Tom Wetzel
Anarcho-syndicalism
October 2002

Retrieved on 12th October 2020 from libcom.org.
This talk by Tom Wetzel was presented at a small conference initiated by the Workers Solidarity Alliance in New York City in October 2002: "Anarcho-Syndicalism Into the 21st Century".

**theanarchistlibrary.org**

# Anarcho-syndicalism

Tom Wetzel

October 2002

and the ability to "theorize" one's experience, and to develop critical thinking skills so that people can think for themselves.

Through a conscious and collective practice of developing skills in people, we can ensure that people are better able to play an active role in the movement.



# Contents

## 7. Critique of Spontaneist Theory of Organization

Lastly, I want to address a key problem that faces us in developing a movement that is genuinely self-managing, and does not contain within it the seeds of new hierarchies emerging.

The IWW has an old slogan, that "We Are All Leaders." As an ideal, as what we aim for, I think that is right. But the question is, How do we make sure our practice approximates to that ideal?

The existing society is divided by all kinds of inequalities, inequalties of access to education and knowledge and opportunities to develop skills. Inequalities along lines of class, education, gender and race will be reflected in these differences in people in these ways.

Some people have more knowledge about how things work, a more "theoretical" understanding, some have more formal education than others, some are more self-confident that others, some have had opportunities that have enabled them to develop skills at public speaking or articulating ideas. Others may have the latent ability to develop such skills but they've just not had the opportunity to develop them through practice.

This tells us that any movement that organizes itself in a purely "spontaneous" way will "spontaneously" tend to replicate within itself these inequalities that have been shaped by the larger capitalist society.

This means a genuinely egalitarian movement cannot be created in a purely spontaneous fashion. We need to consciously be aware of differences in skill development and consciously work to bring out in people their latent abilities, to play a positive role in the movement. There are a variety of things that can be done in this direction. Things like encouraging people to speak, to participate in debates, study groups and activist schools to develop knowledge

best speakers, the intellectuals and policy wonks of the movement. Bakunin pointed out that Marx's partyism is a strategy for the empowerment of the intelligentsia, the people who monopolize scientific knowledge.

Nonetheless, anarchists have never really developed that insight. Despite the fact that anarchists often say that class is based on top-down hierarchy in production, anarchists have never really developed fully a theory of the techno-managerial class, as a distinct economic class in virtue of its position in a hierarchy in social production. Nonetheless, the theory of the techno-managerial class is consistent with anarchist insights.

It's true that often worker struggles are partial, are over demands or goals limited to a particular sector. How do we answer the Marxist argument that the coalescing of the movement into a party is the solution to this? I think we can say that there is an alternative way of envisioning how unity and class-wide program might emerge, in a more grassroots, horizontal way. I think we could conceive of a movement developing where self-managed unions are getting together horizontally for mutual support and develop a program that addresses a worker's whole life, issues that affect us all like housing and health care and so on, and that they involve other grassroots mass organizations in the community as part of this process, such as tenant groups, community organizations of various kinds. I call this idea a "people's alliance." Some people have talked about the idea of "alternative central labor councils" as a way of developing a more militant horizontal solidarity. This is another example of how a horizontal development of a class-wide program could emerge.

So, I would counter this idea of a horizontal, grassroots people's alliance to the partyist strategy. That is, we can conceive of this being the way that power of numbers and solidarity is developed, independently of the state and political parties.



I'm going to talk a bit about the theoretical presuppositions of anarchosyndicalism, and I'm going to make some comparisons with Marxism since both political perspectives claim to base themselves on the class struggle.

Actually they aren't exactly comparable because Marxism purports to be a complete worldview whereas I would argue that anarchosyndicalism is best understood as merely a revolutionary strategy, or strategic orientation.

The basic idea of anarchosyndicalism is that by developing mass organizations that are self-managed by their participants, particularly organizations rooted in the struggle at the point of production, the working class develops the self-activity, self-confidence, unity, and self-organization that would enable it to emancipate itself from subjugation to an exploiting class. The self-management of the movement itself foreshadows and prefigures self-management of production by the workforce, which is the movement's revolutionary aim. I think that is sort of a nutshell summary of anarcho-syndicalism.

