

Breaking down concentrations of power

The State, Democracy and Anarchism

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A thing that sets anarchists apart from all the other varieties of socialists is our opposition to the state. Others believe that the state can be entered into accommodations with, or even that the state can sometimes be a positive force. Anarchists believe that the influence of the state is always ultimately destructive and that it is, by its nature, a barrier to the advance of human freedom.

What is the State?

When we speak of the state, we do not mean the particular government that is in power at the moment. The state is a centralised hierarchic form of organisation, where decisions are made by a (sometimes elected) few, and everyone else is obliged to obey. The police, the prison system and the army are all on hand to make sure that we do obey. There are other organisations which mirror this top-down structure, but the state stands apart in its claim to be the ultimate authority, and in its readiness to use force to back up that claim.

The arguments about which came first, capitalism or the state, are too long and involved (not to mention boring and irrelevant) to get into here, suffice to say that we see the two as being mutually supporting. Political parties need funding from business to get into power, as well as support from the media, owned in turn by rich businessmen.

Even after the election governments need some degree of support from business to survive. For example, when a Labour government, by no means revolutionary, was elected in Britain in the 1974, there was a massive outflow of capital from the country, which weakened that government considerably.

In whose interests?

In return, government supports the rich, by lowering taxes on the wealthy and on business profits (which means taxing us more) and passing anti-union legislation, so that their profits increase while our wages and working conditions lag behind. Some governments are even worse.

The US government, in particular, has a long and dishonourable history of installing puppet regimes who are handsomely rewarded for letting US companies drain their countries dry of all natural resources, while (sometimes literally) killing off any opposition which arises. And, more recently, there was the Gulf War, one lot of imperialist powers fighting another belligerent power, all in the name of ..lower oil prices.

There isn't a one-to-one relationship between business and the state, of course. Sometimes businessmen just get too greedy, or the public get too angry about the cosy relationship that exists between politicians and businessmen, so an example is made of someone, to 'prove' that there isn't one law for the rich and another for the rest of us. Meanwhile the Larry Goodmans and his pals carry on ripping us off with the government's approval.

Very occasionally the government will pass laws which appear to run counter to the interests of the rich, the most commonly cited example being the establishment of the social welfare system, which cost money that could otherwise have been used to 'support business'. But the welfare system wasn't created as an act of generosity, or as the first instalment in repaying us what we are owed.

It was a response to rising militancy and higher expectations in the working class. It was a bribe to forestall bigger demands, they gave us a slice of the cake to stop us from taking it all. And even that is being taken away – the generation that was promised care from the cradle to the grave is the first to be hit by falling pensions and health care cuts.

Democracy?

The justification for this, of course, is that it is “democratic”. We get a chance to vote every four years, and so we are not really being ruled over, our ‘representatives’ are only putting into effect the “will of the people”. But what sort of democracy is this? How much influence do we really have over the decisions taken by the government? Virtually none. When it comes time to put our marks on the ballot paper, what do we have to base our decisions on?

At least half of every party manifesto is identical to that of every other party. Most of the rest is purely aspirational, stuff that’s supposed to look good but that the politicians know, and we know, will never be acted on. The rest? Well, some of it is going to be quietly dropped in the name of ‘party unity’, more for the sake of agreeing a coalition with other parties, leaving about 1% of a manifesto that might actually be taken seriously (probably the bit you wished they’d dropped).

This ‘democracy’ can be seen in action today. The overwhelming majority of householders are opposed to the water charges, and tens of thousands have shown their opposition by refusing to pay. But our ‘representatives’ in the county councils are ignoring this clear expression of the will of the people, even those who promised in the run-up to the last election that they would not impose such charges. Clearly, they are not following our orders, they are following the party line, or their own interests, and so they are rulers, not representatives.

As rulers, they make laws that intrude into every aspect of our lives. The Public Order Act has been used to stop peaceful anti-water charges demonstrations. The anti-strike legislation, seeks to cripple almost any attempt we make to improve our working conditions. It is calculated to destroy any power and militancy the unions might have, leaving us with nothing but state-sponsored national agreements which tie our hands even tighter in return for vague promises and minimal pay increases.

