

Reports on Bradford MayDay '98

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Introduction: Back to Bradford

I'm an Irish anarchist, a member of the Workers Solidarity Movement. These are some of the thoughts that have been mulling around in my mind since the Bradford conference. I am very aware that it is so much easier to criticise than to offer solutions, so bearing this in mind I would like to throw out five things (not solutions unfortunately) that came to mind in Bradford. I should emphasise, that as an Irish anarchist, my experience of the situation in England, Scotland and Wales is extremely limited. Sometimes outsiders can see things that those in the thick of things miss, sometimes outsiders get things completely wrong. Who knows? My hope is that this will contribute to the debate that is beginning at the moment.

The beginning is a very good place to start. The group I was in at Bradford began with the question, are we marginalised. The discussion revealed that yes, politically our ideas were in the minority, but that the marginalisation we felt as individuals was no different from the marginalisation that was experienced by most of society. As anarchists we feel like outsiders because so few others understand or agree with our world view, yet we should also be aware that this feeling of exclusion, of loneliness, is felt by the majority of people in today's society, no matter what their political persuasion, gender, race, whether urban or rural. To live at the end of the twentieth century is to live on the periphery. For me this discussion highlighted that any discussion of the state of the anarchist movement in the UK, must start from an awareness that as anarchists we are not separate from the society we want to change, we don't look on from the outside. Being part of today's society, we are vulnerable to the changes of mood, of political and social climate that affect society in general. The bottom line is that if we are looking for the reasons for weak state of the anarchist movement in the UK at the moment, not all the answer's will be found by looking at anarchism. In many ways the movement seems to have reflected changes that have occurred elsewhere in the world.

For example, in my group many people, with great honesty, expressed their sense of demoralisation, of depression and a growing cynicism of politics. These are views I have heard many times before, from both people who were politically active, and relatively apolitical. Although, theoretically, it was predicted that the fall of the Berlin wall and the changes that followed, would deal a body blow to political idealism, the practical effect of living through such times were never really expressed. The idea that progress is possible has been severely undermined. The idea that it is possible to create an alternative future has been severely undermined. The idea that people have power and a creative ability to decide their own destinies has been severely undermined. In a sense, that this was going to happen, was obvious and was predicted, however perhaps words can never guard against the bitter experience of living in a time that is characterised by defeat and retreat. What I want to emphasise is that, it isn't all that surprising that activists feel demoralised. Indeed it would be surprising if it was otherwise. Only an extremely strong, cohesive and coherent anarchist movement, of the like that has never existed in the English speaking world, could have buffered the movement against the dwindling of hope that has occurred in the world at large. That movement didn't exist, and here we are now. What to do?

Our starting point should be to recognise that we are part of society, and as such it is important to understand how far that affects our political ideas and work. The anarchist movement needs to become more self aware. We need to ask ourselves, what are we doing and why? Are we like bits of wood in a river, tossed this way and that or are can be we more like salmon, con-

sciously swimming against the tide towards our goal. The following sections identify some of the questions I think we should be asking ourselves.

An Anarchist Movement

At the Bradford conference, I felt that there was little sense among the participants, that an anarchist movement existed at the moment, or, indeed any understanding of the importance of creating such a movement. There seemed to be confusion as to what an anarchist movement was, with some people equating it with the creation of one all encompassing organisation. To explain, an anarchist movement isn't an organisation or a structure, rather it is a sense of solidarity and comradeship that exists between different organisations and individuals. It is an understanding that though we have our differences, we are working towards a common goal, and as such we will work in tandem, when possible. It is the idea that when we co-ordinate our activities, it is not simply because it is a more effective way of attaining our goal (for example strike support) but also, and equally important, because in doing so, we are building an anarchist movement. It is the realisation that we should exchange ideas, organisation with organisation, and in this way use our diversity of experiences to create a stronger anarchism that benefits us all.

This understanding of an anarchist movement doesn't seem to exist at the moment. From what I can work out, in England and Scotland, a variety of local networks exist, and cooperate on the basis of activity. The impression I got, was that these local area-based supports co-ordinated activity but didn't see that they had any role in creating an anarchist movement, they worked together to achieve specific aims, but not to build anarchism. However, as I said, I'm looking in from the outside, and I would be very interested in hearing how those involved in such networks define their goals.

