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Overcoming the Authoritarian Mindset

The obstacles to taking a clear stand

Ilan Shalif

March 12, 2008

In modern times, the way people and societies are organized is dependent on objective conditions and the opinions people have in their minds. Because of long history and the prevalence of conservative tendencies, people do not usually abandon the authoritarian mode of thinking and opinions. However, in a situation of high excitement and crisis, people do change – at least temporarily, but even for ever.

In social upheaval, when the system is destabilized, people may stop accepting the usual authoritarian relations and rebel against the State's authority.

However, even when rebelling against a specific authority or most authorities, people tend to accept other authorities, both older and new, as leaders.

One form of major social upheaval is the general uprising that negates the current State system and replaces it – at least temporarily – with an ad hoc order of one kind or another.

In modern times we have seen the tendency to replace the State with alternative systems. In some cases, the alternative

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Retrieved on 10th December 2021 from anarkismo.net

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system was basically authoritarian, but at times it has been based on inter-connected, local grassroots committees.

When the alternative system is authoritarian to begin with, the return to a class society is unavoidable. Even if the desire to end class society was most popular around, it nevertheless re-emerged. And even when the alternative system was initially a mixed one, or even mostly anti-authoritarian, it gradually reverted to an authoritarian system and to class society.

(In his essay “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People”, Mao Zedong predicted that the tendency to accept authority of most participants in a rebellion and the tendency of activists to accept the authority the people confer on them will revive the old authoritarian opinions and will cause the social system to revert to an authoritarian form and, consequently, to class society.)

The only logical conclusion is that only if the anti-authoritarian mode is predominant in the new system and remains so long enough, until the old authoritarian opinions wither away, will class society remain a thing of the past.

The only measure which can prevent the return of the class society is to keep power in the hands of the grassroots assemblies, who will mandate people to carry out their decisions with the least power possible, permanently supervised and recallable if ever any authoritarian tendency “raises its head”.

In the revolutionary, anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist movement, two main systems of grassroots power have been suggested: one organized on the basis of workplace organization; the other organized on the basis of neighbourhood communities.

Many people with difficulty in deciding which of the two is preferable have proposed a mixed system with equal power – impossible to apply in the real world, even if “theoretically” possible (though without taking all the details into consideration).

For sure, each grassroots community will indeed be free to experiment or make decisions on what ties there should or should not be between contributions to society and the supply of needs, but is hard to imagine that people will cherish inequality and non-solidarity to such an extent as to invest in the measuring the different contributions made by everyone to society, in order to give them the exact equivalent.

Even Michael Albert’s non-communist Parecon does not suggest measuring what people contribute, but rather assessing the most elusive “efforts”...

Certainly, each community will have to find its own way to organize its daily life. However, practice in Israel shows that the variation within the wide spectrum of communes and movements³ that followed the principle of “from each according to ability, to each according to needs” was minimal.

³ There have been pro-capitalist, socialist, religious, Leninist and extreme nationalist communes, and also supporters of big communes and supporters of small, intimate communes.

However, it was already suggested by Isaac Puente Amestoy that anything not included among essential supplies that are provided according to needs will be supplied as a quota of values so that everyone will be able to choose from a wide option of services and products that are more luxury than essential needs.

Those who do not raise the question of measurement units only to discredit the communist principle can easily understand the use of “socially needed work time”² invested in the creation of a product or service.

A large-bodied person may need more calories than a small-bodied one, and get them according to need. But the urge for sweets cannot be distributed according to needs, so people will be able to choose them from their quota (of values of choice) as measured with the work invested in these sweets.

Some people who do not have a clear commitment to the multi-tier direct action of the world commune of grassroots communities hide behind the slogan “let the people experiment and decide”. But the real reason for that position is hidden behind the absence of the model these people suggest.

The evasive “let people experiment and decide” reply is mainly because people shy away from thinking and committing themselves.

In a way, the option of “experimenting” is only a real option in relatively small, isolated areas. Experimentation with whole blocks of buildings in big cities is minimal. It is hard to imagine the decentralization of a city’s main infrastructure, its health and education systems, and of course the daily supply of needs.

² The “costing” of products and services will have to be monitored in order to compare the various alternatives and planning (methods of production, etc.). In the capitalist system, it is done to maximise profit; in the classless society, it will be done to optimize production and to monitor the allocation of products and services. When you are allocated a quota of luxuries for a year, both you and the community will need to know if you have used your allocation, or indeed have taken too much or too little.

