

Anarcho-Syndicalism, Technology and Ecology

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In an anarchist society, the absence of centralized state authority will permit a radically new integration of nature, labour and culture. As the social and ecological revolution progresses, national boundaries will become cartographical curiosities, and divisions based upon differences in geography, climate and species distribution will re-emerge. This essay addresses the question of what role unionism will play in these changes.

First, it seems obvious that telecommunications, transportation and postal networks all require organization which extends far beyond the individual ecological region, and activities like road building between communities require cooperation beyond that of individual locales. Thus, a return to a community-based lifestyle need not and cannot imply a return to the isolation of the walled medieval city or peasant village.

Anarcho-syndicalists (that is, anarchist unionists) argue that the best way to address such needs is for the “workers of the world” to cease producing for capitalist elites and their political allies. Instead, they should organize to serve humanity by creating not only communication and transportation networks, but industrial, service, and agricultural networks as well, in order to ensure the continued production and distribution of goods and services.

Yet there are many people in anarchist and radical environmental circles who regard anarcho-syndicalism with distrust, as they mistakenly identify it with industrialism. They argue that global industrialism has been responsible for centralized organization and environmental destruction. They view industrialism as necessarily based upon mass production, and the factory as inevitably involving high energy use and dehumanizing working conditions. In short, critics believe that providing six billion people with toilet paper and building materials (let alone TVs, VCRs and automobiles) necessarily involves large-scale, mass production techniques ill-suited to ecological health — regardless of whether capitalist leeches or “free” workers are running the show. Industrialism, it is argued, is an environmental evil in and of itself; it is only made slightly more destructive by the narrow, short-term interests of capital and state. Such critics argue that technology has likewise outgrown its capitalistic origins, and has taken on a sinister and destructive life of its own.

I am not unsympathetic to this argument. That children and adults alike spend hours on end surrounded by deafening noise and blinding lights in video arcades, in an utterly synthetic technological orgy, is ample evidence of our species’ sick fetish for non-organic, superficial pleasures. The regimentation of the work day, and the consignment of leisure and play to half-hour television slots interrupted by nauseating commercials, is nothing short of the industrial robotification of human nature — an alarming process that has led many to argue that humanity should abandon the industrial and technological revolutions altogether. They further argue that we should return to small-scale, minimally industrial technologies that utilize simple devices such as the hand loom. Given the enormously destructive effects of today’s industrial system, such a course may ultimately be the only path open to humanity. At this point, however, simply abandoning our cities and our technologies and hoping that our species will somehow return to a small-scale, pre-industrial existence appears both unlikely and reckless.

Worker Control

In recent years, there has been a revolution in the distasteful discipline of “personnel” management. For, example, “experts” are declaring a new day in industrial relations because bosses now

eat in the same canteen as the workers in some industries. In the past, when the bosses seemed to be distant figures, the inequities of the class/wage system were obvious to all. But, if the bosses exercise with the rank and file in the company gym, they are perceived as “really just some of us.” In such circumstances, workers tend to forget the 10- or 20-to-one pay differential, company car, and handsome retirement scheme that comes with being the boss. One example of this new type of “personnel management” is found in Australia, where there has been much fuss recently about a “harmonious, happy” outfit which “allows” employees to set their own wages, holiday arrangements, and production quotas. No wonder the boss is happy with this arrangement; s/he no longer has to go to the trouble of working all this out for them. Letting the workers spend their time figuring out the fine details of their own wage slavery is touted as the pinnacle of modern management techniques. (Not only would the employees be much better off financially if they sacked the boss and shared all the profits among themselves, their work would become a richly human experience instead of a dehumanizing and unrewarding one.) Merely by providing a semblance of an egalitarian work environment, modern management has dramatically increased production and minimized sabotage. Imagine the efficiency and satisfaction that would result if this appearance of worker control were turned into a living reality.

