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Anarchism for Everyone

Talk at the Melbourne Anarchist Bookfair 2013

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The following are the remarks I had prepared for a panel discussion at the 2013 Melbourne Anarchist Bookfair. What I ended up presenting varied from what follows in a number of ways. I've included some additional remarks and further information via footnotes and links¹.

All too often I have listened to a definition of anarchism that goes like this: “the word anarchy comes from the ancient Greek *an* meaning not or without, and *arkos* meaning ruler or rulers”.

This formulation is often followed by claims that anarchism traces its origins as far back as ancient Greek philosophy, that it represents some form of innate human desire for freedom, and that it encompasses all philosophical, political or religious traditions that in some way proposed humans could live “without rulers”².

¹ I did not pick the panel title “Anarchism for Everybody”, as Leigh K was both correct and quick to point out in the discussion, anarchism is not for everybody, it is certainly not for the bosses, the police, and the fascists.

² See Kropotkin’s article on anarchism in the 1911 Encyclopedia Britannica for the most famous example. Kropotkin and others attempted to “legitimise” anarchism through these appeals to history, but the disastrous effect of this approach has been a hundred years of confusion about the content of anarchist politics.

The effect of this approach is to strip away the meaning and political content of anarchism, reducing the anarchist tradition to what little a hodgepodge of disconnected figures had in common³.

As a definition of anarchism it is grossly incomplete, misleading, and inaccurate.

Anarchism is a coherent and relatively modern political tradition that combines a positive vision of a future libertarian socialist society with a clear analysis of the state and capitalism, and a practice aimed at overcoming these in order to achieve its vision.

By tradition I do not just mean a series of authors that I think sound similar. Starting with Pierre Joseph Proudon, there is an identifiable and traceable tradition of theorists, revolutionaries and organisations that have developed ideas that were in turn utilised and further developed by subsequent theorists, revolutionaries and organisations.

Proudon has been called the “father of Anarchism”, but that is probably too narrow a description of his influence. The writings of Proudon were critically appropriated by a whole generation of socialist revolutionaries, including Karl Marx and Michael Bakunin. As I like to put it, Marxism and anarchism are siblings of the same socialist family!

When the European socialist movement came together in the First International in the 1860s, anarchists and Marxists, Bakunin and Marx, shared a largely identical critique of capitalism, private property and wage labour, as well as a revolutionary outlook. To this day both anarchism and Marxism are socialist, anti-capitalist and revolutionary in their aims.

Anarchism emerged as a separate political tradition as a result of the contest in the First International over questions of the state, the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat, the nature and

³ It is common amongst western anarchists, and also entirely false, to include figures such as Godwin and Stirner in the anarchist tradition. They did not identify as anarchist, their politics were not anarchist, their ideas were not what influenced the later 19th century development of anarchism

role of a revolutionary party, and the nature of working class self-emancipation.

Then as now, anarchists took the slogan “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves” quite literally.

At the heart of anarchism is a vision of libertarian socialism. This vision of socialism is fundamentally different from that of the Bolsheviks and their modern acolytes.

The anarchist tradition prioritises human freedom, and in particular freedom from all forms of domination by any other person or group. But this conception of freedom is social rather than individualist. The anarchist tradition argues that the greater the links of solidarity, cooperation and mutual aid amongst all the toilers of the world, the greater their ability to realise the material basis for human fulfilment.

As such, anarchism utterly rejects the private property of capitalism. Anarchism instead proposes collective ownership of the means of production, subject to workers control. Decisions about the nature and direction of work would be undertaken by those who toil.

In contrast to the central planning of the state socialists, anarchists propose a system of decentralised planning, a network rather than a command structure. There are debates within the anarchist tradition about whether this system would have to be collectivist, or whether this collectivism could form the basis of an anarchism-communism in which all are provided for according to need⁴. However the long term desirability of distribution according to need is not controversial in the anarchist tradition.

⁴ I should have defined these better. It is essentially a question of the remuneration of work, to each according to labour, or to each according to need? The progression from a workers collectivism to anarchist communism is where, in my opinion, anarchists can answer the questions of marxists about anarchism and the transitional process

This vision of libertarian socialism requires the destruction of capitalism and the state. Anarchists understand that capitalism is propelled to expand, and cannot simply coexist or voluntarily cease to exist. The achievement of libertarian socialism requires a revolution, a conclusion anarchists still share with Marxists⁵.

Anarchism famously rejects the state, including the so-called workers state of the Marxists, but this is not simply because anarchists despise being ruled. Anarchism understands that a centralised state is utterly incompatible with workers control, and that it has embedded in it are interests of power, command and self-preservation that are utterly at odds with the aims of libertarian socialism. Workers state or not, the state IS a system of class domination and will through its control re-create capitalism⁶.

The anarchist tradition understands that the practice for achieving libertarian socialism must be consistent the desired outcome if it is to ever exist.

Oppression in all its forms must be overcome by the collective efforts of the oppressed, or it will not be overcome. If our much desired revolution involves empowering a minority to act on the behalf of the majority, through a single party or a centralised state, it is that party or state that will be in power at the end, not the toiling mass of humanity.

⁵ I reject the idea that Proudonian gradualism has any place in what is now the anarchist tradition, any more than it has a place in classical Marxism

⁶ Recommended reading: Errico Malatesta, 1891, 'Anarchy'