

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Anarchism & Environmental Survival

Ray Cunningham

Ray Cunningham
Anarchism & Environmental Survival
1998

Retrieved on 8th August 2021 from struggle.ws
This article was originally published in *Red & Black Revolution* No
4.

theanarchistlibrary.org

1998

Contents

Mutineers on the Titanic?	5
A World Divided	7
Making the Connections	8
Small is Beautiful?	9
Equal Wealth, not Shared Poverty	10
A World Without Borders	12
Meat 'n' Veg 'n' Microlivestock	14
Cities of the future?	16

into sectors, with each concentrating on a particular use of the land, aiming at sufficiency on a city-wide scale. Or, and this is more in line with the overall project, each sector would be a community in itself, diversity being brought down to a more local level. ('Sufficiency' is used here as an ideal, not expected to be reached. Cities would still be more densely populated than other areas, and so more likely to be a base for industry and other labour-intensive activities, the aim is to reduce the dependence on other areas for food.) Food production would be integrated into the city – cattle grazing on green spaces, lawns turned into vegetable patches, small neighbourhood farms. Between the demands of industry and accommodation, argues Purchase, there are spaces which in a properly planned city could be filled with life.

The immediate question is whether this could ever be more than a gesture. Sure, some farming could be integrated into urban life, but could it ever come close to meeting the needs of those who live in the city? If we are to continue to have the same population density, and the same concentration of industry in our cities, can these urban farms ever be more than a supplement to large-scale farming elsewhere, a token 'greening' of the city? If cities were to seriously approach self-sufficiency, wouldn't this necessitate a huge expansion in their size, or a fundamental change in the nature of urban life? Do we want, or need, such a change?

Cities of the future?

Purchase's proposal for more ecologically integrated communities usually meets with most scepticism when it is imagined applied to cities. Even a relatively small city, like Dublin, is almost completely dependent on food from neighbouring regions, and its ecosystem is made up of cars, people and concrete. If a city like New York or Mexico was sealed off from the rest of the world, it would die within days; the only question is whether it would be from starvation or asphyxiation. Given the number of such large cities around the world, and the fact that, even if it were possible, given the size of the earth's population, for everyone to live in small towns and rural communities, many would not want to, how can cities be accommodated within an environmentally sound anarchist society?

It's an obvious point, but cities did not spring into existence fully formed, with all their support networks intact. Like any community, initially they produced most of their food themselves, but as the industrial base increased, the demand for land for industry and accommodation for the workforce grew, forcing food production into the hinterland. Most cities, even up to recently, would have had small farms comparatively close to the town centre. The supercities of today are only possible because of advances in food preservation (through chemical additives and refrigeration) and transport. Before these advances, the pressure for a city to grow in size was met by the necessity to have enough farms, near enough, to produce the food. Nor is the ejection of agriculture from the city irreversible — during the Second World War, for example, food shortages in Britain led to an immense drive towards small-plot urban farming, something of which has continued to this day in the 'allotments' scheme.

Cities, in Purchase's model would continue to exist, but agriculture would be reintroduced to the residential/commercial mix. There are different ways of doing this — you could divide the city

Graham Purchase is one of the most prolific writers in the Australian anarchist movement, and in books such as 'Anarchist Society & its Practical Realisation', has made a serious contribution to the debate on the future of the anarchist movement, and how our ideas can best be put into practice today. Here, we review his latest book, 'Anarchism and Environmental Survival'.

Alongside the classical anarchist structures of unions and traditionally 'political' organisations, anarchists are increasingly to be found in the environmental movement. This is hardly surprising given that, although one wing of the green movement has entered mainstream parliamentary politics, there is still a wide base of grassroots activism some of which, in its methods and organisation, is very close to anarchism. What's more, the more radical environmentalists are becoming aware that their demands cannot be accommodated by capitalism, and are beginning to make connections between their campaigns and other issues. Why then are the links between anarchism and environmentalism not much stronger? And what are the issues that still divide them?

Mutineers on the Titanic?

Most anarchists have some idea of the serious state of environmental degradation caused by capitalism. You don't have to be politically active to know about the hole in the ozone layer, or the chopping down of the rainforest, and the pollution caused by a transport system based on cars is obvious to anyone who lives in a city. Anarchist groups rarely see these as issues to be campaigned on, like women's rights or trade union struggles. But environmental issues affect the working class disproportionately. They are the least able to escape the effects of environmental damage, and the most likely to bear the brunt in terms of disease, malnutrition and so on. We know that poverty-level wages and poor housing in

the developing world are a result of capitalism. The fact that the slums this creates are the hardest hit by flooding, for example, is another symptom of capitalism putting profits before people. But campaigns against this sort of indirect oppression are thin on the ground.