Efficiency and Self-Sufficiency

Although the local, small-scale production of manufactured items should be encouraged in every ecological region, it would be absurd to expect that every village, town or region would produce its own can openers, razor blades, nails and windmill blades. Even if it were possible for craftspeople in every community to produce these products and thousands like them, this would surely involve an enormous waste of time and energy. No one wants to suffer the noise and clamor of the factory and be a slave to the machine, but neither do most people want to make their own nails and rope by the methods traditionally employed by village blacksmiths and rope makers. The hellfire and brimstone of the factory floor on the one hand, and hours of tedious, mind-numbing weaving on the other, are not desirable alternatives to the wire cutter and the mechanical loom, respectively. There is simply no good reason to reject industrial workshops as a means for producing the wide variety of manufactured items that are required in our daily lives.

Only certain regions have the ores necessary to the production of iron, steel, copper and aluminum, and even if the manufacture of the many items made from such ores were carried out in each local region, it would still require a transport network to get the ores there in the first place. In adopting the ecoregionally self-sufficient community as the basis for a future anarchist society, we must not blind ourselves to its real limitations. In the absence of intercommunal worker associations for the provision of transport, communication, and basic articles of consumption, the anarchist vision is reduced to an absurd and unworkable utopia. Although we may justly assert that many items such as bread, food, energy, building materials ad infinitum should, and in many cases could, be produced by the inhabitants of each city-region, insisting upon a concept of total self-sufficiency, as anti-syndicalist anarchists are apt to do, is unrealistic and dogmatic.

No one wants to spend their whole life in the factory or workshop, but everyone needs nails, transportation, or rope at some time, It would only be fair that all people spend a few hours every week helping to provide these useful products in co-operation with their fellows. Machines do

help us make these things more easily; people only become slaves to their machines because they are slaves to their bosses and to a wasteful, growth-oriented economy. If there were no useless bosses who collect the profits but do no work at the machines they own or oversee, and if production did not always have to be increased to fuel an ever-expanding, growth-oriented consumerism, then it is doubtful that any of us would have to work more than a few hours per week. Those who are by temperament “workaholics” could spend their time improving upon, and experimenting with, products or projects of their choice.

Primitivism and Technophilia

Looking back toward the Stone Age or forward toward some post-industrial techno-utopia is equally pointless. Primitivists long for a quick fix from a (largely imagined) glorious past, while technophiles long for the quick fix in an idealized future — when the way out of the present mess probably entails an imaginative mixture of Neolithic community and selected technologies. For example, the use of non-renewable oil and coal resources during the past two centuries is undoubtedly ill-suited to the ecology of our planet, but so would be the Neolithic firewood hearth, were it to be used by Earth’s six billion people today. (In time, all non-renewable energy sources will of necessity be superseded by renewable ones such as wind and water.)

Capitalism and a Clean Environment

But, returning to the present industrial/technological nightmare, it seems evident that new technological priorities tend to produce changes of emphasis in the realm of so-called pure science. Biology was, until quite recently, seen as a “soft” science compared to the “MM” and more “logical” sciences of inorganic chemistry and physics. This is now changing, and the study of molecular biology is at the forefront of contemporary intellectual and popular interest. Botany, biology and biochemistry are emerging as the main sciences of a second industrial age.

Every day, natural products are being discovered that can take the place of the outdated, chemical synthetic materials of bygone eras. It is now possible to envision a time when every item of industrial manufacture presently associated with environmental destruction cars, fuels, oils, aircraft, plastics, computers, etc. — is constructed with materials that have been harmlessly extracted from nature, and which can in turn be harmlessly and quickly re-absorbed by nature.