Time

An Anarchist movement is an ideal, an entity, that exists across time and space. In contrast, Anarchism in the UK seems to exist solely in the here and now. There was no sense of being part of an Anarchist heritage that stretched into the past or of creating an anarchist tradition that would be carried forward into the future.

Such a tradition would buttress the movement against the ups and downs of political optimism and opportunity that we experience. It would give the work we all do, in our own areas, a larger purpose. When I spend a rainy Thursday evening writing an article such as this, part of my motivation comes from the fact that I see myself as adding to the work done of thousands of others. If Louise Michel could take the time in 1871, if Emma Goldman could take the time in the 1920's, if the women of Mujeres Libres could do so in Spain in 1930's, I can certainly do so now. There are very few anarchists in Ireland, and so I take my support and inspiration from those anarchist women who took the time in the past. To reject your heritage, to cut yourself off from those who struggled before you is to deny yourself a sense of place in history and a source of motivation, inspiration and support. As marginalised people, can we afford to do this?

Furthermore, I get the impression that tradition is equated with history, so that an anarchist tradition is seen as nothing more than dead, dusty and redundant knowledge. Yet, at the core of anarchist ideas is the idea of creation. People have the ability to create a new society, to create

new ways of organising our lives, to create new ways of struggle. An anarchist conception of tradition, for me, is bound up with this idea of creation. Tradition is something that must be made, that evolves, that changes. When anarchists are active, they create and recreate their tradition. Tradition is never static and bound in books. What an anarchist tradition gives us, is the idea that we are adding to a body of knowledge and experience that will continue to be drawn on and used in the future. It gives our anarchism a life that is greater than each individual that makes it up.

At Bradford, a common experience seemed to be, of small groups existing for short periods of time in certain areas, only to die when those involved relocated. This is a very difficult problem to solve. In Ireland we faced similar difficulties, as generations of young activists emigrated. There are no easy solutions, but the creation of an anarchist movement, that is bigger than any one individual or location, would at least ensure, that where an individual is forced to drop out, the work they have done will remain part of the greater movement.

Space

Another thing I noticed in Bradford was the isolation of the anarchists I met there. There seemed to be little awareness that an anarchist movement existed beyond the shores of England, Scotland and Wales, and within the island anarchists seemed only to communicate with others on an extremely local level. A national Anarchist movement can in some way minimise the problems of relocation mentioned above. In order to create such a movement we need to be able to extend beyond local areas (more of this latter). Secondly, an Anarchist movement should draw on the experiences of other anarchists. It should seek to find out what is happening in other countries. I travel to anarchist conferences as often as possible because I find them both a source of inspiration and of information. It is remarkable, how many of the problems we face in Ireland are similar to those faced in England, Italy, France etc. In order to overcome the isolation felt, anarchism in the UK, needs to change the way it sees itself. Rather than picturing oneself as a member of a small group of activists located in a particular part of the island, each anarchist needs to see him or herself as part of a greater, world wide movement. By broadening its horizons, the British anarchist movement can start availing of the resources and experiences of anarchists abroad. Of course, this won't solve all problems, and language barriers and financial constraints will always limit how much communication is possible.

Confidence

In order to succeed, anarchists must be able to speak with confidence. In order to communicate our ideas, we must have confidence in our ability to say, 'this is how things are'. Again, I felt this seemed to be missing from Bradford. Perhaps this is because in the past confidence was equated with dogmatism, division and sectarianism. Certainly we need to address how differences within the movement are dealt with, and as far as I can remember, one of the closing statements emphasised that we should respect other peoples opinions. However, we should also be careful, that fear of disagreement, doesn't lead to a watering down of opinion, or the avoidance of taking a position. As I said, we consciously or unconsciously reflect the society we belong to, and one of the developments of modern day thought, is that all opinions and ideas are equally valid and

true. While this sounds egalitarian on the surface, it is also a recipe for stagnation, for if an idea is accepted as given, it will never be explored in greater depth. Truth emerges from the clash of ideas. If we speak with strength, we are convincing. If we are challenged with equal strength by our comrades, we are forced to re-evaluate and modify. Out of this process, of debate and discussion, of give and take, the theory and practice that we need to build an anarchist society will emerge (isn't this process the essence of anarchism in action?). Again perhaps one of the greatest problems that Anarchists in Britain face is how to undergo this process without leading to sectarian division. Perhaps the answer lies in realising that there is a difference between division and sectarianism, while the former can be a positive response to disagreement, the latter never can be.

