

Are the Alternatives Really Socialist-Anarchism or Barbarism?

Is a Workers' Revolution Necessary to Prevent Catastrophe?

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A statement on the nature of the period and the economic crisis was published by US-NEFAC (US-Northeastern Federation of Anarchist-Communists)¹. It resulted in a lot of discussion on at least one site (e.g., Anarchist Black Cat). While the majority of those who accessed that site checked that they agreed with the statement mostly or somewhat, most of those who bothered to write a comment expressed varying degrees of disagreement. I am going to summarize the discussion, as I understand it, and make some remarks.

The basic view of the US-NEFAC statement is that capitalism as a world system is not doing too well and will be doing worse in the not-too-distant future. It does not deny the possibilities of short-term improvements, such as a relative recovery from the Great Recession, but it expects that the overall direction of the economy is downhill. There will be no return to the prosperity of the 50s or even of the 90s. Reforms and benefits may yet be won by the people, but over time the workers and oppressed will be faced with the alternatives of revolution or destruction. Without predicting just when there will be widespread reaction, it did expect an eventual popular radicalization and rebellion.

As evidence for the long-term crisis, there has been the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Wars continue, raising the dangers of world war and of a civilization-destroying nuclear war. Also there are deepening ecological and energy crises, especially global warming, which are acknowledged by almost everyone—and which is another aspect of the capitalist crisis.

For example, I happen to have in front of me a statement by the Green activist, Lorna Salzman (not an anarchist or socialist of any kind), who writes, “Expert scientists and scientific bodies now unanimously agree that we have less than ten years to reduce the CO2 concentration to 340 ppm...Beyond this period, irreversible and uncontrollable feedback will occur from disappearing ice sheets, melting permafrost, and ocean warming, reducing biodiversity, destroying coral reefs, acidifying the oceans, raising sea level, and leading inevitably to crises in drinking water, food production, land use, and public health that will cost societies far more than it will cost to mitigate or avoid these impacts”². Clearly great suffering is predictable for many people, because industrial capitalism has unbalanced the ecology and cannot repair it.

I am giving a very condensed review of the NEFAC statement’s viewpoint; I expanded on it, from my perspective, in an essay, “Socialism or Barbarism! Anarchism or Annihilation!”³. Also see my review of a book on the causes of the Great Recession⁴. I have argued that we are living through a reassertion of the basic conditions of the epoch of capitalist decay, such as had been apparent to all from 1914 to 1946.

The Future is Unpredictable....

Against this viewpoint, opponents made essentially three arguments. First, it was denied that it was possible to make such predictions with any confidence. Sure, things might get worse, but they also might get better. Who could say? After all the Great Depression and World War II were followed by a prolonged period of relative prosperity, from 1947 to about 1970. Throughout the

¹ US-NEFAC (2010). “Nature of the Period; Background and Perspectives” <http://www.anarkismo.net/article/16222>

² Salzman, Lorna (5/3/2010). “An Open Letter and Appeal to Bill McKibbin and 350.org” *Advt. The Nation*, v. 290, no. 17; p. 19.

³ Price, Wayne (5/28/2010). <http://www.anarkismo.net/article/16212>

⁴ Price, Wayne (6/1/2009). <http://www.anarkismo.net/article/13296>

Cold War, the big imperialists avoided nuclear war. And perhaps the international bourgeoisie will wise up and do something about the environment and energy.

The analysis of the downward slide toward destruction is based on Marxist economics (or, more precisely, on Marx's critique of political economy). A humanistic, libertarian-democratic, interpretation of Marxism overlaps with class-struggle anarchism. The analysis is also based on the study of ecology and energy, integrated with Marxism and with anarchism⁵. Some of our critics reject Marxist economics particularly, and others do not seem to know much about it or care to learn. Obviously it would take much more space and time than I have here to discuss the labor theory of value, the nature of surplus value, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, the causes of business cycles, the epoch of monopoly capital and imperialism (and imperialist wars), as well as the causes of the limited prosperity after World War II and why this had to end. But neither have the critics spent time in expounding what is wrong with these conceptions.

Even integrated into an ecological awareness, these concepts do not lead to specific predictions, comparable to the natural sciences. Over the last decades, I have felt like a geologist who is predicting an eventual huge earthquake in California (the "big one"), and urges people to build more safely—but who cannot predict when the earthquake will occur—in a month, a year, a decade, or many decades. Social predictions are especially uncertain, since, unlike geological strata, classes are composed of people with consciousness and the ability to make choices ("free will"). But it has been possible to say, with reasonable confidence, that social earthquakes are coming.

The alternate view is scientifically nihilistic. It denies that groups of human beings act in repeatable patterns ("laws" or tendencies) about which we may generalize into probabilistic predictions. This belief in unpredictability is consistent with a liberal view: perhaps the state can, after all, be used to end exploitation. Who knows? Perhaps capitalism can peacefully and gradually evolve into libertarian socialism? Supposedly it cannot be predicted otherwise. Unfortunately such views disarm us before capitalist disaster.