Industrialism is, however, beginning to partially reform itself. (Of course, environmental reforms under capitalism will succeed only to the extent that they are compatible with the profit motive.) Even our capitalist bosses cannot escape skin cancer and oil slicks while they sun themselves at their exclusive beach resorts; and many people no longer wish to buy or use environmentally unsound products. The capitalists, ever watchful of the market, have become increasingly aware of this fact; those companies which have presented a superficial “Green image” while persisting in unsound practices have on the whole been “found out,” and are beginning to regret their dishonesty. Green journalism has created a better informed and extremely angry public which will no longer be easily fooled by transparent corporate tactics. Capitalists now fully appreciate that a Green image with genuinely Green products behind it will translate into big dollars and huge profits in the future.

Capitalists are not the only segment of our population undergoing Green-inspired change. Everywhere in the world inventors, scientists, engineers and botanochemists are becoming inspired by the vision of a greener world, and the number of new and potentially environmentally safe processes and products multiplies with every passing day.

Consumerism and Environmentalism

Industrialism is not inherently anti-ecological, and the strength of Green consumerism will almost certainly ensure that the resource base for many of the manufactured products that we consume must and will change for the better. But the individualistic mass consumer culture which has grown up around the industrial system is another matter. If people continue to insist upon having three cars and individually owning every conceivable appliance and convenience, then things are unlikely to get very much better.

No environmentalist wishes to see many millions of acres of land devoted to the monocultural production of maize or palm oil in order to provide bio-fuels for our cars. But neither syndicalism nor, indeed, industrialism, requires capitalism's promotion of "growth" and individualistic over-consumption. For example, syndicalists are committed to providing extensive public transport networks and other basic utilities on a non-profit basis for the benefit of all; and the provision of utilities or public transport using manufactured industrial products in no way requires the destructive and profit-oriented consumer culture of the present day. It might take X number of acres of biomass to power an electric railway, but it would well take 100 times that much to fuel the number of privately-owned automobiles which would transport a similar number of people as the train. It might take Y amount of natural fiber to provide seating for all that train, but it might take 100 times that much to outfit all of those cars. While it might be possible to grow enough biomass or fiber on small lots in a large number of small, organically diverse farms to support the train, the attempt to produce 100 times that amount to support the cars almost inevitably implies the need for extensive monocultural production — with all the degradation of wilderness and soil that such farming methods entail.

Capitalists are committed to growth-oriented consumerism; it does not matter much to them whether they are selling natural or artificial products so long as people keep buying and consuming more and more. As a consequence, more and more of the available land is being given over to producing more and more products for individual consumption. Syndicalists, on the other hand, understand the need for the communal consumption of industrial resources. They understand that a well-constructed trolley line might last 100 years and transport millions or even tens of millions of people in its lifetime. Once a railway or trolley line is built, there is no inherent requirement for growth. Chances are, one line from point A to point B will be all that will ever be needed; there probably will be no need to construct another, let alone 20 or 30 of them. The point is that syndicalists are not interested in growth or profit, and their concept of industrialism must not be confused with the profoundly destructive consumer culture of contemporary capitalism.

Anarcho-Syndicalism and Environmentalism

Only time will tell whether human technology and society can co-evolve successfully with nature. Neither the "primitivists" nor the "technophiles" can read the future, but I am convinced that

neither alone holds the answer. That we can simply dismantle the industrial and technological revolutions and return to small-scale tribal communities seems even more naive a proposal than some old-fashioned anarcho-syndicalists' view that workers self-management alone will bring about the "free society." The idea that a workers' paradise could simply be built upon the shoulders of global capitalism is simply preposterous. The large-scale, centralized, mass-production approach that developed with capitalism, idolized by many Marxists, was, unfortunately, never seriously challenged by either the union movement or by anarcho-syndicalists. The wider anarchist movement, however, has always distrusted large-scale, wasteful industrial practices and deplored the regimentation involved in work and the factory system, and has placed its faith in the self-governing, environmentally integrated community. Anarcho-syndicalists should review the intellectual insights of the broad anarchist movement to a much greater extent than they have. Otherwise, anarcho-syndicalism will become just another tired, 19th-century socialist philosophy with an overly optimistic assessment of the liberatory potential of mass industrial culture.

