

The Vision of Revolutionary Anarchism

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Contents

The Vision Could be Made Real	5
The Alternative	7

There are many approaches to anarchism, but for me the central issue is the vision of an anti-authoritarian, stateless, classless, oppression-less, society. It is the vision of a world based on cooperation, participatory democracy, production for use rather than profit, free and equal association in all areas of life, and ecological balance with the natural world. It would involve networks and federations of self-managed workplaces, industries, communities, neighborhoods, and (so long as they are still needed) militia units (the armed people). These would be managed by direct, face-to-face, democracy—the self-organization of the people. To achieve this, people would organize under the principle of as much democratic decentralization as is practically possible and only as much centralization as is minimally necessary.

This does not mean the end of all social coordination or social defense, but the end of the state. The state is a bureaucratic-military-capitalist socially-alienated machine which is standing above the rest of society. There would be no more masses of professional police, military, politicians, judges, lobbyists, spies, prison guards, and bureaucrats, nor any of the capitalist businesses and semi-monopolies which support and are supported by the state. These are the principles and values of my vision of anarchism. They are consistent with the broad mainstream of the anarchist movement.

They are also consistent with the visions once held by millions of a past Edenic Golden Age, or of a future Messianic End Times when all oppression and sorrow will be gone and people will be free and equal. These myths fit the prehistorical truth that humans lived for tens of thousands of years in small, self-governing, hunter-gatherer groups and agricultural villages, mostly cooperative and equal, without states, or classes, or markets. In a real sense the anarchist vision is of a spiral return to such a society, at a higher level of production—with guarantees of plenty for all and of sufficient leisure, in balance with the ecology.

As a vision, this is different from that of liberal capitalist democracy. Liberals and social democrats just want to expand the “good” parts of capitalist democracy while decreasing the “bad” parts. Gradually, a better world will supposedly come into existence. The liberals do not recognize that capitalism has its own limits. In particular, while most of today’s capitalist states claim to be “democratic,” the rulers make no such claim for their economy. The rationalization for the economic system is that it has a “free market.” Any attempt to “extend democracy” to the capitalist economy would mean taking away the wealth and power of those who own the corporations and business enterprises, large and small. It would mean giving the wealth and power to those who work for those capitalists and work in those enterprises. It would give wealth and power to those who buy the companies’ goods, consume their products, and pay taxes that subsidize their profits. To the corporate rich—the whole ruling class—this would seem like a terrible violation of all that was right and proper, the end of civilization, and a totalitarian attack on (their) freedom.

The capitalists and their agents and supporters would resist any such change—no matter how peaceful, gradual, and popular—tooth and claw, to the last drop of blood (theirs and the people’s). Their democratic (bourgeois-democratic, that is) state would turn out to be not so democratic after all, as they would use it to crush popular resistance (or they would replace it with a more authoritarian state to do the job).

Reforms and improvements for the people have been won and may yet still be won (and should be fought for)—especially in periods of relative prosperity and stability. But when things get bad and the economy goes downhill, the boss class will pull back its benefits, shut down its cooperation with the popular classes, and resist giving any more reforms. This is happening

right now. Then the chances for expanding the democratic-liberal aspects of modern capitalism into a better society become virtually nil—without a revolution.

The anarchist vision both overlaps with and contradicts the Marxist tradition. In the mid-1800s, both anarchism and Marxism developed out of movements for democracy, socialism, and workers' rights. Marxism, like anarchism, had a vision of a cooperative, democratic, society without classes or a state, ecologically balanced—won through the self-emancipation of the modern working class and its allies. Marx and Engels wrote very little about what communism might be like. Their comments are scattered throughout their works. But of what little they wrote, their goal was very close to that of anarchism.

Following in the footsteps of the early “utopian socialists” (Owen, Fourier, Cabet, etc.), both the original Marxists and the anarchists foresaw the end of the division of labor as developed under capitalism. In particular they rejected the division between order-givers and order-takers, between mental labor and manual labor. They saw the reorganization of technology and production in such a way as to expand the all-around potentialities of humans. They expected the end of the division between cities and countryside, between industry and agriculture. There would be a new ecological balance.

Having a vision of a libertarian, humanistic, communist society is not the same as having a blueprint of how such a society might work. The early “utopians” wrote detailed accounts of their visions. Marx predicted that a post-capitalist society would go through specific stages. It would first pay workers with labor-notes and later provide full communism (“From each according to their ability to each according to their needs.”) Anarchists, such as Kropotkin, were more likely to use detailed accounts not as blueprints but as heuristic examples of how their principles might be put into practice; for example, going directly to full communism. After Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta argued for an experimental and pluralistic approach to anarchism. He expected different communities, regions, nations, etc., to try out different ways of organizing non-capitalist, radically-democratic, societies, so long as there was no further exploitation.

Between Marx and the anarchists there were some important differences. Marx saw the state of capitalism as being replaced, not by a free federation, but by a new state of the working class and its allies. This workers' state would be transitional, evolving into a non-coercive but still highly centralized “public authority.” And, while he was for a very democratic form of representative democracy, Marx and Engels did not at all see the need for decentralized, face-to-face, communal democracies at the root of a new society.

