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Review: An anarcho-syndicalist alternative to capitalism

The economics of freedom

Anarcho

December 11, 2010

This is an excellent, if flawed, little pamphlet. Written by a group of people in the **Solidarity Federation**, the UK section of the **International Workers Association**, it is an attempt to explain how a libertarian communist society could work. The aim of such a society is “*to guarantee liberty and equality*” for all and, unsurprisingly, these principles are at the heart of both their model and their criticism of capitalism.

The pamphlet itself is split into three parts. They present a good, if condensed, critique of capitalism, contrasting the “free market” economic ideology used to justify capitalism with its reality. As they note, the modern economy is far from the idyllic picture painted in the economic textbooks or politicians speeches: inequalities of wealth and power, concentration of capital, state intervention on behalf of the boss class, slumps, etc. all ensure that. The casual reader may, however, get confused by the pamphlet’s use of the term “free market” to de-

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scribe both capitalism and the economic model. They also provide a good (if extremely summarised) account of the limitations of markets in such areas as the environment and quality of life.

The second part is a description of libertarian communism, stressing how different it is from what was labelled “communism” in the Stalinist states. It is about creating a social environment which would promote individuality and individual liberty, not “*suppressing free speech, freedom of thought or positive aspect of individuality.*” They stress such a society can only be created when “*people support it and are involved in running it.*” Solidarity as the key and the pamphlet counters claims that community and individuality are at odds: “*individual freedom and welfare can only be promoted in an environment where we all work together and respect, not dominate, each other.*” This is pretty much common sense, although sadly ignored by capitalist dogma which equates picking masters with liberty.

The pamphlet argues (correctly) that human nature is not fixed and depends on social structures. They argue that “*our consciousness would change if our society and economy were to change.*” This exposes one weakness of the pamphlet, namely the fact that for libertarian communism to be created consciousness must change first and this can only be done by social struggle and direct action. This is implied in the section on “*democratising the future,*” but it would have been nice if it had been made explicit. Without stressing that the class struggle is the school of anarchy, that the framework of a libertarian society is created through struggle and that this changes the ideas and hopes of those involved, it makes it harder for many to envision how we can replace capitalism.

The last section is on “*Democracy and Planning.*” It discusses direct democracy, usefully explaining the difference between delegates (elected, mandated and recallable) with representatives (elected to decide for us). The pamphlet, correctly, places the federation of community and workplace assemblies at the

heart of libertarian communism. Sadly, the actual plan for how such a society would work is flawed. It correctly stresses the need to factor in non-economic issues in resource allocation decisions and the need to prioritise certain projects above others, but seems to consider it sufficient to create a computer model to aid the planning process. This is doubtful for three reasons.

Firstly, such a programme would be extremely difficult (if not impossible) to develop. Secondly, it would be impossible to programme in sufficient local knowledge and changing circumstances to make it work. Thirdly, libertarian communism cannot be dependent on computers. This is because the computers may fail, most of the world does not have them and, most importantly, we will need to work and eat while any programme is being created. And boiling down complex economic and social decisions into a programme will result in a similar hiding of real social costs as the market does. This is not to say that computers are not to be utilised, they are important aids but nothing more. The authors' are aware of this, noting that workers "*do not need precise directions from the computer,*" but I feel they are too dependent on computer technology as a means of countering objections. So while authors' are right on the need for "*calculating the cost*" of economic activity, their proposed solution is flawed. I also have to object to the suggestion of recording my consumption on a card!

Of course the authors are aware that a libertarian communist society would be created from below, by the participation of all, and are sensible enough to stress this is just one vision. They also recognise that "*there is clearly no one true 'blueprint' for a libertarian communist economy — local communities and federations of communities will have autonomy as to what economic system they use, subject to the basic anarcho-syndicalist principles.*" Hopefully this pamphlet will get people thinking about what kind of society we want and how to get there as well as the problems it could face.

Our task today is to spread anarchist ideas and bring that day of social experimentation closer. As the authors' say, "*breaking free and going for direct democracy is the only way to secure the future for ourselves and our children.*" If the authors gave more space to the process of creating libertarian communism and revised the suggestions on planning to be more dynamic and less computer orientated, it would improve any second edition of this pamphlet immensely. At it stands, SolFed can be congratulated in getting a necessary discussion started even if the actual details of the pamphlet's vision are lacking in key areas.

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