## 1. Minimal Materialism

There is one commonality between Marxism and anarchosyndicalism that I want to take a look at. This is what I call "minimal materialism".

"Minimal materialism" is the idea that class structure, based on power relations between groups of people in social production, is the most fundamental or basic structuring in society. The class structure is the basic structure of control over social production, the basic economic structure, according to minimal materialism. This structure is supposed to be the background against which everything else about society is to be explained or understood.

Two arguments for it being fundamental:

1. Production is necessary to human life.[1]

2. People spend a huge amount of their waking time at work, and their prospects in life are very much dependent on their relationship to social production.[2]

To explain what I mean by "structure" I'm going to use an analogy. Let's say I pull out a match and strike it on the sole of my shoe and the match bursts into flame. The end result is a burning match. The stimulus event was me striking the match. But the stimulus by itself isn't sufficient to explain what happened. What if the match head was wet? What if it was a fake plastic match? What if the match stick was so rubbery I couldn't get any traction? So, to explain why the match burst into flame we need to bring in these more stable factors that we take for granted — the chemical composition of the match, its dryness, the rigidity of the matchstick, and so on.

Okay, those are what I'd call "structural" factors in the explanation. They are part of the more or less stable background in which the causal process of getting the match to light happened. Well, the idea of "minimal materialism" is that the class division in capitalism is a background "structure" like this, it is something you have to look at if you want to get a complete and accurate picture of why things happen the way they do.

The idea is that the class structure is like a causal force field that shapes everything that happens in society.

## 2. The Doctrine of the Class Struggle

One thing that follows from minimal materialism is the doctrine of the class struggle, that this is how society changes over time. The

[1] But this argument doesn't work. There other other things that are equally essential to human life — for example, sexual reproduction and consumption.

[2] I think this is a better argument.



and among different groups of workers there are big differences in wage rates and conditions of work or autonomy in work.

Another thing to note about the techno-managerial class is that it is capable of being a ruling class. This is in fact the true historical meaning of the Soviet Union and the other socalled Communist countries. They are in fact systems that empower the techno-managerial class.

What is interesting is that the failure to see or appreciate the significance of this class is a central blindspot in Marxism. This is one of the things that enables Marxists to fail to see aspects of Marxism that programmatically lead to techno-managerial class dominance.

## 6. Partyism versus Syndicalism

One of the techno-managerial aspects of Marxism is its partyism. By partyism I mean the following idea. Marxists will often argue that struggles of this or that union or this or that group of the population are partial struggles. A particular union or other group will focus their attention on demands or aims that are partial, not a complete class-wide program. A key tenet of Marxism is that the development of a class-wide program, a program that can represent and advance the interests of the working class as a whole, is developed by coalescing forces behind a labor or socialist political party. Marxism is strategically partyist, that is, its strategy for change is that of a political party leadership gaining control of a state.

The traditional anti-authoritarian critique of partyism is that it is substitutionist, it substitutes the party for the class. The anarchosyndicalist or councilist alternative is that it is the class as a whole, through mass organizations like workers councils, that is to gain power, not a party leadership through a state.

Partyism will tend to elevate to leadership and control those who have the most education, who are the most articulate, the

Ownership may be the most important basis for power over social production in advanced capitalism but it is not the only such basis. There is also another class of people, who I call the techno-managerial class. Their role is that of controlling the labor of the working class. This is the class that includes the management hierarchy and the professional consultants and advisors central to their system of control — as lawyers, key engineers and accountants, and so on.

The point is that it is *power* relations in social production that creates a class stratification, and there are different ways that people can have power over others in production; ownership of productive assets is just one such basis.

Historically the techno-managerial class developed as capitalism reorganized the nature of work, diminishing the dependence of employers on the skill and intellectual ability of workers to coordinate their own work, and vesting this increasingly in a layer of expert intellectual cadre. The redesign of work processes, to break up work into pieces and minimize the reliance on skills in the workforce aimed at changing the balance of power against the workers and making the whole process more dependent on management coordination.

The members of the techno-managerial class may have some small capital holdings, either via things like stock options or small investments or ownership of their houses or other small property. But that is not what their livelihood and way of life is based on. Rather, they have their class position because of their relative monopolization over knowledge, skills, and connections. This what enables them to gain access to the positions they have in the corporate and goverment hierarchies. They share in common with the working class that they are hired labor.

