

The Anarchist Economic Alternative to Globalisation

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IS THERE AN ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVE?

An immediate question springs to mind: has an alternative society ever existed, and has such a society existed for long enough to be useful to us as an alternative model to the economic model of capitalism. The answer to both these questions; and this may surprise you – is YES. The most elaborate and extensive alternative economy ever created in human history existed in Spain between the years 1936–38. Estimates of the number of people involved range between 5 and 7 million; the industries that took part were both urban and rural.

What was it about this society that made it alternative? I would say that there were two principle features that made the Spanish Revolution Model an “alternative to capitalism”. In the first place, production and distribution of goods and services was to serve human needs and not profits. In some sections of the alternative economy created in Spain during the revolution, money was abolished. As long as people made a reasonable contribution to the work of the community or collective they were free to partake of the goods and services that that community was able to produce. In sense the economy operated in the direction of the philosophy, “From Each According To Their Ability, To Each According to Their Needs”.

The second feature of this alternative economic model in Spain was what we might call “the democratic element.” And perhaps it is this as much as anything that marks this Spanish example out as one of the most unique and far reaching in the annals of human history.

Democracy is a much abused word, but in the Spanish revolution, for one of the very first times in human history, workers replaced the “authoritarian” running of the economy with a democratic alternative. What do I mean by this, “democratic alternative”? Basically what I am saying is that in any workplace – from a factory to an office, from a farm to a hospital, the administration or management of the enterprise was on the basis of an elected and recallable management. In other words instead of having the management of a company imposed by the “owners” or the shareholders of a company, the workers, on the basis that they were the ones who did the work and made the wealth, decided that they should select the management. This idea is more generally called “workers self-management” and I would argue that it has to be in place if we are ever to talk meaningfully about a real alternative economy.

In the Spanish revolution a huge number of industries were collectivised and run democratically. In the Catalonia area, the industrial heartland of Spain, for example, over 3,000 enterprises came under workers self-management. This included all public transportation services, shipping, electric and power companies, gas and water works, engineering and automobile assembly plants, mines, cement works, textile mills and paper factories, electrical and chemical concerns, glass bottle factories and perfumeries, food processing plants and breweries.

On the land, the scale of the revolutionary transformation was equally dramatic. The major areas being Aragon where there were 450 collectives, the Levant (the area around Valencia) with 900 collectives and Castille (the area surrounding Madrid) with 300 collectives.

Not only was the land collectivised but also in the villages, workshops were set up where the local trades-people could produce tools, furniture, etc. Bakers, butchers, barbers and so on also decided to collectivise.

Spain is an important and valid example of how a democratic economy geared towards people's needs, can actually work. The economy lasted for nearly two years and survived in a climate that was less than hospitable. Remember that Spain in that time was immersed in the Civil War and just as importantly there was bitter political struggle to be contended with – with anarchists on one side defending workers self-management, with liberals and the Spanish Communist party opposed to the idea. These aspects placed enormous pressures on the alternative model of economic organisation. Nevertheless, that model survived and even thrived until its eventual military suppression towards the end of the Civil War.

In the context of the discussion here today then, the example of the democratic economic model that emerged in Spain emphasises some key points that are pertinent to our discussion here today:

Firstly it refutes the argument of the bosses and those capitalist economist who say we can only run a modern economy with a heavy dollop of authoritarianism; what they're often talking about here is of course slave labour conditions and wages.

Secondly we can see in the Spanish example that a democratic economy has significant advantages to the "authoritarian" economy of today.

What are these advantages:

1. It destroys the profit motive in the sense of bosses and owners taking their cut of the wealth that the workers actually make.
2. It destroys the alienation from work that is so much part of working life nowadays.
3. It makes workplaces, factories and farms more accountable to the communities and area they are part of – since workplaces in general draw their workforce from local communities and now that these workers are participating in a meaningful way in the running of their workplaces, factories and offices, they are far more likely to operate in a more environmentally friendly and accommodating manner to their nearby communities

So to sum up on the question we have in front of us today, the Spanish worker collectives formed at the height of the revolution are one of the best examples of how an alternative to capitalism can actually function and thrive.

The collectives were large-scale and involved a wide range of communities, geographical areas and industries. From a practical, economic point of view they worked. And to this day they remain the most extensive democratisation of a large-scale economy ever achieved on this planet.

There is I think one final point that needs emphasis if we are to appreciate fully the achievement and potential of the Spanish Revolution model. In part this has to do with the politics of means and ends, in parts this has to do with the aspirations of the Spanish anarchist movement. They wanted to create democratic self-management by the workers. And this is why during the decades prior to the Revolution they emphasized and re-emphasised the need for democratic accountability and methods in the anti-capitalist movement in Spain.

This is something we can learn from today. If we want our struggle to take us in the direction of a self-managed, participatory democracy then we have to put those features high on our agenda and we have to make them also part of our practice. We have to understand that means and ends are connected.

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