One possible reason why anarchists don't campaign as much on environmental issues is the gradual nature of environmental problems. Unlike other struggles where there is a clear line that is crossed, an obvious point to focus on — whether it be a repressive piece of legislation or a strike — pollution, for example, is incremental. The problem is generally not that one factory opens and suddenly the air is visibly polluted. The level of pollution tends to increase steadily over time, and it is hard to get excited over a difference that you can't see. Of course there are exceptions — a few years ago in Cork a particularly bad toxic spill led to calls for stricter controls on chemical production and safety (see *Workers Solidarity* 41 for details). But, in general, we become accustomed to the degradation of our environment if it happens slowly enough.

The final, and most important problem, for anarchists in tackling environmental issues is that we disagree with most of the solutions on offer. The mainstream green line on the environment is that we are all, more or less equally, to blame for its destruction, and we must all, again more or less equally, make sacrifices if the ecosystem is to survive — this when the poorest 20% of the population produce only 3% of carbon dioxide emissions. Even more radical greens, though they do realise that corporations and capitalism are doing most of the damage, insist that we must all reduce our consumption and simplify our lives. They also say that industrialisation, in itself, is a bad thing, no matter who is in control. Anarchists, on the other hand, think that everyone should have more of what they want, not less. There are problems with how production is organised, and certainly if things are produced for need and not profit a lot of waste will be cut out. But most of the world has a standard of living far below what westerners would

cows for grazing is certainly inefficient, but that's not the only way to farm animals.

The tendency in agriculture (as in industry) in the last century has been for specialisation, and for the production of smaller herds, made up of larger animals. Purchase goes into some detail on the virtues of microlivestock — smaller, more adaptable, and generally hardier versions of the more common modern animals. Such animals are more productive — the greater number that can be raised on a given area of land makes up for their small size — and it's easier to match the size of the herd to the land available. All of these factors make them ideal for the kind of small-scale mixed farming he proposes should be (re-)introduced to our cities.

The question of efficiency is not the only reason so many environmentalists are also vegetarian. After all, the battery farm is perhaps the epitome of efficiency, and that has few friends in the green movement. There is also a moral argument, that we should try to reduce the effects of humanity on the planet, and on the animals that live alongside us. Purchase quotes Elisee Reclus, a well known anarchist of the 19th century, “for the great majority of vegetarians...the important point is the recognition of the bond of affection and goodwill that links man to the so-called lower animals, and the extension to these our brothers of the sentiment which has already put a stop to cannibalism among men”.³ You will have to judge the merits of this argument for yourself, Purchase shows that it is not necessarily relevant to a discussion of the environment, and that a meat-eating society can still be green.

³ “On Vegetarianism”, 1901

As anarchists we have always argued that, from union struggles to environmental protest, from community organising to revolution, the best way to victory is through mass participation and democracy. Whenever they seize the opportunity, people are well capable of organising their own lives, and their own movements, better than any ‘wise’ leader, or ‘benevolent’ dictator. We should be more confident that a free and democratic society will handle the problems of environmental damage, and the questions of local autonomy and global interdependence, in a just and fair way. After the anarchist revolution, do we really need a green revolution?

Meat ‘n’ Veg ‘n’ Microlivestock

Vegetarianism and environmentalism often go hand in hand. This is partly because the consumption of large livestock has itself an effect on the environment. It takes seven pounds of grain to produce one pound of beef — if we were all to become vegetarian, so the argument goes, much less land would have to be used for agriculture. This is true to a certain extent, but the grain:meat ratio leaves out many things. For example, a cow produces not just meat, but milk, leather and dung (a fertiliser, soil stabiliser, and even fuel source). Wool, feathers and eggs are all useful ‘by-products’ of animal husbandry that have to be taken into account.

Even so, raising animals is not the most efficient use of agricultural land. But a lot of land is not suitable for other forms of agriculture. Animals can be raised in forests, or on the side of mountains, and in areas where the soil is too poor for crop production. Many animals can be reared alongside crops, and others, like poultry, are well suited to small scale farming. Turning over whole prairies to

take for granted and, as an absolute minimum, this has to be addressed.

A World Divided

The history of this century has been of deepening divisions in humanity. The gap between rich and poor has widened enormously, today 225 people own more than the poorest 50% earn in a year. Eighty four people are together wealthier than China, three people wealthier than the poorest 48 countries. The wealthiest 20% of the global population consumes 60% of the energy, 45% of the meat and fish, and owns 87% of the vehicles.¹ This is not to say that everyone in the ‘developed’ world is well off, of course. Within the richer countries the gap between rich and poor is also growing, with the figures for homelessness, unemployment and malnutrition rising all the time. In the last decade, diseases like tuberculosis, caused essentially by poverty, have reappeared, having been eradicated earlier this century. The US may be the world’s biggest consumer, but it also has the highest per capita prison population, and 16.5% of its population lives in poverty.

