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Anarchism and Radical Governments

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How should anarchists relate to revolutionary or left-wing populist governments? Should they denounce them out of hand? Should they join in the movement? What are the traps to avoid? This is an important question as radicalized populations are creating movements which give rise to alleged progressive governments. As capitalism goes into ever-deeper crisis we can expect more of these movements to develop.

Anarchism is more influential and wide-spread than at any time in the last 70 years. And the movement continues to grow and develop. This does not necessarily mean that we will become the predominate tendency. Even during anarchism's previous zenith – the years immediately after World War One – we had to share the stage with other socialist currents. The most important and far-reaching anarchist movement – that of Spain in 1936 – saw the formation of a united front involving the CNT-FAI, the left-communist POUM and rank and file militants of the Socialist trade unions.

It is safe to claim that social change – let alone social revolution – will involve a number of different tendencies, of which

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anarchism will be one, and not always the predominant one. Anarchists will work together with the other tendencies which promote self-government and self-management, in essence, all tendencies that in some manner or other support the popular struggle. This notion is not a controversial issue among us. We are already working along side other tendencies in the environmental, peace, anti-fascist and anti-capitalist movements.

The problem comes for anarchists when the pressure of social movements gives rise to populist, democratic socialist or “revolutionary” governments. Examples of these are to found in Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador. How do we, as resolute anti-statists, relate to governments, which in some manner, reflect and act according to the needs and desires of the social movements and the working population? How we react to these situations can be fraught with danger to our movement.

In the past, anarchists have reacted in two opposing and erroneous ways. One might be called “liquidationalism”. Here anarchists give up their distinct program and dissolve themselves into the governing “revolutionary” tendency. During the Russian Revolution, thousands of anarchists joined the Bolsheviks or formed-Bolshevik inspired organizations in their respective nations. Needless to say, the Bolsheviks did not enact our program! After The 26 July Movement made its turn toward the Communist Party, and Cuban anarchists were suppressed, many anarchists outside Cuba tended to ignore the plight of their comrades out of solidarity with the Cuban Revolution. Liquidationalism means giving up on anarchism entirely, in exchange for a bit of social progress, and sometimes not even that.

I think that liquidationalism comes about through anarchist weakness. There had been few attempts at anarchist revolution prior to 1917, and anarchism had “growing pains.” Bolshevism seemed to show the way. The early 1960’s were the nadir of the anarchist movement and a lot of anarchists looked for anything to be optimistic about, and Cuba seemed to fit the bill.

denouncing them for supposedly co-opting the environmental movement and community control, which sectarians would have done, we said nothing. To ourselves, we were pleased with what they did and were too busy trying to create an anarchist movement to spend time attacking them, which would have been the flea denouncing the elephant anyway.

What did happen was that half our group became so entranced with the progressive actions of the government they wanted to join the NDP as a bloc and push for further community control. When we refused, the liquidationalist faction broke away and joined on their own. We denounced them and for some time there was bitter hostility between the two groups. The anarchists that remained went on to create the Vancouver anarchist milieu which exists to this day. As for the “NDP anarchists”, we eventually became friends again and they remained sympathetic to anarchism, also to this very day.

In retrospect, liquidationalism arose because people did not have a full understanding of anarchism. The experience of the sectarianism found in the left sects generated an over-reaction in the opposite direction. We also had no older, more experienced comrades to help us. We were re-inventing the wheel, so to speak. We were correct not to attack the NDP, but erred in not educating our membership as to the differences between social democracy and anarchism.

Since anarchism today is a growing force, I do not see liquidationalism as a major problem, though, of course, one never knows for sure.

