

Landauer's Fallacy

Gustav Landauer's "Famous Statement"

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Reading contemporary anarchist literature, I repeatedly come across some version of a quotation from the German anarchist Gustav Landauer (1870–1919). A book on anarchism and education cites “Gustav Landauer’s famous remark” (Suissa, 2010; p. 136),

“The state is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.” (quoted in above)

The writer on education actually took this quotation from a work by the well-known anarchist writer, Colin Ward. Another version of this “famous statement by Gustav Landauer” (Gordon, 2008; p. 38) is cited in Uri Gordon’s book on the nature of anarchism,

“One can throw away a chair and destroy a pane of glass but...[only] idle talkers...regard the state as such a thing or as a fetish that one can smash in order to destroy it. The state is a condition, a certain relationship among human beings, a mode of behavior between men [note]; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another...We are the state, and we shall continue to be the state until we have created the institutions that form a real community...” (quoted above)

In either version, this statement is fundamentally wrong, I will argue. First, I will paraphrase the statement, to summarize what I think Landauer was saying. He was denying that the state is primarily an institution, a social structure. Instead, he claims that it is nothing but a set of relationships among people. He draws the conclusion that it is wrong to seek to overthrow the state in a revolution. Instead, we should develop alternative ways of relating to each other, expressed in alternate social arrangements created in the here-and-now, to gradually replace the state. (While the quotations refer to the state, I assume they generalize to all forms of oppression, particularly capitalism.)

Note that it is not I but Landauer who counterposed these approaches: either we see the state as a thing, an institution, or we see it as relationships. Either we aim for a revolution to smash the state or we build alternate relationships here-and-now. This was his view and the view of those who quote him—not mine.

The Landauer quotation is admired by those anarchists whose basic strategy is to gradually build alternate institutions until they can peacefully replace capitalism and the state. Sometimes this is called a “new anarchism,” although it goes back to the ideas of Proudhon, not to mention Landauer. This nonrevolutionary strategy is opposed to the supposedly “old” strategy of revolutionary class struggle anarchism (see Gordon, 2008; Price, 2009).

Who Was Gustav Landauer?

In his time, Landauer was an influential anarchist thinker and activist. Erich Fromm referred to him as “one of the last great representatives of anarchist thought” (Fromm, 1955; p. 221). Jesse Cohen stated, “Gustav Landauer [should] be remembered, right along with Bakunin and Kropotkin, as one of anarchism’s most brilliant and original thinkers” (quoted in an advertisement for a new collection of Landauer’s writings, at the back of Suissa, 2010). Paul Avrich, the historian of anarchism, wrote, “He was also the most influential German anarchist of the twentieth century”

(same). Perhaps the most impressive blurb is a 1893 reference in a German police file, “Landauer is the most important agitator of the radical and revolutionary movement in the entire country” (same). High praise indeed!

During his political career, Landauer went from being a Marxist oppositionist among the youth of the German Social Democratic Party, to complete hostility to Marxism and dedication to anarchism. (Until I have seen the new collection of his work [*Revolution and Other Writings: A Political Reader*, Gabriel Kuhn ed. & trans.; PM Press], I am relying on Landauer; 1978 and Ward; 1965).

In 1919, following World War I and the Russian Revolution, revolutions swept across Europe. Landauer was invited to serve on the central council of the region of Bavaria, which was trying to establish a republic of workers and peasants councils. Counterrevolutionary military forces, under the orders of Social Democrats, overthrew the council republic. Landauer was arrested, repeatedly shot, and then trampled to death, similar to the killing of Rosa Luxemburg in Berlin. “When [Luxemburg] and Gustav Landauer were murdered by the soldiers of the German counter-revolution, the humanistic tradition of faith in [humanity] was meant to be killed with them” (Fromm, 1955; p. 210).

Gustav Landauer’s Program

Landauer’s writings express keen insight into many of the problems of Marxism: its teleological determinism, its centralism, its scientism, its mostly uncritical attitude toward technology. He was entirely correct that socialism requires new ways of human beings relating to each other and of relating to nature. Almost all anarchists would agree with these views.

