

The Pragmatic Idealist

or, an anarchist stab at utopia, attempt #1

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“If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundation under them.”(Henry David Thoreau)

A thousand times have I heard, “I know what you’re against, but what are you for?”*

And a thousand times have I answered, “I am for a world of economic justice, of tolerance and diversity; a world of healthy ecosystems both natural and social; a demilitarized world; an abundant world; a sustainable world; a world in which everyone may fulfill her/his full potential as a human being; a world where art and ideas are more valuable than money; in short, a world of liberty and justice for all.”

Five hundred times have I heard (i.e. from those who haven’t run away yet), “Well sure, that sounds great. But do you have any concrete suggestions for making it happen? Isn’t that...pardon my French...just a utopian vision?”

Yes, it is. I admit it. And why not? Who in their right mind, if given the opportunity to create a new model, would deliberately strive for a lemon? Or even settle for one. I do not accept this as the best of all possible worlds. Of course, it’s reasonable to expect that our efforts will always fall somewhat short of the ultimate goal. Therefore, it’s all the more reasonable to aim as high as possible. As pragmatic idealists– or idealistic pragmatists – we must evaluate where we are, envision where we want to be, and identify the steps required to bridge that distance.

Besides the charge that utopia is unrealistic, the second common criticism of utopia is that it’s undesirable: that it really means absolutism, totalitarianism, conformity, centralized control, closure, stasis, micromanagement. Surely no anarchist would stand for any of that! Homogeneity, monoculture...these words are dead ends. One person’s dream is another’s nightmare. Self-determination will inevitably lead to a variety of choices and conclusions. To prescribe one “right” way for everyone, even if it could be enforced, would be cultural imperialism. But one advantage anarchism has over traditional communism and authoritarian socialism is the value it places on autonomy and diversity.

“I am truly free only when all human beings around me, men and women alike, are equally free. Far from being a limitation or negation of my freedom, the freedom of my neighbor is instead its precondition and confirmation...Every individual or collective body...is entitled to be itself and nobody has the right to foist upon it his[sic] own dress, customs, language, views and laws; everyone should be absolutely free in his home.” (Mikhail Bakunin)

What anarchism strives to do is to create a space in which multiple, voluntary, finite utopias can thrive and interact. Not a global village, but a global federation of villages, each free to order itself as it sees fit. Harmony, as opposed to unison, is the goal. This requires dismantling the patterns of the current global economy and balance of political power, which prevent the majority of people on earth from access to the basics needed for survival, let alone for the implementation of their ideals in healthy, autonomous communities.

*What I am against, for the record: capitalism, the nation-state, imperialism, militarism, religious fundamentalism, racism, fascism, patriarchy, environmental despoliation, the oil industry, nuclear weapons, the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, George W. Bush, Ariel Sharon, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, McDonalds, Nike, the Gap...got me pegged yet? Muahahahaha!

POINTS OF UNITY?

For all of this to work, we'd still have to be on the same page about a few basic principles. Of the variety of people involved in the global justice movement, I believe that most would acknowledge these. Simple as they are, and logical as they seem, they'd still require a fundamental shift in the values with which many of us have been tacitly socialized.

they are:

- sustainability; prioritization of environmental impact in all decision making
- acceptance of difference, (only possible **after the active dismantling** of structures of racism, sexism, etc.)
- direct democracy; self-determination; decentralization
- non-alienation of labor

What would be the consequences of accepting these points? Well, if we followed them to their logical conclusions, we would limit the range of possible shapes which political, economic and social structures could take. For example, it would rule out the shape we call "imperial superpower" as well as the shapes known as "transnational corporation," and "fundamentalist theocracy."

A world based on these points if followed to their logical conclusions, could not have:

