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The Political Economy of a Free Society

Joel Olson

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Once people find out that I describe myself as an anarchist they inevitably want to know how an anarchist society would be run. In particular, they want to know what an anarchist economy would look like. Folks in the U.S. today have a really hard time imagining how an economy could be run on non-capitalist principles. Capitalism seems so natural that suggesting another economy is possible is like saying it's possible to change the color of the noonday sky to bright green.

For example, someone I know recently asked me the following question in an email:

“A question that I have long desired to be answered from an Anarchist/Libertarian Socialist is how would society and more importantly the economy organize? How does Anarchism organize without apparent incentive? Certainly human cooperation for the common good is overly idealistic, so I have to imagine there is some other force that the anarchists point to.

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They certainly can't expect that given the freedom to pick any job they want (libertarian part) and be rewarded the same (socialist part- because after all if they were rewarded differently there would be class differences), that societies' needs would be met. Surly there would be an over supply of easier jobs (Desk Assistants Customer Service Jobs) and a shortage of the more difficult or less appealing ones. (Doctor, Sewage manager)."

This is an important question, but to ask it is both fair and unfair. Fair, because any ideology should be able to spell out what it stands for and not just what it is against. Unfair, because the amount of detail in the question forces the anarchist to predict the future.

To paraphrase Marx, I don't believe in drafting blueprints for the kitchens of the future. That is, I think the great majority of the specifics of how an anarchist economy would be run will have to be figured out by the generation who actually, concretely confronts this problem. I happily defer to their wisdom rather than try to impose mine.

That said, I think we can at least state some basic principles of an anarchist economy, if not the details. Here are mine:

1. The economy must be democratic. Neither a command nor a market economy are democratic, so I imagine a truly free economy would borrow aspects of each but ultimately look like neither. By "democratic" I simply mean that direct democracy apply to the economic as well as political realm, so that a) major decisions about what to produce, how to produce, where to produce, what not to produce, etc. will be made by the community at large (including the international community, if need be), and b) the workplace will run on a day-to-day basis by the workers themselves.

2. There must be no exploitation. Exploitation means the labor of some is appropriated by others (usually in exchange for wages, though not always) and that the fruits of labor go to the appropriator (the ruling class) rather than the appropriated (ordinary folks). Thus, the hierarchical division of labor (managers vs. employees), wages, and other undemocratic aspects of the workplace will be abolished and replaced with a community-owned, collectively-run workplace. I'll leave it to future citizens to determine the details of this, such as whether family labor, apprenticeships, or working for small businesses count as exploited labor.
3. The principle incentive for work will not be profit but the desire to labor creatively. I reject the notion that humans are inherently lazy and selfish. Rather, humanity, like ants and other animals, is a laboring species—we work. But unlike ants, we don't work simply out of instinct or need. Rather, we also work creatively—we like to make things that are beautiful, not just useful; fun, not just practical; clever, not just efficient. If you know anyone who is in a band, writes a blog, tinkers with cars, or does community service then you know what I'm talking about. Thus, what will drive humans to labor in an anarchist society is the promise that at least some of their work will fulfill their creative capacities. Of course, not all labor is creative—someone will still have to take out the trash—but I suspect humans will find ways to make even drudge work creative—or if they can't, they'll spread it out among the populace.

Anarchism and Marxism are political theories, not economic ones, because their main purpose is to outline the basic principles of a free society. Political theory is not very good, however, at figuring out in detail what the future will look like. At best it's like reading a science fiction novel written a long time ago about

today. For example, take George Orwell's 1984. The technical details of the future world in the book are quaint and say more about Orwell's time than our own. But still, the basic political points Orwell makes give us pause today. That's all we can hope for, and that's about as far as we should try to imagine.