

What about human nature?

Thinking about Anarchism

Alan MacSimoin

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A WORLD without war, famine, poverty, racism? A world where there are no bosses ordering us around and living off our work? A world where competition is replaced by co-operation and individual freedom?

Sounds nice. Who wouldn't like to see it? But it can never happen, it runs against human nature. How many times have you heard that line? How many times have you been told that people are naturally selfish, greedy, prone to violence and short-sighted?

We are constantly being told that there will always be leaders and led, rulers and ruled. These ideas are powerful because they seem to make sense. We do live in a nasty, competitive society.

IT WOULD BE A MIRACLE

Capitalism is based on competition. Countries compete, companies compete. At work you are encouraged to compete for promotion (or to avoid being let go), in school you compete against other students to get the best exam results. With so much competition around it would be miraculous if people were not competitive.

The question is whether this is natural? The idea that there is some eternally flawed human nature that we can't do much about gets lots of support from those with a stake in the existing set-up. Anarchists reject this as self serving nonsense churned out by those who are doing well out of capitalism and don't want to see it got rid of.

WHO DOESN'T CARE?

Despite the odds stacked against it we can find just as many examples of caring and co-operation as we can of selfishness and competition. Solidarity strikes are an obvious one. We even saw workers in Dunnes Stores go on strike for months in support of black workers in South Africa whom they had never even met.

Look at any working class neighbourhood and you will find people caring for each other. They are organising football teams for the teenagers, summer projects for the younger children. This doesn't make sense if greed is part of our human nature.

WILLIE BERMINGHAM

Greed and selfishness don't motivate people to carry kidney donor cards or make them want to donate blood to the transfusion service. Greed did not inspire the late Willie Bermingham to start up ALONE to care for the elderly living on their own.

Selfishness does not lead people to give money to charities. It does not explain why nurses volunteer to work unpaid for Concern projects in the less developed countries.

But, we are told, there are those better suited to ruling, that inequality is natural and inevitable. Before capitalism the ruling class used the argument that God had chosen them, the 'divine right of kings'. With capitalism came a new justification. We are told that our bosses and rulers owe their position to superior talent. They 'merit' their position.

ARE THEY BETTER THAN YOU?

We are told that with intelligence and hard work anyone can make it. The other side of the coin is that those at the bottom of society are there because of their own laziness or because they are not as bright as the likes of Haughey or Ben Dunne. Are we really expected to accept that Dan Quayle is an intellectual giant? Are we to believe that the child of a millionaire has only the same chances as the rest of us?

This is crap pushed at us to stop us questioning why the many do all the work while the few make all the important decisions and live off the fat of the land.

The true story is that we are products both of the environment we live in and of the changes we make on it. We have no control over what sort of society we are born into but we can change it.

CHANGING VIEWS OF 'NATURAL'

To law-abiding parents stopping the heroin dealers was a job for the gardai. When the gardai were not moving against the Larry Dunnes and Ma Bakers those same law-abiding parents thought it quite natural to organise into the CPAD and put the pushers out of their areas — even though doing that was illegal.

To the conscripted American soldier in Vietnam blindly obeying orders from officers seemed perfectly natural. After years of slaughter and massacres, desertion and even mutiny seemed natural.

To most workers getting in to work each Monday morning and taking orders from the boss seems natural until they are forced to strike. They may even challenge the right of the boss to control their workplace by occupying it.

WE CAN DO IT

We have the power to change the world. The ruling class know this and try to divide us. They split us into Protestant and Catholic, gay and straight, black and white, working class and so-called middle class (white collar workers).

But again and again the system throws us together in struggle. It is in struggle that we come to depend on each other and co-operate for a common goal. This is the first step towards building a society where selfishness is replaced by co-operation, where the dictate of the boss is replaced by freedom, where we take control of our own lives and futures.

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