

Evolution or Revolution?

Thinking about Anarchism

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THE IDEA OF evolution has always been important to socialists. Except for a handful of utopians most have thought of socialism in terms of human progress and improvement. This idea was given a scientific basis in the nineteenth century by socialists who saw society as evolving through stages towards socialism (not that it would stop here socialism would just be the end of pre-history real history could then begin.) Most socialists believed that the struggle towards socialism was a striving of people to develop and move forward.

So socialists have been united by the idea of the human race advancing towards a better society. They have been divided about how to get there. A major division has arisen between those who believe that socialism can evolve passively through education and example and those who believe it has to be fought for.

Can change occur by itself?

As capitalism began to develop during the nineteenth century small groups began to question the system and whether it ran in the interests of everyone. Most of this criticism was moral. Capitalism was seen as evil because it denied humans their full potential and freedom. One of the first practical solutions put forward was to build a new society from within capitalism. This was the idea of forming socialist co-operatives.

Some of these settlements were models of socialist ideas in practice with all goods held in common and an equal say for all. For example a Co-op set up at Rahiline Co. Clare in 1831.

This was founded when the owner John Scott Vandeleur donated his 618 acre estate to the original tenants. The Ralahine Agricultural and Manufacturing Co-operative Association was an instant success. All land was held in common and workers were paid in labour notes. These could be redeemed for supplies from the committee but such was the abundance they were hardly required. The committee was elected by all the ex-tenants and was made up of both men and women.

Unfortunately Vandeleur lost all his money gambling and the estate was sold to pay debts. The workers signed a declaration "We the under-signed members of the Ralahine Agricultural and Manufacturing Co-Operative Association have experienced over the last 2 years contentment, peace and happiness." (quoted in P. Berrisford Eliss History of the Irish Working Class)

The area quickly settled down to the old pattern of police and landlord violence and agricultural revolts exactly as before. Despite the best intentions of the co-operativists few wanted to follow their example and just hand land to the peasants. None of their schemes led to socialism though some gave a clue as to how it might work in practice. In Ireland today modern farm co-ops are just limited companies. Many are among the most successful capitalist enterprises in the country.

Islands in the stream

Unfortunately these isolated social experiments are doomed to failure. There can be no islands in the stream of capitalism. Any such group has to enter into economic relations with the modern capitalist economy eventually.

The only other choice is total self containment and isolation like the religious colonies of Hutterites, Menonites and Amish in America. Though these societies spurn war and violence

and hold all goods in common they are also conservative, sexist and rooted in tradition. They have basically stood still for 400 years and ignored the world around them. They cannot move forward because progress and evolution is ultimately based on social and human contact.

Is that a ballot box in your pocket?

So socialism won't evolve from islands within capitalism. Neither will it evolve from example, education or voting to put the "good guys" in power. Only a total idiot (and I've met a few in my time) could believe that voting social democrats into power could bring about socialism. A study of parliamentary democracy in Western Europe between 1970 and 1985 noted that "all European parties of any reasonable size have enjoyed at least one period of power in this period."

"Socialists" have been in government everywhere! Yet through out Europe it has been business as usual. No matter what party was in power economic policy remained unchanged. In the election in Australia last year a panel of leading economic experts could not see any difference between the Labour party and neo-thatcherite Liberal party on economic policy.

The striking thing about parliamentary democracy is its entirely undemocratic character. John Stuart Mill the 19th century liberal philosopher saw democracy as a form of government in which "the intellectual classes would lead the government and the government would lead the stupid classes" Whatever about the intelligence of "democratic" governments they certainly rule in the interests of a minority class. The "stupid classes" get to mark a card every few years and otherwise put up or shut up. Capitalist democracy is merely an exercise in mass disenfranchisement.

Biological crisis

So how do we anarchists see socialist ideas evolving? Evolution is not necessarily a smooth and even process. The modern view of evolution in biology is a story of long periods of stability with little change separated by brief crisis periods. Within these short periods of evolutionary time there were huge waves of evolutionary change along with mass extinctions. During this time hundreds of species perished and hundreds of new ones evolved. This idea was first put forward by a materialist zoologist; Stephen J Gould. It is to the idea of materialism that we turn to for our view of how societies evolve.

Society does not progress slowly and smoothly but after long periods of evolution there are briefer periods of revolutionary change. Capitalism, for example, evolved slowly from within feudalism. However the actual transition from feudalism to capitalism was marked by upheaval and social revolution throughout Europe. A new class of merchants and capitalists overthrew an old order of lords and monarchs. Democracy and the nation state replaced a network of earldoms and dukedoms loosely bound together by a king or queen.

Revolutions

Our view is that, unfortunately, Major social change does not happen quickly or easily. Anarchism won't just happen. It will only succeed when the majority of society have the ability and the wish to run it in their own interests.

In practice we see revolution as building from the ground up. Workers infringing more and more on the bosses' profit margins and eventually questioning their right to make a profit on the backs of the working class and taking over their workplace. As the struggle progresses more workers setup workplace committees, councils and eventually defence militias. Groups begin to federate upwards on the basis of democracy, delegation and recallability. This is a revolution desired by many not imposed by a few (as most past revolutions have been.)

Inevitably when faced with a major challenge the bosses and state will be ready to fight to defend their wealth and power. We have to be ready to fight to defend and forward the revolution.

With good organisation, most people on our side and the army coming over we would hope this would not be a long or bloody fight. We are certain the system can't be reformed out of existence. It has to be destroyed. We are revolutionaries not out of blood lust or because we think it sounds cool. We are revolutionaries because it is the only way forward.

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