

About Anarchism

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How about if we start by trying to situate anarchism today. Are there main strands that you think compose the whole?

Anarchism is a rather vague term, covering a variety of anti-authoritarian stances and its influence can be rather diffuse. Quite a few people who engage in civil disobedience around issues like the war in Iraq, against institutions like the WTO, proposals like the Free Trade Act of the Americas are probably influenced by anti-authoritarian, direct action ideas, ideas about direct democracy. This gets reflected to some extent in the ways that protests get organized, like the use of spokescouncils and affinity groups for things like the anti-war protests here in San Francisco.

Of course, at one extreme, there are the primitivists, and extreme anti-organizationalists, but their influence is limited by their unwillingness to see themselves as part of a broader “left” and their limited involvement in broader struggles. The main influence of these ideas comes about from their being the dominant sort of view found in two longstanding anti-authoritarian publications, “Anarchy” and “Fifth Estate.”

Extreme individualism is not inherent in all forms of anarchism — not in social anarchism — but this is one of those tensions or contradictions in the anarchist milieu. Among those influenced by the more individualistic strain, this can be reflected in anti-organizationalism, or nihilistic styles or in the refusal of voting, things like that.

Individualism is also reflected in those who think of anarchism in terms of how the individual personally leads their life, a lifestyle statement, rather than as method and goals of collective social struggle.

When some anarchists say they are against “all forms of authority”, for example, well, what happens if a community directly self-manages its own collective economy? Wouldn't it be exercising “authority” over its members? So, the slogan of “opposition to all authority” could be interpreted in an individualist way — or it could mean opposition to top-down power hierarchies, like the state or class systems or patriarchy. Social anarchists will take the second position, but an extreme individualist is against any control on the individual. This is an example of the ambiguity in anarchism.

People who see the class struggle as central to social change tend to be more organizational. In this camp you have syndicalists and platformists and those influenced by European autonomism and council communism.

Platformism has grown in its influence in the U.S. in recent years. Platformists agree with the thesis of the “libertarian communist platform” that was developed in the ’20s by the Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno and his associates. Reflecting on the disorganization of anti-authoritarians that contributed to their defeat in the Russian Revolution, the “Platform” advocates a disciplined, democratic cadre organization, organized as a horizontal federation of groups, to exert influence within broader struggles.

A key difference from Leninism is that the “Platform” holds that it is the masses of the population who are to take over the running of the society through mass organs of self-management like workers councils. The anarchist activist organization is to assist this process. They view the Leninist idea of a political cadre organization taking power as substitutionist, that is, it empowers the party elite, not the mass of the population.

The largest Platformist group in the U.S. is the North East Federation of Anarcho-Communists (NEFAC), which publishes “The Northeastern Anarchist.” There are a number of similar but smaller groups elsewhere. NEFAC is involved in a variety of tenant and union struggles. I think quite a few of the people in NEFAC came out of the anti-corporate globalization protest movement, and have decided to try to build local struggles and movements.

And then you have the anti-authoritarian syndicalists. Syndicalism is the thesis that social change in an anti-authoritarian direction is to be brought about by developing mass industrial organizations that rank and file workers directly self-manage, as a means of not only more effective struggle at present but the creation ultimately of an economic system based on self-management.

And here you have to include the IWW — the wobblies, which may have something like a thousand members at this point. The IWW does not call itself “anarchist” — it is billed as a union run by its members and committed to an anti-capitalist program, of workers eventually taking over the management of industry.

And then you have Workers Solidarity Alliance, which does not define itself as a union but as a group of anti-authoritarian activists. WSA also does not use the word “anarchist” in its statement of principles. As tactics towards developing a revolutionary labor movement, WSA advocates both attempts at revamping existing AFL-CIO local unions into more militant, self-managed unions, as well as the formation of new unions self-managed by their participants. WSA is involved in various worker solidarity efforts like the Taco Bell boycott, and extends the concept of syndicalism to self-managed community organization, that is, to spheres other than the workplace.