On a global level, the picture is of a southern hemisphere owned, controlled and exploited by the north. Raw materials — minerals and food — are produced in the south and consumed in the north. The environmental problems in the north/west are mainly those caused by over a century of industrial production — pollution has become a fact of life. The earth, the air, the rain, all have been contaminated.

The south may not have as long a history of industrialisation as the north, but as far as environmental damage goes it is gaining rapidly. When a corporation shifts production to the developing world, it does so to escape not just trade unions, but also environmental regulations. Workers in the south are not just lower-

¹ United Nations Human Development report, 1998

paid, they're subject to much more dangerous working conditions, and much more damage to their environment, than workers in the north. As well as industry, agriculture is made more damaging. Leaving aside the use of insecticides and fertilisers that have been banned in the north, the trend towards large-scale monoculture farming means the soil becomes exhausted and prone to erosion. The need to expand the area of land under cultivation means the destruction of wilderness areas and deforestation, which also causes soil erosion. This in turn causes flooding, which destroys people's homes and crops under cultivation, leading to more pressure on the land.

The worldwide increase in the human population and the level of (industrial and agricultural) production means that the potential impact of humanity on the environment continues to grow. At the moment, this impact is enormous because, often, the people who are making environmentally sensitive decisions are shielded from the results. Whether this is because of money or distance, the end result is that, no matter how damaging their decisions may be, they can be sure the damage will be to someone else, and so are free to continue their pursuit of profit.

Making the Connections

Graham Purchase's book, *Anarchism and Environmental Survival*, is an attempt to bring anarchist and green theories together, and propose a model for a possible post-revolutionary society. His anarchism is based on the idea that decisions must be made by those who are effected by them. The basic social unit of society, then, is the community. Your community is where you live and work, the particular area you identify yourself with. Depending on the context, this could be your immediate surroundings — a village or suburb — or an extended area — a county or city.

reocrats — that allow decisions to be made democratically, with mass participation, involving thousands, or millions, of people.

After all, there will always be a clash between the needs of society and the needs of a particular area, the only question is about how to balance them. Factories have to be built, and food grown, somewhere. Nuclear power may be unnecessary, but gold isn't,² and you can't mine it without damaging the local environment. We will always have to walk the line between decisions being made by groups far-removed from their effects, and the NIMBY tendency — do what you like, but not in my backyard. The difference, in an anarchist society, is in who makes the decisions, and why.

Capitalism is notoriously short-termist, decisions are made based on their immediate profitability, thinking even a few years ahead is unusual. What other kind of society would build nuclear power stations without knowing how to dispose of the waste safely? Why else would the economy be based on non-renewable fossil fuels, when the only question is when, not if, they will run out? If the earth is an uninhabitable wasteland in 100 years, what does it matter, as long as the profits are good? All the green consumerism in the world won't fix this insane system, if we want a rational economy we're going to have to run it ourselves.

Agriculture and industry need not be as damaging to the environment as they are at the moment — we already know of cleaner and safer ways of doing things, that aren't used because they aren't profitable. How much can we change things if, as well as using the technology we know of now, science is directed towards cleaning up pollution instead of weapons research? If research was done on minimising the damage of intensive farming, instead of developing 'Terminator' genes? We don't have to believe that science has all the answers to know that there is a lot of room for improvement.

² Gold is not just decorative, it has many important industrial uses, but you must use cyanide in the mining and purification process.

everyone's standard of living. Some may choose to live a life of austerity, but most of us want a new world because we want more of the good things in life, not less.

In the developing world, the gap between what people have and what they need is even bigger. The southern hemisphere has been exploited ruthlessly by the north, one of the first priorities for an anarchist society must be to redress that balance, and the enormity of that task cannot be under-estimated. Millions of people don't even have a clean source of drinking water, we want everyone to have a standard of living beyond the current average for an industrialised country. There is no way this can be accomplished without increasing current levels of production.

These are major problems with the idea of self-sufficient communities. On the one hand, we need a globally integrated economy, for the foreseeable future at least, because of the vast gap between the wealth of a community in Namibia, for example, and one in Oregon. At the same time, we can't afford the relative inefficiency that small-scale, localised production implies. Even if we decide that decentralising production is a good thing, it can't be our first priority. And is it necessary?