- capitalism, with its attendant consumer culture, rampant profit motive, and gross maldistribution of wealth. Its insatiable expansion has led directly to colonialism. Its exploitation of labor has led to the material impoverishment of the majority of the global population. Its exploitation of markets has led to the spiritual impoverishment of the remainder. (Capitalism should not be confused with small-scale free enterprise. The latter has far more in common with syndicalism, in which those who control the product are the same as those who do the work.) [more recently i have been questioning whether syndicalism implies uncritical acceptance of large-scale industry]
- the modern, centralized nation-state, which in practice is a non-representative, for-profit military-industrial complex. Nationalism implies exclusivity and xenophobia; in its extreme forms fascism, ethnic cleansing and genocide. In the effort to monopolize land and resources within an arbitrary domain, nationalism leads inevitably to militarization and war. (I am differentiating this kind of nation-statism from the "patriotism" of resistance movements defending their ethnic identity and means of life from annihilation.) [more recently i have been exploring the possibility of forms of anti-colonial resistance that reject the nationalist model]
- imperialism in all its forms. Military occupation and economic thralldom are both direct violations of autonomy, not to mention survival.
- religious fundamentalism, or any other form of absolutism which makes the good of one group mutually exclusive with that of all others. Abolute moral doctrines cannot be imposed, particularly those which advocate the mortification of other people's flesh.

- reliance on fossil fuels; waste; excessive consumption. The most basic pragmatism requires this drastic reduction, lest we commit planetary suicide in the foreseeable future. Overpopulation is a major stumbling block, but maldistribution and waste dramatically exacerbate the problems. The oil industry, which places us on a collision course with all of the points above, is arguably the keystone to the entire lethal pattern of today's geopolitics.

EXPERIMENTS

What might a society which accepts these principles look like?

Collectives and democracies: From the desert monastery to the hippie commune, there have been many experiments in communal or cooperative living. Some developed naturally while others were deliberately designed. Many have dissolved or imploded, often due to a shift toward dogmatic, authoritarian control. This indicates a recurring failure to balance our crucial need for privacy and individuation with the socio-economic benefits of collectivism. Others (the Paris Commune, the early Soviets, the Spanish FAI/TNC) were nipped in the bud through extreme military repression from external forces and/or domestic rivals.

The basic principles of direct participatory democracy and mutualism visible in many Native American tribal and African village-based societies, may be the most logical way for human communities to coalesce. Town meetings, block or neighborhood associations and urban co-ops demonstrate the contemporary application of similar principles. Communities may collaborate in looking after one another's children, for example, or in the joint maintenance of local clinics and gardens, in accordance with needs they identify for themselves. Decisions are made by those they affect. "Direct democracy" requires that every participant have an actual, not merely a symbolic or proxy voice.

A basic structural tenet of classical anarchism is the federation of autonomous collectives, each rooted in this sort of direct democracy. The principles of social ecology (Bookchin) and mutual aid (Kropotkin) would apply both between individuals within a community, and between communities within a region.

Given the value our culture places on individualism, one possibility we might attempt is a mixed society in which individuals could regulate the degree and area of their participation in collective endeavors. The choice to go it alone is also valid, but one who does so must accept exclusion from some of the benefits of participation in a social network.

Social services: Now, contrary to popular belief, anarchism does not advocate chaos, but rather alternate forms of organization. It's not so much order per se (not that order's all that either, as an ultimate value in itself), as control, that bothers us. We do not need rulership, but let's get real: we do need structures for the provision of social services like health care, education, child care, sanitation, etc. Now, if you oppose a welfare state, you will agree that the government has no business interfering with these matters. If you favor a welfare state, I'm sure you'd concede that the state is not doing such a good job of providing them anyway.

Nor is privatization the answer, if this means the commodification of basic resources such as water and medicine by for-profit corporations, as for example, the incursions of Suez Lyonnaise, Pfizer and GlaxoSmithKline into Africa; or of Monsanto and Bechtel into South America. This merely substitutes implacable masters for inefficient ones. Instead, to name a few examples, women's collectives and/or mutual aid enterprises such as the Self-Employed Women's Asso-

ciation in India, the General Union of Palestinian Women in occupied Palestine, and the Argentinian assembly movement have taken matters into their own hands to provide autonomous, locally empowering social services outside state jurisdiction, with some success. (It is no coincidence that this happens in places where the functional state has broken down.) In general, necessary administrative functions are best fulfilled at the municipal or local level; in most cases, by cooperative endeavor. However, these are all too often crushed by corporate interests and neoliberal structural adjustment requirements.

Production and trade: In accordance with syndicalism [see previous caveat; I didn't make clear that participant-control might imply smaller scale cottage-type production rather than industrial factories], as with medieval guild structure [with caveat of guilds' hierarchical structure and control of information], control of each sector of agricultural and industrial production could be shared by its participants; not directed by a centralized "workers' state." Production wherever possible would be carried out locally, though of course trade would be welcomed in order to distribute items (and ideas) not locally available. Isolation leads to stagnation; however, in both agriculture and industry, the local needs of a community should come before the demands of a global market. The choice whether and how to participate in wider trade networks must be at the discretion of the community.