However, he integrated the communist-anarchism of Kropotkin with the gradualist alternative-institutionism of Proudhon’s mutualism. He advocating leaving the cities (and the class struggle in them). Instead he proposed building collective farms. These would spread until they replaced capitalism and the state.

“The socialist village, with workshops and village factories, with fields and meadows and gardens...you proletarians of the big cities, accustom yourselves to this thought...for that is the only beginning of true socialism...” (quoted in Ward, 1965; p. 246). “Let us unite to establish socialist households, socialist villages, socialist communities....They should shine out over the country, so that the masses of men [note] will be overcome by envy of the new primeval bliss of satisfaction....” Landauer, 1978; p. 138).

There is nothing wrong with building cooperatives or collective villages. But this is not a strategy for overthrowing capitalism and its state. Its most “successful” implementation were the Israeli kibbutzim, which were ideologically inspired partially by Landauer’s friend, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. Whatever their virtues, these served as agents of a capitalist, colonial-settler, new state, not socialist anarchism.

Along with his valid criticisms of Marxism, Landauer also condemned its core orientation to the working class (he similarly condemns the syndicalists). After all, he wanted the workers to leave the big cities and industries where the class struggle was being fought out and (as the “famous statement” has it) “contract other relationships” by building collective agricultural-industrial farms in the countryside. This meant that they must stop being industrial workers, proletarians.

He supported labor unions only if they worked with consumer cooperatives, using their money to buy land for collective industrial-agricultural villages. This was not a class orientation, since he also hoped for “rich men [to] either join us completely or at least contribute to our cause” (Landauer, 1978; p. 140).

Unfortunately, his writing is full of vile insults and degrading caricatures of the working class. “Proletarians are the born uncultured plodders....The proletarian’s uncultured mentality is, incidentally, one of the reasons why Marxism, systematized unculturedness, has been so well received by the proletariat....The workers are not a revolutionary class, but a bunch of poor wretches who must live and die under capitalism....If the revolution came today, no stratum of the population would have less idea of what to do than our industrial proletarians.” (Landauer, 1978; pp. 69, 86, 134)

It is ironic that Landauer died, not defending his fantasy of collective villages, but as part of a real working-class revolution. Whatever his weaknesses, he died bravely in the cause of proletarian anarchism.

The Famous Statement

Returning now to the “famous remark” of Landauer’s: saying that the state is only a relationship between people, is like saying that Niagra Falls is just drops of water flowing downward. It is true, but misses the point. All institutions (social structures) are composed of individual humans. If a neutron bomb killed off all the people but left the buildings in which the government meets, there would be no more state. But this does not mean that, as Margaret Thatcher once said, there is no society, only individuals. When many people act in consistent, repeated, and stable patterns, then that is an institution. (By “act” I include both overt behavior and internal thinking and believing.) And such institutions resist change. The US national state has outlasted all those who once established it, and those who continued it, for over 200 years; the individuals are different, but the state continues.

No doubt, if tens of millions of individuals decided to live in a different, nonstate, way, this would challenge the state. But what if, at the same time, other millions decided to keep on living in a statist fashion? What if they have self-interests in living as powerful and wealthy people, and this is part of their self-conception? Statism will not be settled by how many people chose to live this way or that. It will take a clash, a conflict, a fight. Ruling classes have rarely permitted those they exploit to chose to live differently; they use force to maintain their institutions, especially the state—and the oppressed are forced to either use violence to defend their choices or to surrender to the masters.

Even Landauer notes that his strategy of collective villages and cooperatives will face state resistance. “The state...will place the greatest and smallest obstacles in the way of the beginners. We know that” (Landauer, 1978; p. 141). What is his answer to this? “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it!” (same). This is hardly adequate.

Socialist-anarchism will need a mass movement of workers and all the oppressed, determined to live differently, for ourselves and our children. But it will not succeed if the movement blinds itself to the obstacles, bases itself on fantasies, and refuses to prepare for an eventual revolution.

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