Sectarianism is the other error. Surprise, surprise, democratic socialists and populists are not anarchists! We cannot expect them to carry out our program, but we can expect them to carry out the aspects of their own program that help the populace. If they do this, should they be condemned as enemies as evil as the corporatists and oligarchs? What do the people think when anarchists damn these reformers? Sectarianism separates anarchists from the mass of the populace, who cannot understand why erstwhile revolutionaries are condemning the very actions which are improving their lives. What is even worse, is when sectarianism leads to propaganda imitating the reactionaries. According to the sectarian, the glass is never half-full, it is always empty. Should reaction triumph, the sectarians will be tortured and killed along with the other tendencies, and their sectarianism will remain as a bitter taste in the mouths of a defeated people. (1)

This is most particularly the case in Latin America where the mobilization of the populace immediately leads to polarization between the masses and the oligarchy and its supporters. If the oligarchy gains the upper hand in this struggle the result is the suppression of popular movements, torture and massacre. To think that one can stand aside during this polarization, or that it is “only a struggle between bourgeois factions and doesn’t concern us” is to live in a dream world.

One cause of sectarianism is fetishizing the alleged or actual lessons of the past. The Bolsheviks turned on their anarchist allies, so too, Fidel Castro. Wherever Stalinism took over, anarchists and other radical tendencies were eliminated. From this tragic history comes an unspoken view that any revolution or government led by Marxists, real or alleged, will end up following this pattern. But history does change not merely repeating itself like a rubber stamp. Stalinism is not some Platonic Form,

hovering in the cosmos, just waiting to manifest at the first outbreak of revolutionary change.

The alternatives to Stalinism – Trotskyism, democratic socialism and anarchism – were too weak in the 1940's and 50's. Stalinism was hegemonic at this time. But people learn what works and what doesn't. What was once seen as a viable model for revolutionary change – the one party state plus nationalization of productive wealth – is no longer seen as an answer. It does not create the sort of society that anyone wants.

The movement away from the hegemony of the Stalinist model began in the late 1960's. The Unidad Popular government of Chile attempted to create socialism, through a democratic process. The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua did not go in a Stalinist direction. Rather than suppressing all tendencies but their own, they favored a multi-tendency democracy – even for the right-wing, a kindness that was not acknowledged.

What then should anarchists do in the face of new revolutionary or progressive regimes that work to some measure in the interest of the population? First off; Our loyalty is to the people, not the government – or any government. If the people support a progressive government it is because that government is responding to their wishes. A direct frontal attack on such a government – until it truly begins to work against its supporters – is futile and creates a wedge between us and the people.

We should remain non-committal, as long as the government somehow acts in the popular interest. When it deviates from that path, we criticize. But there is also a way of criticizing that is not off-putting to the people. That method is one of positive re-inforcement. To never cease bringing up the need for direct democracy and self-management. If the progressive government is reticent to go beyond words, our unending needling on these points will be a powerful criticism, yet will not be seen as a negative attack. Our goal should be

to push the progressive government, from below, to either the breaking point where it exposes its reactionary other face, or to where it begins to dissolve itself into popular power. And if this process cannot be pushed to its libertarian fulfillment, we must win a strong base among the people, in the unions, neighborhoods and social organizations, to defend our gains and build a base for the next step in the struggle.

We must involve ourselves with the populace, if the people win some measure of self-government and decentralization, we should be there, pushing these measures to the full. If the revolutionary government encourages coops, we should form them or join them, making sure they are autonomous and democratic. Should reactionaries attempt to re-establish their rule through a coup, electoral fraud or invasion, we must be at the forefront of the resistance, not as government lackies, but as supporters of the popular movements the reactionaries will destroy if they regain power. Our slogan should not be “Defend our Government”, but “Defend the People ... our Neighborhoods, Trade Unions, Cooperatives etc.” At no time must we ally with reaction, even verbally, no matter what our differences with the progressive government.

Personal Experiences

In 1972 a social democratic government (NDP) was elected in British Columbia for the first time. At the same time, we were trying to build an anarchist movement. There were maybe 25 or so people interested in anarchism, half of whom belonged to our group. The NDP government introduced “green belts” to protect the environment and agricultural reserves to protect the farm land from developers. They raised welfare from \$95 a month to \$160 and created a form of decentralized democratic control of the welfare system. They abolished beating children in school and other repressive legislation. Rather than