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Anarchism and the Big Society

Anarcho

February 16, 2011

In the *Independent* (16/02/11), Brian Lincoln from Edinburgh wrote a letter discussing David Cameron's "Big Society" and anarchism:

"In proposing the 'Big Society' as the antidote to 'big government', has David Cameron converted to anarchism, the political philosophy which most wants to get the state out of everything?"

"In an 1896 text, the Russian revolutionary Peter Kropotkin explains that anarchism "seeks the most complete development of individuality combined with the highest development of voluntary association in all its aspects, in all possible degrees, for all imaginable aims; ever-changing, ever-modified associations which carry in themselves the elements of their durability and constantly assume new forms which answer best to the multiple aspirations of all'. Familiar?"

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Yet this is a selective account of anarchism, completely ignoring its economic ideas *and* the means advocated to achieve it. This can be seen from the text quoted, namely Kropotkin's *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal*. Yes, Kropotkin *does* argue for free association but he recognises that this is only truly possible in a society without class division for "we know full well today that it is futile to speak of liberty as long as economic slavery exists." Thus capitalism meant the worker must "sell his labour power for less than it is capable of bringing in" and Kropotkin points to "the fatal consequences of the present forms of property." Thus:

"when we analyse the evils of the present economic system, we see – and the worker knows it full well – that their essence lies in the forced necessity of the worker to sell his labour power ... he renounces the benefits his labour might bring him in; he abandons the lion's share of what he produces to his employer; he even abdicates his liberty; he renounces his right to make his opinion heard on the utility of what he is about to produce and on the way of producing it."

Interestingly, given the current economic woes being used to justify Cameron's ideological agenda, Kropotkin notes that these are inherent in capitalism and so the "industrial crises, the frequency and duration of which are always augmenting, have passed into a chronic state in many industries." He was also clear, given his analysis of the exploitative nature of capitalism, that an economic revolution was required as well as a political one:

"a conception of society arises, in which conception there is no longer room for those dominating minorities. A society entering into possession of the social capital accumulated by the labour of preceding generations, organising itself so as to make use of this capital

in the interests of all, and constituting itself without reconstituting the power of the ruling minorities.”

Such a “society, having recovered the possession of all riches accumulated in its midst, can liberally assure abundance to all in return for four or five hours effective and manual work a day, as far as regards production.” Libertarian communism, Kropotkin stressed, was “the best basis for individual development and freedom; not that individualism which drives man to the war of each against all.” No Tory would agree with that perspective.

Similarly, it is doubtful that Cameron would conclude that “this ideal presents itself based on the necessity of Communism, imposed on our modern societies by the eminently social character of our present production.” Anarchy, argued Kropotkin, “refuses all hierarchical organization and preaches free agreement.” This applies economically as well as politically. The hierarchical capitalist workplace based on *wage-labour* must be replaced by the self-managed socialist one based on *associated-labour*. Anarchists, unlike the Tories, “loudly ask for the return to the community of all riches accumulated by the work of preceding generations” and the “holding in common of land, mines, factories, inhabited houses, and means of transport.”

Again, unlike Cameron, anarchism sees free association as being created from below rather than legislated from above:

“Communist organisation cannot be left to be constructed by legislative bodies called parliaments, municipal or communal council. It must be the work of all, a natural growth, a product of the constructive genius of the great mass. Communism cannot be imposed from above; it could not live even for a few months if the constant and daily co-operation of all did not uphold it. It must be free.”

Again, unlike the Tories, anarchism sees a free society being created by the direct action of the working class:

“The worker perceives that he has been disinherited, and that disinherited he will remain, unless he has recourse to strikes or revolts to tear from his masters the smallest part of riches built up by his own efforts”

Unlike the attempts by the Tories to restrict the right to strike and to organise unions, Kropotkin stressed the need for “collective revolt – strikes and working class insurrections.” This was the means by which “they will be able to start the destruction of the present economic system” as well as the state which protects it, that “mutual insurance society of landlords, bankers, priests, judges, and soldiers.” The means of production would be seized and run by those who use them, for “how can the peasant be made to believe that the bourgeois or manorial land belongs to the proprietor who has a legal claim ... how make the worker in a factory, or the miner in a mine, believe that factory and mine equitably belong to their present masters”?

Would Cameron be praising such actions as the “Big Society” or would he be invoking “Big Government” to crush such revolts? The answer is all too obvious.

To conclude, it is *not* a wise thing (unless you wish to discredit anarchism!) to suggest Cameron’s vision of a *privatised* society is similar to anarchism’s *socialised* one. It staggers belief that anyone could suggest David Cameron has “converted” to anarchism or seeks the same society as Kropotkin. Yes, anarchism *is* for free and self-managed association but it is premised on a transformation of economic relations and property. Cameron has *not* decided to become a (libertarian) socialist nor, like Kropotkin, renounce his own social position to work for the self-emancipation of the working classes from our slavery to capital and its defender, the state. Quite the reverse as the cuts and the Tory agenda he is trying to

hide begin his “Big Society” rhetoric are aimed at *increasing* our slavery to capital. The road to *private* serfdom, if you like...

Suffice to say, anarchism has *never* been purely anti-state and to suggest otherwise is to impoverish it. As can be seen from Kropotkin’s 1896 text, we recognise that free association cannot exist as long as capitalism does.

Kropotkin’s *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal* is contained in the excellent anthology *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings* (previously released as *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets*). It is reviewed along with an Emma Goldman book here: *How Revolutions Must Not be Made*. His ideas on mutual aid are discussed here: *Mutual Aid: An Introduction and Evaluation*. His arguments for revolutionary unions and direct action are addressed here: *Syndicalism, Anarchism and Marxism*.

Attempts by the Tories to adopt the mantle of social progressives are refuted in *Tories for Social Justice? WTF?* while *Mutualism: Fake and Real* exposes the nonsense of the Tories promoting co-operatives. As predicted, in power the Tories are still Thatcherites

Finally, for more information on anarchism then visit *An Anarchist FAQ* or, for a shorter introduction on that kind of socialism based on (to quote Proudhon) “the denial of Government and of Property” then read: “I am an Anarchist”