And they did not see a role for a moral vision of a new society. To Marx and Engels it was the material historical process which led to the ends of socialism and communism. They specifically rejected relying on the vision of the workers. The workers would fight for socialism because the workers would fight for socialism. The dialectical dynamics of capitalism would develop its internal contradictions. It would build giant capitalist enterprises with huge concentrations of workers and would heat up the class struggle between the workers and bosses. As a result, the workers would automatically develop class consciousness and self-organization, leading to the overthrow of capitalism. At no time, in their vast body of work, did Marx or Engels write that the workers and others should fight for socialism because it was right to do so, because socialism was good. (Undoubtedly, Marx and Engels were personally motivated by moral passions, but it was not part of their theoretical system.)

Although I am an anarchist, I agree that there are certain dynamics of capitalism, accurately analyzed by Marx, which push in the direction of socialism. These include the growth of industrial

capitalism, the periodic and longterm crises of capitalism, and the development by capitalism of the international working class. But there are also countertrends, some of which were also discussed by Marx. There are certain stabilizing mechanisms within capitalism which can overcome short-term crises (at least for a while). Also, better-off workers are usually satisfied with the status quo. Worse-off workers may be beaten-down and demoralized. Whether and when these or other layers of the working class will rebel against capitalism cannot be known for sure. Socialist revolution is not “inevitable.”

The historical struggle for a better society is not something which happens to people—through historical processes external to them. It is something which people do—as they react to historical circumstances. Class conflict is not a mechanical clash of forces, but a conflict of wills. Socialism is not an inevitability; it is a possibility, which will happen only if enough people chose to make it happen.

Marxism went from a vision very close to anarchism to become a rationalization for totalitarian, mass-murdering, state capitalism—until the “Communist” states collapsed back into traditional capitalism. I have just touched on some of its essential weaknesses which contributed to this result (while interacting with objective pressures): its centralism, its “transitional” state, and its non-moral determinism.

I reject the moralistic method of starting from a set of values (which a good society should have) to work out a plan for what a good society should be. This was the classical method of the “utopians,” as well as the authors of “Parecon” (participatory economics) today. I also reject the mechanical conception of capitalism grinding out a new society, with a visionary consciousness playing little or no role. Such a view was dominant in Marxism (and, to an extent, in the work of the great anarchist Kropotkin). The split between these two views is based on a positivist split between values and facts. I do not accept this dichotomy. The struggle for a libertarian socialism, for anarchism, is both moral and based on social forces.

The Vision Could be Made Real

The vision of a free, democratic, and cooperative society is, then, rooted in the ancient visions of humanity. It is the culmination of the values raised by the greatest teachers, philosophers, and religious leaders. It extends the democratic rights proposed in the great bourgeois-democratic revolutions (the U.S. revolution, the French revolution, etc.) and expressed in the early programs of “utopian” socialism. Now these goals are able to be realized. In past revolutions, the people overthrew their old masters, but then most people had to go back to work if they were not all to starve. Only a few could be free to pursue science and mathematics, social coordination, managing waterworks, etc. Unlike pre-historical hunter-gatherer societies, there was just enough to support this non-producing elite (and its enforcers)—but there was never enough to provide plenty for all.

Now humans have the technology and productivity so that hard but necessary labor can be reduced to a minimum and shared by everyone. It is possible for most work to become an integration between creative, pleasurable, activities and useful labor, as crafts have sometimes been. Socialist communities can decide where to use automation, where to use small power machines, and where to work by hand. Contrary to its present development by centralized corporations and military states, industrial technology can be reorganized to support self-governing communities

and industries. With modern means of communication, decentralized groupings could be coordinated from below. There can be enough leisure for everyone to go to meetings to make collective decisions, without taking up all their free time. People will be able to choose their life styles and activities; they will be able to decide themselves how to express their genders and sexualities.

However, because socialist revolution has been so delayed, this powerful technology also poses terrible threats. It is under a social system which developed in scarcity, which divided social wealth among competing capitalist firms, and divided the world among war-waging national states. It exists in a capitalist system which is driven to expand, to grow quantitatively, to accumulate ever more capital regardless of social or ecological costs.

The dangerous misuse of modern technology is clearest in the case of nuclear bombs. So far, the capitalist states have avoided nuclear wars. The rulers have feared the results, with good reason. Even a “small” nuclear war (or even a one-sided attack) not only creates local effects through huge blasts, but would throw into the atmosphere radioactive dust and debris, which would effect the whole world. It could cause a “nuclear winter,” blocking out sunlight for years over the whole earth, possibly destroying civilization or even all humanity (and other species).

This has not yet happened, even during the Cold War. But non-nuclear wars are continuing across the world, while atomic bombs still exist, they are spread more widely, and they are being updated. The world capitalist class cannot bring itself to get rid of them. It would only take one nuclear exchange, once, to possibly wipe us out. These states and this ruling class need to be disarmed by the working people of the world.

