusiasm for the Paris Commune (defended by Bakunin against Mazzini), he joined the Naples section of the International Workingmen’s Association that same year. (I would recommend the excellent *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* for more on his ideas and remarkable life – he is my favourite dead anarchist).

So an anarchist society would be able to draw upon all the initiative and forces within a society which is channelled and often lost in hierarchical structures like the State and private companies. Likewise, we would not have capitalists seeking to profit from the situation – so we would have the initiative of free people without its skewing towards bolstering narrow private interests (needless to say, seeking to stop an epidemic would be in everyone’s wider “private” interests). For example, transport workers would undoubtedly decide to limit activities to the minimum needed rather than transport companies worrying about their profits.

In short, just because the State monopolises certain useful activities it does not mean that an anarchist society will not provide them. Kropotkin put it well:

“Developed in the course of history to establish and maintain ... the ruling class ... what means can the State provide to abolish this monopoly that the working class could not find in its own strength and groups? ... what advantages could the State provide for abolishing these same privileges?

Could its governmental machine, developed for the creation and upholding of these privileges, now be used to abolish them? Would not the new function require new organs? And these new organs would they not have to be created by the workers themselves, in *their* unions, *their* federations, completely outside the State? ...

“... independent Communes for the *territorial* groupings, and vast federations of trade unions for groupings *by social functions*—the two interwoven and providing support to each to meet the needs of society ... groupings *by personal affinities* ... infinitely varied, long-lasting or fleeting, emerging according to the needs of the moment for all possible purposes ... These three kinds of groupings, covering each other like a network, would thus allow the satisfaction of all social needs: consumption, production and exchange, communications, sanitary arrangements, education, mutual protection against aggression, mutual aid, territorial defence ... Unnecessary for maintaining the economic life of society, it would likewise be [unnecessary] for preventing most anti-social acts.” (*Modern Science and Anarchy*, 164–5)

This network of associations – based on community, economic and scientific interests – would exist without the bureaucrats, politicians and capitalists and would be the basis for a response to such a crisis in a free society. Nor would we have a society in which education is skewed to enrich some and marginalise the many and so we would have an educated and well-informed population who have a better grasp of science (so everyone would combine “Brain Work and Manual Work”). So a free society would have a better educated and