Only a Moral Judgment is Required....

This leads into the second argument used against our view. Some say that we do not need to know that capitalism is going to cause catastrophe unless a revolution is made. It is enough, they say, to judge that anarchist-communism would be morally superior to capitalism. Among other anarchists, this view is held by Murray Bookchin and his followers.

I do not deny that libertarian socialism would be better than capitalism as a way for human beings to live and work. I insist on it. I reject any arguments—particularly from Marxists—that it unnecessary to make such a moral evaluation. But a moral argument is not enough, not by itself. It could just as well be used to justify a gradualist, reformist, program—and it often has. Once we have decided on a social goal, for moral reasons, we have to then decide how to reach this goal—by reformism or by revolution. This requires as objective as possible an analysis of how the system operates and what can be done to change it.

To take a revolutionary position requires something more than only moral judgment. It requires a belief that a revolution would not only be good but that it would be necessary. A revolu-

⁵ Bookchin, Murray (1980). *Toward an Ecological Society*. Montreal-Buffalo: Black Rose Books. Foster, John Bellamy (2000). *Marx's Ecology; Materialism and Nature*. NY: Monthly Review Press.

tion, even the most nonviolent, would involve mass struggle, suffering, bloodshed, and destruction. It is irresponsible to advocate revolution unless we believe that it is absolutely necessary. Nor would many people join one unless they were convinced that they had to. And they would be right not to.

It is Enough to Know Workers' Consciousness....

Another argument which was raised also claims that it is not necessary to know the nature of the period or the tendency of capitalism toward self-destruction. What is necessary, this argument says, is to know the level of popular struggle, what issues excite workers, and what a revolutionary minority can do to join in popular struggles.

This argument is not so much wrong as one-sided. There are two possible unilateral positions which a revolutionary minority may take, both wrong. One is know-it-all, feeling that it is sufficient to know that socialist revolution is necessary. Then the revolutionaries go to preach to the unenlightened masses, telling them The Truth. As is well known, this is realistic picture of various sectarians.

The reciprocal error is to start from wherever the people are and build a program only as an elaboration of popular consciousness. It is certainly true that revolutionaries need to know what nonrevolutionary workers and oppressed people are thinking. We need to know how to talk to them about our ideas. But we cannot just expand on their current consciousness. Popular consciousness is a very mixed bag, with progressive and reactionary ideas jumbled together. Working people are influenced by many sources, including the mass media, the church, and schools. These inculcate reactionary ideas along with positive beliefs in democracy, freedom, and fairness. Workers develop ideas based on their experiences, which include pushes toward radical consciousness, such as their oppression and their working collectively with others. But they also have experiences which push in other directions, such as job distinctions, some apparently decent jobs, demoralizing overwork or unemployment, etc. All-too-often these lead to racism, conservatism, sexism, superpatriotism, and religious superstition. But these can change drastically and quickly during periods of upheaval.

The revolutionary program cannot be based on workers' current consciousness. That effort has historically been called "tail-endism" or "rank-and-fileism." That is the approach, for example, of the US Solidarity group. Rather than sectarianism, in practice this is what is wrong with most of the Left.

Instead, the revolutionary program is based on the objective conditions, which means on the need for a socialist-anarchist revolution. In fact, the socialist-anarchist revolution is the program, the whole of the program. But to express the need for revolution requires breaking it up into specific planks, specific demands, slogans, and proposals. And how to explain these planks, demands, slogans, and proposals is based on the interaction between the objective analysis and popular consciousness. The revolutionary minority must be in a constant dialogue with working people—especially (but not only) with the most militant, active, and radicalized workers and youth.

As brief examples, faced with an assault on workers' wages and conditions on the job, we should undoubtedly defend the workers' demands for better pay, no givebacks, better conditions, and union protections—standard reforms. But we also propose that workers should make addi-

tional demands: that supposedly unprofitable businesses and industries, instead of be allowed to cut workers' wages and/or firing workers, should be taken away from the bosses (expropriation) by the state. They should be turned over to the workers and local communities to run democratically. We add that they should not become competitive producers' cooperatives but should coordinate with each other to create useful products and to improve the environment.

To support workers' goals, even the most mild reform goals, we support union strikes and boycotts. But we also argue that mass picketing, plant occupations, and general strikes are needed. (And so on.) When and how to say such things depends on circumstances...but they must be said.

This is precisely the issue which divides anarchists and libertarian Marxists into two tendencies, those who believe that revolutionary libertarian socialists should organize themselves into distinct political groups (with clear, revolutionary, programs), and those who want them to dissolve into the broader movement. It is because the program is not simply the sum total of the workers' demands that a special organization needs to be organized around it. Otherwise, why bother?

A revolutionary approach is a complex interaction of various aspects: objective prediction, moral judgment, necessity, and response to worker's concerns. Nothing by itself will be enough. Only everything is enough.

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<http://anarkismo.net/article/16412>

Responds to arguments that it is not necessary to show that capitalism leads to social and ecological catastrophe in order to be a revolutionary anarchist.

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