Theory

Related to this is the question of theory. At Bradford, some raised the old call, 'we need new theory'. I agree with them, but would like to make a few points. It is worth considering what we mean by theory and how it is created. If you see in theory, the anarchist holy grail, you are bound to be disappointed. No theory exists or can exist that will solve all our problems. It is futile to wait for a theory to appear that will lead us all to liberation. What is theory? Theory is an understanding of how the world is organised. It is an understanding of why we do, what we do. Where does it come from? If it comes from our experiences, our struggles, our campaign work. Theory is what we create in small rooms when we discuss why Tony Blair is introducing the JSA? is it stoppable? and if it is what are the best tactics we should be using? Theory informs our practice (tells us what to do) and comes out of our practice (what we do informs our theory). As such, it should be obvious that theory doesn't grow overnight, it develops over time. And no theory is ever finished, it is always open to re-evaluation, re-discussion as times change (or don't change). So yes, anarchists need theory, but this is not something that we can divorce from activity, or indeed wait for. Instead we need to ensure that we constantly analyse the work that we do, that we examine our activity, that we question the society we live in. We need to write this stuff down, exchange it with others, invite criticisms, force ourselves to come to positions. This is the process that both develops our understanding of the world and develops our confidence in explaining our ideas to others.

Organisation

Finally, a word about organisation. When I went to Bradford, I was convinced that a major weakness of the British anarchist movement is its extreme aversion to organisation. I still believe that without the development of strong organisations, anarchism in England, Scotland and Wales will always be weak and susceptible to the ebb and flow of the political climate. It seems that the issue of organisation has never been discussed in depth. It is true that many national organisations have failed in the past, and many problems have arisen from the way national organisations have operated. However, rather than seeking to identify those problems or to look for new solutions, many anarchists, with a simplistic and superficial analysis, throw the baby out with the bathwater, and reject any form of national structure. It is simply not good enough to reject national organisation with the aphorism 'they don't work'. If they don't, why don't they?

How can they be made to work? The following words were written by Russian anarchists in 1926. I re-read them recently, after returning from Bradford, and was struck by how true they still rang today.

“It is very significant that, in spite of the strength and incontestably positive character of libertarian ideas, and in spite of the forthrightness and integrity of anarchist positions in the facing up to the social revolution, and finally in the heroism and innumerable sacrifices borne by the anarchists in the struggle for libertarian communism, the anarchist movement remains weak despite everything, and has appeared, very often, in the history of working class struggles as a small event, and episode and not as an important factor.

This contradiction between the positive and incontestable substance of libertarian ideas, and the miserable state in which the anarchist movement vegetates, has its explanation in a number of causes, of which the most important, the principal, is the absence of organisational principle and practices in the anarchist movement.”

Following the conference, I realised that lack of organisation was not the only problem facing British anarchists. Given this however, sooner or latter the movement will have to debate how best to organise itself. When it does, I urge you to read the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists (from which quote above is taken). It is no holy grail, but it is, in my opinion, a good starting point, on the road to building a strong anarchist movement.

Summary

If I was asked to describe a single word that describes the state of anarchism in the UK, it would be fragmented. And if I was asked to describe the single problem facing anarchists in the UK it would be this fragmentation. Again it's interesting to remember that in many ways our movement is made in the image of the society we live in. We have a fragmented movement, for a fragmented world. In the course of this (long) discussion I highlighted four issues that need to be taken on board, in order to rebuild anarchism;

1. The Anarchist Movement. The questions we need to address are, what do we mean by an Anarchist movement? Why is it useful? How do we go about creating one?
2. Confidence. How do we develop an ability to convey our ideas with confidence
3. Theory. What is it? How do we get it? What areas should we be looking at?
4. Organisation. How?

To conclude, I would like to say that I very much enjoyed the Bradford conference. I found it very inspirational. It was wonderful to be able to meet so many fellow travellers, to be able to talk politics with so many others. I was impressed with the dedication of many of those I met. Many of those at the conference had a long term commitment to anarchism and had developed a wealth of experience. Its a good place to start, I wish you the best of luck.

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