The emphasis upon class and mass struggle seems to have grown quite a bit in the past decade. One longstanding pro-organizational tendency that rejects the class struggle approach, however, is the social ecologists — the group influenced by Murray Bookchin’s ideas. Like the syndicalists and platformists, they are social anarchists who reject the more individualistic or primitivist tendencies in anarchism. Part of their emphasis is upon developing a kind of direct democracy approach to local city politics, which they call “libertarian municipalism.”

A weakness of the American anarchist milieu has been its difficulty setting down roots in communities of color. This seems to be changing a bit, with involvement in some anti-racist struggles and formation of groups like Revolutionary Anti-authoritarians of Color (RACE).

Are these strands distinctive only due to strategic differences? Or do they have different long-term goals, as well? Indeed, what are the goals of the different strands?

There are underlying philosophical differences, I think, on issues like the relation of the individual to the social collectivity, how to analyse the structure of society, how to envision the alternative to capitalism.

The primitivists think of technology as prior to social structure, not shaped by social structure. And their aims seem to lack a connection to reality. It's not clear to me how they expect a better way of life to come about, even if they assume some ecological catastrophe as the agency.

Concern with the impacts of capitalism on the environment, and the destructive effects of various kinds of technology, however, are much more widespread among anarchists than just the primitivists.

Some anarchists have a vision of a kind of "gift economy" as the replacement for capitalism. The idea is that people would voluntarily work to produce things which would then be provided as a kind of freely to others. They want to get beyond the force on people to go along with structures of control in order to survive.

This has a close affinity for the traditional concept of "libertarian communism," which is still probably the vision of a post-capitalist society that has the most support among social anarchists – from social ecologists to the Platformists. Libertarian communism has both a vaguer meaning, and a stricter meaning. At its most vague, it means simply social ownership of the land and means of production combined with structures of direct democracy like community and workplace assemblies.

The idea is that there is a horizontal self-managing kind of social organism based on communal ownership of the system of production. The stricter meaning of "libertarian communism" includes agreement with the slogan: "From each according to ability, to each according to need." Anarchists are clearer about the structures of control – worker and community assemblies, and horizontal federations of these – than about the principles of allocation or economic planning.

Among syndicalists there is less unanimity behind "libertarian communism" in the strict sense. A more widespread agreement exists, at least among class struggle oriented anarchists, that a post-capitalist society is to be based on structures and practices of self-management, such as workers self-management of industry.

Social ecologists, on the other hand, reject the whole idea of class struggle as a strategy and also reject the idea of workers self-management of industry. Instead they propose community assemblies – made up of the residents in an area – making the decisions to run the local economy, doing the planning and so on. So, they have participatory democracy and community self-governance but not self-management of work.

I should also mention that quite a few anarchists (some of the Platformists for example) use a conception of class close to that of Marx, in which there are only two main classes in capitalism, capital and labor. This is reflected in the common anarchist view that the old Soviet Union was "state capitalism." On the other hand, there are some anarchists who argue that class is derived not from ownership per se but from power hierarchy, that class is the differentiation from power hierarchies in social production.

Another strategic difference is the different weight that different people place on the building of collectives and cooperatives at present. Some people seem to think a kind of new economy can be built that way within the shell of the old. But the more class struggle anarchists tend to think in terms of a revolutionary process, in which workers would eventually take over the running of industry, and the existing state structures would be dismantled.

I should also mention that, despite the traditional anarchist opposition to the state, there isn't a single "anarchist theory of the state." Some anarchists or anti-authoritarians like Rocker and Makhno have held that the state exists to defend the position of the economic ruling class, the bosses and owners of land and means of production. This is close to Marx's theory of the state. But other anarchists have held that the state is prior to the economic structure, or that the power of the capitalists is derived from the state. And still others seem to hold that the state is the basis of a separate class in society, or a separate force, with some autonomy from the capitalists.