A World Without Borders

Anarchism has always been international, has always stressed the importance of our shared humanity over all those things — nationality, language, race, religion, gender — the ruling class tries to use to divide us. We stress the importance of democracy, of people having a say in the decisions that affect them. We also realise that some decisions are too far-ranging in their effects, too intertwined with the situations of others to be made at a local level. That is why large anarchist groups often operate as federations, and a lot of thought has gone into creating structures — like mandating delegates, rotating positions, minimising the need for full-time bu-

Each community is linked to a particular place, although the borders of this region are rarely clearly defined. You could draw the limits of a town where its buildings end, or include land cultivated by its inhabitants. Sometimes these are useful definitions, but the people themselves, when talking about 'their land' may include nearby forests, lakes or mountains (and again, since the size of a community varies depending on the context, this region can also vary in size). Communities are made up, then, not just of relationships between people, but of the relationship between the people and the land. This, Purchase feels, is the key to environmental protection.

With the globalisation of the economy, and society in general, the current trend is to tackle environmental problems on a global level. This appears to make sense with an issue like the destruction of the ozone layer, but it can often become ridiculous — as when the Earth Summit's decision to fix the level of global emissions merely led to the creation of a new market. Developing countries can now sell some of their 'pollution quota' to richer countries. Most problems, says Purchase, are better tackled at the local level, but this means some changes in the way production is organised. Earlier I talked about how money can shield you from the effects of environmental damage — the same is true of distance. Those of us who live in urban areas know the problems that industrial concentration has caused locally, but only get second or third-hand reports of the problems of intensive food production, for example.

Small is Beautiful?

If you think of the global economy as a factory, with each worker/community making only one part of a complex machine, and depending on the others to make all the other parts, you can see how difficult it is for one worker/community to change what they're doing. Purchase proposes that we shift from the current,

locally specialised and globally interdependent society, to a society made up of more balanced, self-sufficient communities (individual artisans, if you like). Thus we would immediately deal with some of the problems overconcentrated production has caused, like pollution and soil erosion. We would eliminate some, at least, of the costs of transport between these production centres. We would also make it easier for each community to deal with the problems that arise in their own region.

When Purchase talks of increasing local independence in this way, he does not mean these communities would be entirely self-sufficient. The fact that some areas are richer in minerals, or more suited to growing certain foods, means there will always be a certain degree of specialisation. Nor does it follow that, if there is a shift towards food production in urban areas, for example, that each rural area has to include a certain amount of factories. Finally, self-sufficiency should not be confused with isolationism — the communities Purchase describes are starting points for federations, not a return to feudalism. Even if it is just on the basis of common environmental influences, a shared river, or mountain range, or coastline, communities would obviously come together to discuss things that affect them in common. And in an anarchist society, based on the idea of our common humanity, there would surely be an abundance of regional, continental and global projects, covering every aspect of science and culture.

Equal Wealth, not Shared Poverty

There is still a clear sticking point in any attempt to integrate anarchist and environmental positions, and that is the question of levels of production. Depending on how far down the path of self-sufficiency you go, you rule out more concentrated, specialised production, and so reduce the possible output. (Or at least, reduce efficiency — you can build a train in a workshop, but it's a lot easier

to do it in a factory). In an anarchist society, a lot of work will be recognised as socially unnecessary, and it's hard to overestimate how much effort goes into keeping the apparatus of international capitalism and the nation state going. When money goes, we get rid of the banking industry and financial exchanges. Without states, there is no need for armies and the whole weapons industry — a sizeable part of most western economies — becomes defunct. When production is based on need, we will be rid of most advertising, and the useless duplication of identical goods it was created to hide. There will be no more built-in obsolescence, because who would build something they know is going to fall apart rather than something that will last, if it wasn't for their boss's desire for higher profits.

The production that remains will be changed. No rational society would base their transport system on cars. A good public transport system would improve the quality of most people's lives immeasurably. The benefits in terms of lives saved, public health, and countless other areas are obvious, and well-known. Over-dependence on cars is a result of the pursuit of profit, and it is profit that makes our industries so polluting. Cleaner sources of energy, like solar and wind power, are available but not profitable. Scrubbers and filters for chemical outflows, biodegradable, recycled and non-toxic materials, all of these could be used in most of our factories. But as long as control of production is in the hands of those who do not feel the effects of pollution, they will be overlooked in favour of the cheaper, more profitable alternative.

By eliminating, or greening, all of these processes, we would go a long way to reducing our ecological footprint. But eliminating useless production is only part of the story, an anarchist society would also increase useful production. Even in the developed West, far too many fall below the poverty line — we need more homes, more schools, more hospitals, enough to meet everyone's basic needs — and then we must go further. An anarchist society will want to have more than just the bare essentials, surely we want to improve