In England, every major city has close-circuit cameras mounted throughout their centres, ending any idea of privacy outside the confines of your own home – how long before Ireland follows suit? After all, it’s only in recent years that we’ve managed to get the government out of our bedrooms, finally changing the laws on homosexuality and contraception – though we’re still waiting for abortion rights, despite winning a referendum!

As anarchists, we will have nothing to do with elections. We choose not to be ruled, so we will not choose between rulers. A candidate may be honest and well-intentioned (though that would indeed be a rarity among politicians) but, if we voted for him/her we would be handing over control of our own lives to someone else.

By taking part in elections, we would be saying that they are a fair way of choosing rulers, and, by extension, that it is okay to be ruled. We will vote in elections when we are only choosing representatives, i.e. people who are mandated to vote exactly the way their electors want. The role of such such representatives would be to carry out decisions made by their electorate, not

to make decisions over their heads. It would also have to be case that they could be recalled if they break mandate.

By any means necessary?

Some would say that, at certain times, it is necessary to have a state. They say that, although centralised power is usually a bad thing, sometimes one must command and everyone else obey. In Russia, for example, during the revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks took over central government, reintroduced 'traditional' practices in the army (differential treatment for officers, pyramidal command structure with disobedience punishable by court-martial, etc.), and closed down dissident newspapers, independent trade unions and left-wing organisations.

Those who place themselves in the tradition of the Bolsheviks — most non- anarchist socialists — argue that though these things were regrettable, they would do them again, if necessary. It says a lot about these people's idea of socialism that they think freedom can be turned on and off like a tap.

Statism, the belief that society needs to be ruled by one small group, could be compared to sexism or racism in that both believe one group of people is superior to another group. What would our reaction be if we were told that, although socialists naturally abhorred racism and sexism, it would be necessary to confine women to the home, and black people to ghettos, in the name of some greater cause? Would it be enough to be assured that, in time, these restrictions would 'wither away'?

What kind of freedom?

Would we be satisfied if told that, eventually, there would be no need to treat huge numbers of people as second-class citizens, and they could take their place in a free society? I don't think I'm alone in finding the idea outrageous. What kind of freedom can be based on the servitude of others? Freedom is all or nothing — everyone or no-one.

For anarchists, freedom is not an optional extra, it cannot be put on hold, or added in at a later stage. Democracy — real democracy — must be a feature of the revolutionary change from day one. This means decisions being made by those who are directly affected by them — the simplest example being workers in a factory deciding how their workplace should be run.

Of course, there will be a need for co-ordination and planning, we are all interlinked, every decision we make having repercussions for others. But we don't need one group of people stepping in and telling us ("in our own best interests", of course) what we should produce, what we should consume and how we should live.

Instead, when there is a decision to be made by a large number of people, each smaller group can discuss the issue themselves, and, when they have reached a decision, send people to a delegate conference, where every group is represented and a final decision can be made. The important point is that these delegates do not speak for themselves, they are under strict instructions to relay the views of the people who sent them (not like today's situation where TDs and councillors speak on behalf of their party leaders). Also, these positions should be rotated. Everyone who wanted to could have the opportunity to be a delegate to a conference, to make sure no-one gets too attached to a position and tries to build a personal powerbase.

This is democracy from below, the only democracy worthy of the name. To some people, it may initially sound unworkable, but that is because we have been taught from an early age that we cannot organise things for ourselves, that we always need someone else to tell us what to do. The fact is, though, that it has worked, and it does work. The example of Spain in 1936/37 shows that this form of organisation can involve millions of people and still be more efficient than capitalism. The example of today, where our TDs and our employers — our rulers — ignore our every wish in the pursuit of their own interests, shows that it is not just possible, it is necessary. And it is because of this belief in real freedom that anarchists will always and everywhere oppose the state.

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