Sometimes when people differ it is based on different perceptions or even facts that they have. Sometimes it is a different estimate of what is possible, or likely, or a different view of how obstacles and impediments obstruct their aims, etc. And sometimes it is different values. Do you think the strands of anarchism could largely converge, or are the differences destined to remain? How much is different values, in other words — as compared to different perceptions or estimates which might be amenable to resolution through the lessons of reason and experience?

I think some of the difference may be due to different circumstances of life. Some adopt anarchism as a kind of personal repudiation of capitalism, or "industrial civilization," a dropout mentality. I think the primitivists seem to have a different set of values, but they are a minority I think.

Most anarchists are ordinary wage-earners. It's possible that there could be more convergence if there were a larger oppositional movement, which might then play a kind of defining role or pole of attraction for people.

As an anarchist it is obvious what you think the strengths of the approach are, relative to other options, though maybe you would like to summarize that. I wonder what you think the weaknesses are, that need attention and improvement.

I actually tend not to use the label "anarchism" in regard to myself. I think there are a variety of things that the word "anarchism" seems to mean to people. These are so varied and inconsistent with each other that I usually don't find the word "anarchism" very useful for communicating with people.

I've already mentioned the influence of individualist ideas and the contradiction of this with democratic, collectivist interpretations of anti-authoritarianism — this is a longstanding problem.

I think that a very basic thing is the building of movements and organizations that are directly self-managed by their participants. It's hard to see how society could be changed in ways that overcome class division and other ways in which people are subordinated or oppressed without this being through movements that develop confidence and ability of people to run their lives and the society themselves, movements that give people the power to shape the way society is configured.

People have a need to be able to plan and direct their own lives, in cooperation with others. The existing capitalist society thwarts this need.

So, I tend to think of self-management as both means — a strategy — as well as a goal. This is perhaps the real strong point of the anti-authoritarian tradition.

But a movement for self-emancipation on a very massive scale is required — a movement that is internally democratic, and self-managing. Sometimes American anarchists don't adequately appreciate fully what would be needed for this, in terms of the level of organization and a culture of popular democratic discussion and resistance among the masses of the population.

No such movement could emerge spontaneously, though there are episodes or outbursts of struggle that may happen in ways that are unforeseen, for sure.

Some anarchists think of a self-managed society as a “spontaneous order”. But the tendency of people is to “spontaneously” fall back into old habits and ways of doing things. We’re raised and live day to day in a society where people are expected to defer to people in authority, to experts, to employers and so on.

A tendency in all kinds of organizations is for the people who bring certain advantages to end up in control or to exercise disproportionate influence — because of their education or higher level of knowledge, their greater self-confidence, or their speaking abilities, or other advantages. Due to class, race and gender divisions, there is a tendency for certain people to have more of these advantages than others. Thus the “spontaneous” tendency is for those with the advantages to use those advantages, even unconsciously, for greater influence. A hierarchy in organizations can emerge in which decision-making and knowledge gets concentrated into the hands of a few.

We know from the experience of the Communist revolutions that there is a tendency for this sort of hierarchy to congeal into a class system. To avoid this sort of outcome, we need to consciously work from the beginning to democratize knowledge, share opportunities to learn leadership skills and work to consciously develop skills in participants of movements.

Another issue where there was an unclarity in anarchism historically was on the concept of the governance of a society, the political structure of self-governance. Sometimes anarchists talk as if they are proposing that there would be no institutional structure that would have the power of making and enforcing rules — a polity.

But if you look, for example, at the Zaragosa program of the Spanish anarcho-sindicalists of 1936, it’s clear they were proposing a polity — a grassroots structure of political power — regional and national congresses to make decisions, a militia that could defend the grassroots social order and workers control of production, and so on. During the revolution, some anarchist union activists proposed regional and national defense councils, elected by the unions, to replace the government and to run a unified labor army in fighting Franco. Though these proposals were not carried out, the point is, these are institutions of political power.