To facilitate the circulation of goods and services, it may be expedient to use a medium of exchange; but this must not be fetishized and given more weight as an abstract force than the things it is intended to mediate. Ithaca hours are a promising model. Barter is another possibility, or basing exchange of goods and services in a moral gift-economy rather than a profit-driven economy. In this case the transaction doesn't have to be simultaneous, as the parties may not need what the other can provide at the same time. Assuming the pledge is honored, "I owe ya one" automatically builds in a longer term relationship of shared interests. Division of labor (both within and between communities) makes sense, given individual preferences and aptitudes, as well as regional differences in climate and available resources. Division of labor, after all, is what enabled us to evolve from single-celled organisms into complex animals. But socially, it must be self-selecting. And everyone shares the shit work.

Widening connections: In matters of mutual interest to a number of communities, such as trade, or defense from natural disasters or hostile nation-state hold-outs, representatives could be delegated on a temporary, rotating basis to regional councils. These might function purely as information relays so that a community can better make decisions for itself, or they might be empowered by the community to speak and make decisions on their behalf, within certain limits. This decentralized organizational model has been utilized successfully on a continental level by the North American and European global justice movement, and on an international level by the People's Global Action Network and the World Social Forum both comprised mainly of 3rd world communities.

The fulfillment of different needs does not necessarily have to be connected, though for smooth functioning it helps if they're aware of one another. Multiple networks can function simultaneously, in as many ways as people interact with each other. For example, a postal service guild might function intercontinentally, while a pollution control council might function across a bioregion. Sound like too many meetings? One more good reason for division of labor among actively cooperating members of a community. Notice that all of this leaves personal, artistic, religious and cultural expression untouched.

The question is: can it work on a large scale? Herein lies the rub; the small scale is what works. Plato got one thing right: the basic organizational unit must be large enough to sustain itself, but small enough for the direct participation of all its citizens (though of course, Plato's qualifications for citizenship were extremely narrow). The modern nation-state is too large [and artificially homogenized] a unit of organization to function equitably. The key is to build upward from the grassroots community level into ever wider networks, while retaining the decentralized character of the web.

CONCLUSIONS

I have not invented the wheel in this pamphlet. Others before me have summed up beautifully the foundations of any utopias– or utopian rough drafts– I might propose.

“It is absolutely necessary that any country aiming to belong to [a] free federation of peoples should replace centralistic, bureaucratic and military organization at home with a federal organization rooted solely in the absolute liberty and autonomy of regions, provinces, communes, associations and individuals, with elective officials answerable to the people, an organization that will no longer operate, as it does today, from the top down and from center to periphery, according to the unity principle, but rather from the bottom up, from periphery to center, in accordance with the principle of free federation.” (Mikhail Bakunin)

“It goes without saying that the artificial frontiers created by existing new governments will collapse...Communes will band together freely according to their economic interests, linguistic affinities and geographical situation. And in certain countries... which are too huge to form only one agglomeration of communes, and which nature herself has split into several distinct regions, there will doubtless be, not one, but several Federations of communes set up. Which will not signify a breach in unity, a reversion to the old atomization into small, hostile, isolated political States...this voluntary union, rooted in genuine usefulness, in a community of aims and needs, in ongoing exchange of good offices, will be tight and solid in a way quite different from the sham unity of political centralization established by violence and with no *raison d'être* other than exploitation of the country for the benefit of one privileged class.” (James Guillaume)

It is not my or anyone else's place to dictate correct choices. What I or anyone can do is to throw some options out into the available spectrum, which may not have been considered– and as the Zapatistas have recommended, to aim at creating the space in which autonomy and diversity can flourish while struggling against structures that encroach upon such space.

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This piece was written in June-July 2002. It came out of a specific attempt to address widespread ignorance about anarchist organizing in the NYC area during the months surrounding 9/11, subsequent anti-war activism, and opposition to the World Economic Forum in the winter of 2001–2. Drawing on the “classics,” it was intended for outreach and education aimed at non-anarchists who were paying us increasing attention, but who continued to misunderstand what we were “for.”

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