Nevertheless, it is only through organizing our fellow wage-earners, who have the least to gain from the continued functioning of global capitalism, that we can build any lasting challenge to the state and its power elite. The traditional methods of syndicalism, such as the general strike, could bring the global mega-machine to a complete standstill overnight. No other group can achieve this, because wage-earners, and especially the growing army of service workers, represent the majority (at least 60%) of the adult population. Once the people wrest the industrial and service infrastructure from the hands of the elite, we can do what we will with it. Maybe the majority of workers will choose to dismantle their factories and abandon their fast-food restaurant chains, committing industrial mass manufacture to the dustbin of history; or perhaps they will elect to develop new, more localized versions of their industries. Of course, unless anarchists persuade their fellow workers to organize themselves to resist and eventually eliminate the current state and corporate coercive apparatus, this whole discussion is so much pie in the sky. This is the most compelling reason why an environmentally sensitive and rejuvenated anarcho-syndicalist movement represents one of the most practical methods of halting the destructive advance of the state and the mega-corporation.

The worldwide nature of pollution provides more reason for international workers' organizations. Even though governments have achieved some successes in controlling pollution, these successes have been sporadic and limited. For example, the Montreal protocol appears to have been successful in slowing the continued production of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons, of CFCs. These chemicals are, however, mainly produced by only six companies, and we should not be too optimistic about the possibility for global co-operation between capitalists and national governments on environmental issues. (The failure to do anything about "greenhouse" gas emissions shows the near-total lack of environmental concern of those in power.) Although CFCs were first synthesized in 1894, they were not used industrially until 1927. Had they been used beginning in 1894, we may not have had an ozone layer left to protect. We are told that, after a period of thinning, the ozone layer will most likely begin to repair itself. But what other long-term or irreversible industrial damage is occurring without our being aware of it?

The industrial system as we know it may indeed be causing such damage, but what do anti-syndicalist anarchists propose to do about it? Even if humanity decided to give up industrialism altogether and return to a craft economy, global co-operation among the industrial workers of the world would be necessary to implement that decision — via a permanent, worldwide general

strike. In the absence of a grassroots and anarchistically inspired workers' movement that could mount a sustained opposition to industrial capitalism, such a course does not even present itself as a possibility. Anti-syndicalist anarchists, if they are sincere in their desire to abolish the industrial system, should as a matter of logic talk with working people, persuade them to accept their point of view, and then help organize them to implement it. Neither capitalists nor unorganized, unaware workers will abandon their factories and consumerist habits. And, as long as there are industrial capitalists — and no massive international opposition to them — industrialism as we know it will assuredly remain.

Means and Ends

It is true that we may ultimately discover that most technology, and even the industrial system itself, is inherently environmentally destructive. It is even possible that many of the new eco-technologies that seem to offer hope may turn out to have unforeseen side effects, and that humanity will be compelled to give up modern technology altogether. But, if this happens, it must be an organic process. Its starting point, one would hope, would not be simply to smash up the machines, dynamite the roads and abandon the cities, beginning again at “year zero” — as Pol Pot attempted to do in Cambodia. The only non-authoritarian way in which the “year zero” can come is for the people to decide unanimously to destroy their factories, stores, highways, and telephone systems themselves. If this happens, there would be nothing anyone could or should do to stop them. But starvation, dislocation, chaos and violence would almost certainly be the immediate result of such reckless actions, leading to dictatorship, horrendous suffering, and political and social passivity in the long run. (And even if primitivists would, by some miracle, convince a majority of our fellow citizens to discard science and technology, would that give them the right to force the rest of us to submit to their will?)

