

From Protest Movement to Social Revolution

Deepening the roots of the anti-capitalist movement

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The new movement is most readily compared to that of the late 1960s and early 1970s, starting in particular with the French Revolt of 1968 which saw 10-million workers go out on strike, several cities being run by worker-student-resident committees and the near-collapse of the De Gaulle regime. The revolt echoed around the world, with risings as far away as Tokyo and Mexico City and the famous “Prague Spring Revolt” in Czechoslovakia. But although we are seeing mass mobilisations of anti-capitalists in first world cities – the very centre of gravity of the corporate world where history was supposed to have ended with the fall of the USSR – the current movement is qualitatively different to that of 30 years ago.

The first obvious difference is in political form: in the 1960s, the main reference points for non-Stalinist radicals were the 1948 Chinese Revolution, the 1958 Cuban Revolution and the anti-imperialist struggles particularly of Algeria and Vietnam. Even though the global communist movement had fractured after the wrapping up of the Comintern in 1943 and the independent line taken by Titoist Yugoslavia after the war, it was essentially a bipolar world, but one split between two elite statist options: communist versus capitalist. So for young radicals then, Trotskyist sect-building, Guevarist adventurism or Maoist kragdadigheid seemed like realistic projects compared to revolutionary anarchism which had recently been defeated by Castro’s nationalist counter-revolution. But today there are no statist communist options. They have all been revealed to be bankrupt state-capitalist dictatorships and the few embalmed bitter-enders like China, Cuba, Vietnam and North Korea are slowly succumbing to capitalist “reform”, while most authoritarian guerrilla insurgencies have either fought to a standstill or are contracting peace with their enemies. The new movement today – despite the attempts of a shrill band of embittered lefties and a lard layer of liberal opportunists to suppress and channel worker-poor-peasant demands into ineffective memoranda and spectacle – is mostly a true movement of the base and a school in practical anarchism. Revolutionary anarchism and allied anti-authoritarian practices like council communism and autonomism are today the only revolutionary political forms that find true resonance and respect among protestors. The world today is still essentially bipolar, but today the options are clearer and truer to class structure: capitalism versus anarchism, the statist elites versus the popular base.

THE ANARCHIST POLE OF REVOLT

The second obvious difference is in terms of political content: in the 1960s, apart from the various authoritarian socialist doctrines and liberal reformist sects, the anti-authoritarians were by and large chaotic, anti-organisational and focussed on personal “enlightenment”. This disastrous combination produced a movement that was as poisonous and fractured as it was ineffective: its offspring were terrorism, identity politics and drop-out abstentionism. But today, the anti-authoritarian movement is profoundly political. Although the movement has embraced libertarian guerrilla movements like the Zapatistas in Chiapas, as well as the anarchist tactics of direct action, it has eschewed terrorism.

Authoritarianism remains problematic and insidious, especially where it emanates from supposedly democratic groups, but the overwhelming spirit and practice is participatory-democratic, with much genuine anti-hierarchical content. There remains much that is rooted in shallow soil – spectacle and opportunism – but the spontaneity that the dying old left hates (because it frustrates their attempts at divide-and-rule) has proven a creative, constantly-changing engine. Identity-

political sectarianism has been replaced in most cases by an overarching idea of class struggle – with ethnic, gender and other components marching side-by-side. The static navel-gazing of the past has been replaced by dynamic, outward-looking approaches to global problems.

Which brings me to the third obvious difference: the movement’s pro-globalism. In the 1960s, there was the token internationalism of Jayne Fonda visiting Vietnam and the tactical internationalism of the likes of the Red Army Fraction, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Japanese Red Army. Today, although the protests in the North have grabbed more headlines, the movement is intimately involved in mass Southern projects such as the Zapatista Revolt, the Landless People’s Movement in Brazil, anti-dam activism in India, the successful fight in Bolivia against water privatisation, and the battle for cheap anti-retrovirals in South Africa. These Southern movements are arguably far more important than the Northern protests, being rooted in real community struggles and not made-for-TV spectacular actions, but the connection between Southern and Northern revolutionaries, of housewives to guerrillas, of unionists to environmentalists, of First Peoples to activists, is the skeleton of a new internationalist movement that is rapidly modernising anarchism – while at the same time rediscovering the validity of its core concepts.