At the same time, the capitalist misuse of technology is causing ecological catastrophes. These include the loss of species, the pollution of the land, air, water, and food, and worst of all, global warming. In the here-and-now this causes extreme weather, of storms, floods, droughts, and fires. It is tending towards heat levels which humans and other organisms have never experienced as a steady condition. Whether our civilization can survive is an open question.

The problem is that capitalism needs to grow and accumulate, or it collapses. But the ecological world has the exact opposite need. It requires a steady, balanced, system not geared to growth—or at least not quantitative growth of expanded production; qualitative improvements and increased complexity are another matter. This is a deep contradiction. Our industrial civilization is built on the increasing use of fossil fuels—which are limited and nonrenewable, polluting, and cause global heating. Neither the oil companies nor the capitalist class as a whole will willingly end this grow-or-die system.

After World War II, the theorists of capitalism claimed that they had solved capitalism’s contradictions. There was to be eternal prosperity (at least in the industrialized—imperial—nations), with tamed business (boom-and-bust) cycles. They would do this through moderate government intervention in the economy (financial stimuli, tax and money manipulations). In fact the post-war prosperity lasted for almost thirty years.

Yet the deep crisis of capitalism during the Great Depression was only temporarily overcome. That required massive defeats of the world working class, the rise of Nazism and fascism, the rise of Stalinism, and the Second World War. This was followed by the reorganization of world imperialism (so that the U.S.A. became the main power), expanded military spending (on nuclear arms), the growth of world-spanning semi-monopolies, and the use of “cheap” oil and other natural resources (without paying for their eventual replacement). These forces provided for a new prosperity which lasted until the early 70s, when they ran out of steam.

Profits come from surplus value, which is nothing but the unpaid labor of the workers. (So says Marx, and I agree.) The very expansion of capitalist production means that there are ever more machines and raw materials being used, so that the labor force becomes a smaller proportion of what the capitalists pay for production (that is, while the number of workers may even expand, they are relatively fewer as compared to the even greater expansion of the non-human costs of production). This causes a relative drop in the amount of labor which may be used to make the produced commodities (and which determines their exchange value). Therefore there is a relatively smaller amount of unpaid (surplus) labor screwed out of the workers. The rate of profit declines for the overall set of capitalists. There are a range of counteracting forces which limit this fall in the rate of profit, described by Marx. But there continues to be a long-term tendency toward the fall of the profit rate.

This basic tendency has reached its long-term expression since about 1900, the beginning of what has been called “the epoch of capitalist decline.” Since about 1970, it has reasserted itself against the apparent post-war prosperity. A major symptom (and, in turn, a contributing cause) has been the expansion of giant corporations: monopolies, semi-monopolies, and oligopolies. Another symptom is the lack of funds to deal with the global warming crisis. Overall, there has been stagnation, under- and un-employment, pools of poverty even in rich countries, expanded inequality, uneven development of the poor nations, increased wars and international conflicts, the growth of financialization (investment in money and paper, rather than in real production), and attacks by the capitalists on the unions and on the working class’ standard of living. The evidence is that the overall economy will continue to decline, with moderate ups and downs, with further, and probably worse, crashes in the future—perhaps a depression worse than in the ‘thirties.

These predictions of capitalist decline are not based on some absolute knowledge, rooted in reading Marx’s *Capital*, or other sources. It is just the best evaluation of probable reality which I and others have been able to make.

Along with these looming catastrophes—nuclear war, global warming, economic crashes—are other evils of this system. Capitalism supports—and is supported by—a network of oppressions, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, national oppression, religious bigotry, and so on and on. It continues to be an ugly civilization, crushing the spirit and distorting human potentialities, causing suffering and sorrow in all sorts of ways.

The Alternative

So the vision of new world is possible. It is also necessary, if we chose to avoid military, ecological, and economic catastrophes, not to mention the continuing suffering caused by capitalism as it is. This is what Rosa Luxemburg meant by saying that the alternatives are “socialism or barbarism,” summarizing statements by Marx and Engels. It is why Murray Bookchin, focusing on the ecological situation, upgraded this to “anarchism or annihilation.”

This does not make socialism (anarchism, libertarian communism) inevitable. On the contrary, it means that capitalism has a dynamic which leads to greater and worse crises and catastrophes. As an economic system it is deeply flawed and irrational. It is highly unlikely (I will not say “impossible”) that it can pull out of its current extended crash-landing and return to a period of stability and relative prosperity. The last time it did this, from the late 1940s to 1970–1975, it

was at the cost of a Great Depression, a World War, post-war spending on nuclear arms, and the vast use of fossil fuels. To revive itself, even for a time, would require something similar. It seems unlikely that the system could survive either another world war or a deepened misappropriation of the natural world.

But the people of the world—the working class and its allies among the oppressed—could choose to replace capitalism with libertarian socialism. That is, to make a revolution. While, to repeat, there are forces leading in that direction, this is ultimately a moral choice, made by mass movements of millions of oppressed and exploited humans. The evils of capitalism and its states and oppressive institutions can be rejected and the long-held visions of a new and better world can be created. This does not depend on mechanical historical processes but on moral choice and commitment.

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