The everyday needs of humanity are enmeshed in the continued functioning of the industrial machine. One cannot simply smash up the life-support system and hope for the best. Instead, it must be carefully dismantled while new methods and practices are developed. If we are to achieve an eco-anarchist society, workers must wrest power from their employers, after which the goal should be production of socially necessary and environmentally benign goods. Once people are no longer forced to produce useless consumer goods and services, it is likely that every person will work only a very few hours per week — leaving people with much more time to devote to their own interests and to their communities. By eliminating the parasitic classes and reducing industrial activity to the production of basic necessities, a huge amount of human energy would be released. The reconstruction of the eco-regionally integrated human community from the corpse of the state could thus commence in an incremental way, ensuring that basic human needs would be effectively met while retaining the positive aspects of the industrial infrastructure. Each of us would have to continue to work a few hours per week to keep the industrial machine minimally functioning while we made changes.

If, in the face of sustained efforts to reduce its adverse effects and to integrate it with the local eco-region, the industrial system still proved to be an environmental menace, then humanity would, one hopes, have had the time to explore new ways of life suited to meeting its basic needs without industry as we know it. Industrial syndicalism is one relatively bloodless way of doing away with the state/capitalist elite, and of allowing construction of an anarchist society; it may

or may not have a place in the creation of an ecologically sound way of life, but it is a sure method of returning economic and industrial power into the hands of the people. Anarchists — be they industrial-syndicalist, technophile, or neo-primitivist — thus have no program other than to bluntly declare that it is the people who must decide their own social and environmental destiny.

Of course, the question remains of whether industrial syndicalism is the only, or most satisfactory, anarchist method of reorganizing the distribution of goods and services within communities. What we can be sure of is that the individualistic mass consumerism of the current state/capitalist system is quite ill-suited to the health and sustainability of life on Earth.

The Organization of Daily Life

In order to have influence, anarchists, who have always believed that the individual and the collectivity are of equal value and can co-exist harmoniously, must clarify the alternatives to both capitalist and authoritarian “communist” economics. For example, nonprofit, community-based forms of individual skills exchange, such as barter-based networks, represent co-operative efforts which strengthen the autonomy of both individuals and communities. Local skills exchange systems use their own bartered “currency” and distribute goods, services and labour within the community; community infrastructures can thus develop according to the ideals of their members, without dependence upon government, capital or state.

The value that ordinary people place upon individual effort and exchange cannot be ignored by anarchists; there is simply no need to collectivize or industrialize those services that do not require elaborate structures. Further, the rise of the service sector (counseling, food services, daycare, etc.), together with the need to reduce the work week and to minimize consumption by producing only socially necessary goods, will mean that the social organization of work will be increasingly directed toward community-based and non-profit activities such as skills exchange networks.

But, unless the trains run and municipal water and energy supplies, are assured, the social situation will quickly dissolve into chaos. The intercommunal postal and transport networks needed to deliver basic goods and services obviously cannot be supplied by community-based skills exchange networks.

Again, anarcho-syndicalists’ traditional approach to providing such services via worker-controlled organizations points to a solution: workers in non-profit industries would simply exchange their labour and products for credits in local skills exchange networks. Small-scale, non-industrial approaches and their integration with local exchange networks are thus viable steps toward an anarchist society. The realization of a federation of free communities requires a multifaceted attack upon the institutions of capital and state, involving elements of traditional syndicalism as well as more individually oriented yet essentially non-capitalist systems of production and consumption, systems that allow for adequate levels of consumer choice.

Village life is in decline everywhere and, even if it will eventually be necessary to return to a world composed of small villages, at present we face the problem of increasing millions of urban dwellers living on the outskirts of cities which long ago ceased to be discernible social entities. The social ills upon which modern life is based — mass alienation, consumerism and self-centered individualism — may prove fatal to our species, and should be democratically eradicated through

education. Syndicalism, local skills exchange networks, and traditional co-operative ventures are ways of helping people to educate themselves about community and regionally-based ways of life. These possibilities are far superior to either the Stalinist “proletarianization” of the people through terror, or the state, capitalist robotification of the urban and rural masses by an endless media circus that lobotomizes people into insatiable consumerism, cynicism, and social apathy.

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