The seismic shift that has transformed the global revolutionary anarchist movement was the subject of a January article in the New York-based Village Voice entitled “Keepers of the Flame: as moderate groups turn down the heat, anarchists light a new way for dissent”. Its author, Esther Kaplan, put the case well: “Unlike modern-day social reformers, who want Nike to let inspectors into their factories or the World Bank to forgive some debt, anarchists explicitly oppose capitalism itself. They don’t attack the International Monetary Fund or the WEF just because their policies exploit the poor, but because their power is illegitimate. They envision an egalitarian society without nation states, where wealth and power have been redistributed, and they take great pains to model their institutions in this vein, with autonomous, interconnected structures and consensus-based decision making. UC Santa Cruz professor Barbara Epstein, an expert on direct action, senses that anarchism has now become ‘the pole that everyone revolves around,’ much as Marxism was in the ‘60s. In other words, even young activists who don’t identify as anarchists have to position themselves in relation to its values.”

WE HAVE MORE TEARS THAN YOU HAVE TEARGAS

Which brings us to the book *On Fire: the battle of Genoa and the anti-capitalist movement* (17 contributing writers, One-Off Press, 2001).

This new offering from the AK Press stable which publishes anarchist materials in the UK and the US is a valuable contribution to the debate on the anti-authoritarian involvement in the nascent anti-capitalist movement.

Peppered with powerful black & white action photographs and representing a diversity of views ranging from street-fighter black bloc anarchists and pink-clad peacenik pagans to scholarly autonomist Marxists, it is naturally uneven and goes beyond anarchist orthodoxy – but in doing so helps locate revolutionary anarchism within the anti-authoritarian wing of that movement in a more holistic way. It is a mixture of excited despatches from the barricades, in which one can almost smell the tear-gas, and more studied analyses of what occurred. Central to many of the pieces is the question of the Black Bloc tactic, which is examined both by participants

and outsiders. The question for anarchists is not the usual red herring issue of “violence” that is raised by reformists. The use of violence – assuming that it is against legitimate capitalist targets (admittedly a contested term) – is purely a tactical issue, to be employed or dropped as necessary. In the context that our enemies, both state, corporate and are illegitimate terrorist usurpers who readily slaughter thousands in pursuit of profits, smashing a bank’s windows is the mildest of responses. So the real question is about tactics to be employed in protests and the longer-term strategies that the tactics should be building towards, bearing in mind the old anarchist saying that means are ends-in-the-making. In other words, mindful destruction.

It is interesting to note both the criticism of anarchists like “Anonymous” in “Being Busy” that the Italian anarchists did not appear to have organised anything in advance of the G8 Summit, as well as the support for the Black Bloc given by pacifists like “Venus Kamura” in “Love Changes Everything” move the debate well beyond the tired sectoral squabbles we all know so well by now. Kamura’s piece in which she emphasised the importance of direct action is indicative of the way in which anarchism is becoming respected and recognised by an ever-widening circle of activists. I was surprised by how much I agreed with her sentiments, terminological differences aside.

In fact, revolutionary anarchism has now broken out of the ghetto it has been confined in since the crushing of the last significant mass anarchist movement in Cuba following 1958: police estimated 10,000 anarchists demonstrated against the war on Afghanistan in Brussels in January (admittedly police often blur political distinctions, but then again, they also usually vastly under-report the true size of demos). Sure, we are a long way from the 1920s and 1930s when some anarchist organisations boasted up to 2-million members (the CGT in France following the Russian Revolution, the CNT in the Spanish Revolution and the KPAM in the Manchurian Revolution), but revolutionary anarchism is now the heart and soul of the movement that brought 500,000 anti-capitalist protestors out onto the streets of Barcelona in March against “Fortress Europe”. This means both that there is a pressing need to reorient our debates towards an external, sometimes even non-activist (community), audience – and to actively engage with those sectors of the movement that are inherently anti-authoritarian, or are at least grappling with the issue. For these reasons lumping anarchists together with radical pacifists and autonomists for On Fire was a sound initiative.

Probably the weakest article is “What the protestors in Genoa want” by autonomist Marxists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, authors of the book “Empire”. It looks like a hastily-cobbled note, written by liberals at a great physical and ideological remove from the struggle.