Related to this problem of the nature of overall social self-management as a goal, is the problem of what to do about current struggles over the state. A strategy based on large-scale self-managed movements arising outside the state and other hierarchical structures — that is the basic anti-authoritarian strategy, as I conceive it — but how does that relate to actual political struggles over what the state does right now?

Traditional anarchism had certain insights but it didn’t have a complete theory or understanding of society to offer, and has the internal inconsistencies I’ve mentioned. This is why I think that anarchism by itself is not completely adequate as a perspective for social change. Though certain anti-authoritarian insights, like the importance of self-management, need to be carried forward, I also think that the limitations of traditional anarchism need to be transcended.

That anarchism needs clarity about polity is an almost counter intuitive claim, given that in some respects, historically, polity is what anarchism has highlighted. But I agree. Finally, I wonder though, what about economics? Do you feel anarchism as a school of thought, or some strain, has settled on economic aims that are both worthy and sufficient, or is there need for further clarity about economy, too?

Yes. I think it isn’t possible to get “beyond economy” as some anarchists think. The planet’s resources are limited, our time is limited. There are only 24 hours in the day. So, we inevitably

need some institutions for allocation of scarce resources — such as our work time — that ensure they will not be wasted, but will be used in ways that optimally meet the desires and needs that people have.

“Libertarian communism,” if taken strictly, means that allocation is to be governed by the principle, “From each according to ability, to each according to need.” I think this makes sense sometimes. We provide sidewalks and firefighter services on this basis now, and that seems to work. If someone is injured in an accident, I think they should receive health care just simply because of need, irrespective of what their income is.

But I don’t think an entire, complex industrial economy with many millions of people could be run on that basis. Individuals and various subgroups of the population have different desires, interests, tastes. Referring simply to general assemblies as a decision-making method isn’t adequate. Different production possibilities have different social opportunity costs. If no price attaches to things people consume, how do they know how to make responsible decisions about what to consume?

There needs to be some way that individuals can allocate their share of production for private consumption without this having to be filtered through collective approval such as meetings.

On the other hand, we don’t want the relations between producers and consumers to be mediated by the market either, because that is a system that allows agents to use any advantages they may have, such as control over key skills and information, to entrench a position of economic advantage. I think the market inevitably generates class division.

So, what is the alternative? This is where I think the process of participatory planning, as in the parecon model, comes into play, participation both by individuals for private consumption planning and by communities for public goods and services. Through the process of people making proposals and then being required to refine these proposals in light of reasonable limits on their own consumption and information about social costs, the preferences that people have for productive outcomes can be registered in the process of deciding what to produce.

Participatory planning differs from central planning. In central planning there is a separate group of people who do planning from those whose lives and work are impacted by the plans. The central planning group gather information and issue orders to groups of workers for what to produce. Central planning, when combined with public or collective ownership of the means of production, would lead to the entrenchment of a techno-managerial ruling class, as we saw in countries that practiced it. Participatory planning and self-management, on the other hand, imply that the people as a whole has a means of planning productive outcomes for themselves. Participatory planning is thus necessary to realize the anti-authoritarian aim of society-wide self-management.

The idea is not to be “utopian” in the sense of plotting out how people are to live in some proposed future society — but to indicate how the structure of society needs to change so that people can control their own lives, that is, how it is possible to have a viable economy that isn’t still a class system.

But I think the aims or values or vision needs to be tied to some strategic conception of social change, based on what actually exists, that provides some guidance on how society might change in the direction of self-management, dissolving the structures of oppression. I can’t see how a restructuring of society on the basis of self-management could come about other than by very large-scale mass movements, mass organizations, that develop the capacity in people for running their own lives, the capacity for democratic self-management.

The anti-authoritarian tradition suggests that it is through the direct involvement, direct struggle, of those affected, and the development of organizations of struggle that are self-managed by the rank and file, that this sort of change can come about. The importance of building movements and organizations today that are self-managed, as a means to creating a self-managed society, is an enduring insight of the anti-authoritarian left.

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