As life is much more than just work (and will be even more so after the revolution); as most people, most of the time, are in their neighbourhood; as the time spent working should diminish greatly after the fall of class society; as the neighbourhood will be the centre of social consumption and life; then it is logical to base the people’s grassroots units on their neighbourhoods.

Society will be organized as a multi-tier, direct-democratic world network, of which the basic units will be the neighbourhoods and the regular assemblies of their grassroots communities.

Workplaces and the various production and service units will be mandated to act as needed in autonomous ways within the boundaries decided on by the relevant grassroots community assemblies.

(Some “workerists” find it hard to accept the secondary position of the workplace and call for a system of two independent systems. Thus, all the relevant decisions would have to be negotiated between the two systems. This way, the system of communities which is responsible for the consumption side of things would not have the final word over who is to work where and what is to be produced. But as the same people make up both “communities” – the community itself and the workplace – this would result in a kind of a split personality (dis)order.)

During the uprising stage of the revolution and the dissolving of the States, there will be disorder. Therefore, production and the supply of services will have to be taken over and reorganized very quickly in order to support life.

The members of the old capitalist class will have to be relocated to workplaces and their huge accumulated wealth confiscated. We cannot be sure how strong their resistance to change will be. Many of them, and indeed a minority of others, will want to revert to the class society, but faced with a cohesive community, very few of them will have the ability to resist.

Even fewer will have to be dealt with as endangering the system.

(Ex-capitalists, like every other person, will be mandated to work tasks. And like everyone else who is mandated to work tasks, they will be accountable and supervised by co-workers, other community members, and the relevant grassroots community committee. The real die-hards among them will be dealt with in the same manner as those who go to make up that tiny fraction of less-than-sane people and who will need special treatment with restriction of freedom so that they will not endanger themselves or others in the grassroots community.)

Among anarchists and other like-minded people there are polemics about the transition from the capitalist system and the nature of the society they want to replace it.

As is the case regarding the power structure of the future society, so is the case about the way people will obtain what they need.

There is the question of abolishing the system whereby needs are distributed according to work and effort contributed and reverting to the communist mode of “from each according to ability, to each according to need”.

All of us are influenced by the capitalist system and the consumer culture we grew up under. The opinion system of each of us includes – besides anarchist opinions – less prominent opinions that contradict our anarchist opinions. The result is a certain amount of vacillation, of internal “compromises”, and on some points the reactionary opinions can become predominant.

The main areas where reactionary opinions are likely to be expressed among common people and even among revolutionary anti-capitalists is with regard to people’s motivation to contribute to society. It is these people in particular who doubt the claim that people will follow the principle of “from each according to ability” unless they are materially compensated in

accordance with their contribution. The capitalist brainwashing which links the effort and work one invests with the remuneration one receives is prominent among these superstitious opinions. As if the motivation to invest in work were not related to the satisfaction felt after a job well done... As if the opinions of your acquaintances which are so dominant in human behaviour – and is expressed in the capitalist society in the form of consumer culture – will die alongside the capitalist system and will not influence people to contribute according to ability.¹ It seems that revolutionary anarchists’ ability to resist social pressure to conform to the alienated capitalist system, blinds them to the strength of this factor in human behaviour.

There are also secondary factors in the hesitation of people to adopt the communist principle and thus claim the need for a long transitional period.

One is the distribution factor: how the principle of “to each according to needs” can be applied.

Those who resist the part of “to each according to needs” raise several questions, first among which is who decides what are the needs of each person? The “danger” of others intruding on one’s freedom makes them jump as if they had been bitten by a snake. The other problem is how people can receive according to their needs when there is not a free supply of everything. As there will never be an unlimited supply of everything for everyone, and as the idea of a social agency that will decide for us about everything we receive is repulsive, the implication is that distribution according to needs is impossible.

¹ I still remember my first years in the kibbutz (Israeli communes), when I worked in fruit and vegetable picking. It was certainly not the kind of work I preferred but, as I was interested in promoting revolutionary political opinions, I made efforts to be regarded as a diligent worker and not as a lazy wordmonger... I succeeded in that, and was regarded by all as the best worker, with the result that people were more responsive to my political opinions. Years later, when the members’ assembly of the Zionist commune tried to expel me for anti-Zionist activities after the 1967 war, there was a majority for this motion – but not the 75% majority they needed.