THAT SLIPPERY COMMUNAL NETWORK-FORM

But the best article is also by an autonomist, Massimo de Angelis, editor of the on-line magazine *The Commoner*, entitled “From Movement to Society” that poses the crucial question of how to transform the protest movement into a social movement, rooted in society – and that answers Negri & Hardt with: “What in practice this movement has shown it wants is horizontality and participatory democracy”. It is on the issue of methods of organisation and alternatives to market capitalism that De Angelis is on form, noting that: “Our organisational forms are of primary importance: not so much for reaching a goal external to them, but as a social force that constitutes new forms of social co-operation beyond the capitalist market”. This is a fundamen-

tally anarchist perspective: that the way in which we organise will not only form the nucleus of the future society, but will determine its content. And the history of revolutionary anarchism over the past 140 years has clearly demonstrated that contrary to misinformation, it has always been fundamentally about organisation – often en masse – horizontal, federated, self-responsible, directly-democratic organisation. The anti-organisational anarchism of Luigi Galleani has always remained a tiny minority strain.

Importantly, De Angelis ventures further into anarchist territory, admitting that the market is not a “spontaneous mechanism” separate from, or even antagonistic to the state, as many leftists claim: “On the contrary, the state and its repressive apparatus provide the very conditions for the market’s existence, operation and protection...”

Capital, is in fact not separate from the working class, an abstract enemy, but an intimate part of it, the product of its labour. Our enemy is strictly speaking not capital (the fruits of our labour), but capitalism, the system that enables a parasitic non-productive class to live off the capital we produce. And, he notes, our organisational forms must be participatory and horizontal, federated in ever-widening circles regionally and internationally, in order to effectively combat the “utterly militaristic and vertical” forms of states and corporations.

De Angelis said that neo-liberal leaders and the leaders of mass popular organisations alike were “puzzled – if not irritated or threatened – by the network-form of this movement. Many remain perturbed that the participants in this movement do not take this network-form as an expression of the low degree of development of the movement, as an early stage in the process of building a political party better suited to ‘represent’ the aspirations of millions. Such observers are disturbed that, on the contrary, the network-form is taken to be a symptom of strength by movement participants.

Many such observers cannot rid themselves of their suspicion of a movement that does not pose the question of the alternatives to the market in recognisable terms. That is, in terms of a programme which can be packaged, discussed through official media channels within 30 seconds of an average interview, and deliverable to official institutions.” Indeed! We refuse to serve our revolution up on a silver platter for the elites to dissect and consume. Again, De Angelis reaches anarchist conclusions: that the very strength of the movement is its denial of traditional authoritarian, channelled, sanitised forms of dissent and its reliance on free communal relations as the highest form of, and in fact the ultimate aim of, organising.

A NEW WORLD IN OUR SHOPPING CARTS – NOT!

The global anti-capitalist movement which developed in the social vacuum caused by the oxygen-thieves of turbo capitalism after the fall of the Berlin Wall has restored revolutionary anarchism to its rightful place at the centre of popular protest against tyranny – and it has given it tough and complex new challenges that can only be met both by time-tested anarchist principles, tactics and strategies, and on an open relationship with our neighbours on the barricades. Tolerance, a concept so alien to our enemies, must be our watchword with regard to fellow activists, even those who we disagree with (though we reserve the right to trounce those who try to destroy what we build!).

The anarchist world is changing rapidly. From the resurfacing of anarchist organisations such as the International of Anarchist Federations (IAF) in 1968, and the return of CNT exiles to Spain

following Franco's death in 1975, growth was slow and difficult. But today, as the new movement has magnetised and invigorated the international debate on our future, we have surged ahead to poll position. And the quality of thought that we are contributing to that horizontal discussion on alternatives has vastly improved, as have our organisational forms.

The American anarchist scene is a noteworthy example of new organisation. Once plagued by lifestylist pseudo-anarchism and uncritical support for guerrilla movements, the movement has seen a maturing anarcho-communism trend develop with the formation of groups like the North Eastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists (NEFAC), which covers the Atlantic seaboard of the US and Canada, and plans afoot for a similar regional grouping on the Pacific coast (only the southern belt seems to be lagging and anarcho-primitivism still lurks in some quarters). On the global front, the anti-sectarian approach of the growing anarcho-syndicalist, anarcho-communist and Platformist groupings has led to a new network-form: the International of Libertarian Solidarity (ILS-SIL), which Bikisha Media helped plan at the Other Future international anarchist gathering in Paris in 2000 and of which it is now a part along with Zabalaza Books and the Zabalaza Action Group. These days, the revolution may well be televised – but as the revolutionaries of On Fire indicate, its form, content, breadth and depth will not be driven by parasitic outside interests.

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