It's true that there are relative differences in power and privilege within this class, but this is true of all classes — there are huge differences in the wealth and power of different capitalists,



idea is that class struggle is the central factor in the evolution of human social formations.

Marx said that one of his most important ideas was the distinction between labor and labor-power. Within capitalism the ability to work is what the proletarian sells to the employer.

She sells her ability to work to a firm to use for a certain period. She can't tell her labor power to go to work and stay at home in bed; she has to drag herself into work with her labor power. There is then inevitably a fight between the employer and the worker over exactly how the worker's ability to do work is going to be used. Advanced capitalism developed a very elaborate hierarchy of bosses and their professional advisory groups precisely to try to control workers, to protect the interests of the owners in maximizing profit over the long run.

So, this generates an ongoing class struggle, the fight against the power that the bosses have over us in social production.

Minimal materialism by itself does not entail any commitment to economic determinism or any idea of there being any inevitable direction to history. It just says that the class structure, and the conflict it generates, is very central to understanding what happens in society.

Historically the anti-authoritarian left has rejected the idea of an inevitable collapse of capitalism, and has been sceptical about Marx's crisis theory. The anti-authoritarian left — both councilist Marxists and anarchists — have emphasized the positive role of worker self-activity, personal development, solidarity and self-organization in the process of self-emancipation.

## 3. Is Minimal Materialism Class Reductionist?

As minimal as it is, minimal materialism has been subject to a certain criticism in recent decades, namely, that it is "class reduc-

tionist." The complaint goes something like the following. Because the materialist says that class is the only fundamental structural element of contemporary American society, it can't do justice to the oppression and conflict on lines of gender and race and political authoritianism. That is, we can't reduce the struggle against gender oppression, against racism, against political authoritarianism to just the class struggle. This criticism became increasingly salient over the past half century, with the struggles of the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the gay and lesbian movement having a big impact on how people perceive faultlines in society.

To activists of color, racism seems just as fundamental a faultline; feminists are likely to see things in terms of the struggle around gender inequality.

For example, some feminists will argue that the "family wage" system in the USA in the 19th century, which helped to cement the subordination of women as a gender caste, was a kind of deal between workers and capitalists, to control the labor of women, with male workers gaining control over women in the home. Thus for some feminists, gender is the most basic structure and the conflict between male workers and male bosses was just a conflict internal to the ruling group.

Now, I think one possible line of reply would be to acknowledge that racism and patriarchy and authoritarian hierarchies can each generate its own dynamic, that affects other things, including the class struggle itself. For example, the authoritarian hierarchy in AFL-CIO unions creates its own problem for the class struggle.

## 4. The Four-Forces Theory

Some people will take this to the conclusion that the underlying structure of contemporary American society really has four distint facets or structures — patriarchy, racism, class, and political authoritarianism. Each is equally fundamental, they will say, with



each acting as a distinct influence on everything else. This is what I call the "Four Forces Theory." For example, you'll find this theory worked out in the book "Unorthodox Marxism" by Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel.

Since socialist-feminists in the '70s had convinced me that gender was equally basic as class, I'm not going to try to defend "minimal materialism" nor am I going to try to answer the question of whether the Four Forces Theory is the best way to understand contemporary American society. I'm going to leave that as an exercise for you to figure out.

I do want to make one point however. What I want to claim is that anarchosyndicalism is just as compatible with the Four Forces Theory as it was with Minimal Materialism or the views of the socialist-feminists.

The reason is simple. All of these theories acknowledge that class is basic. They are all thus implicitly committed to the inevitability and importance of the class struggle. They are all consistent with the idea that it is through a movement developed directly by workers that class oppression can be overthrown and workers control over production created.

## 5. Critique of the Marxist Theory of Class

I've talked about class structure, but What is class?

What I want to argue is that Marxism has a mistaken theory about class. Marxism historically has assumed that there are only two major classes in capitalism, namely, labor and capital. Marxism assumes that it is ownership that is the key relation that defines class. The investor class, who own the means of production, are thereby the ruling class. Everyone else must seek work as hired labor.

The problem with this theory is that it leaves out a class. There are in fact three major classes in advanced capitalism, not just two.