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Anarchism and a moneyless economy

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Anarchists are usually pretty good at listing the things we are against: capitalism, racism, religious sectarianism, authoritarianism and so on. We are usually pretty good at explaining how best to struggle: direct democracy and mass direct action. Where we often fall down is in explaining what we want at the end of the day, and convincing our listeners that it is a realistic alternative rather than a utopian pipe dream

Too many anarchists throw up revolutionary slogans without explaining what they mean.

To give an example: most people think the state is the country where they live, i.e. Ireland. So there isn't much point in shouting 'smash the state' without first explaining what the state is and why we want to smash it. Unless we want to look like idiots!

Similarly, there is a slogan in one of the toilets at work that says 'abolish all prisons'. Without a discussion about what is a crime, what causes crime, why we believe most of the causes can be eradicated — we sound like nutters who just want to open the doors for rapists, gangsters and murderers.

If we want to be taken seriously we have to convince people that what we say makes sense.

We often sum up our goal of a communist non-market and moneyless economy with the slogan 'from each according to ability, to each according to need'. Tonight I will try to kick off a discussion about what this means and how it might work.

To start, I'll reject the collectivist idea of exchange between independent workplaces and localities. That may have made sense when the productive forces were only in their lower stages of development, but now capitalism has created the conditions which makes communist economy a realistic option.

Those at workplace level who produce goods would have no say as to how those goods would be distributed or used — since if they did they would have a property right over them and that would not be socialism.

Society as a whole is immediately the owner of any product of labour supplied by each of its members, who will have no special rights over what they have produced.

Under anarchism production will be social, and thus there is no ownership by anyone of the instruments of production, including the land and fixed installations like factories, power stations or transport fleets.

Social ownership would not be based on the state (or nationalisation), or even on common ownership by the workforce in each job, but on the complete absence of any exclusive use-controlling rights over the means of production and their products; and it would involve the complete disappearance of buying and selling, of money, of wages and of all other exchange categories, including enterprises as autonomous economic units.

The administration — or whatever we choose to call the bodies we delegate to administer distribution — will allocate whatever proportion is needed for general services like health, education, housing, foreign aid, etc. and leaves the rest for daily individual consumption.

We would also need money to trade with non-anarchist countries, and indeed to holiday there. But this would be a very minor part of everyday economic life for the average man or woman.

And what money we may need could have an expiry date after a few years, so that it could not be traded internally and hoarded.

These are the sorts of questions we should devote more time to if we are to move from being protesters at the injustice of capitalism to being the advocates of a system that our friends and neighbours will see as a realistic possibility.

Naturally, there being no money, the goods which the administration make available for individual consumption would be available for individuals to take freely without charge.

But what happens when there is not enough to go around? That's really the key question isn't it? There will be conflicts and disagreements. Should we put a new roof on apartment building A or apartment building B? And if we want to do both we might need to use timber obtained by cutting down trees in an area that some people believe should be left untouched because it is important to a local ecosystem.

So disagreements will exist, the difference is that we will seek to resolve them democratically rather than through the rule of the rich.

What about "supply and demand"?

Anarchists do not ignore the facts of life, namely that at a given moment there is so much a certain thing produced and so much of is desired to be consumed or used.

Neither do we deny that different individuals have different interests and tastes.

However, this is not what is usually meant by "supply and demand." Often in general economic debate, this formula is given a certain mythical quality which ignores the underlying realities which it reflects as well as some unwholesome implications. So, before discussing "supply and demand" in an anarchist society, it is worthwhile to make a few points about the "law of supply and demand" in general.

Firstly, as the historian E.P. Thompson argued, "supply and demand" promotes "the notion that high prices were a (painful) remedy for dearth, in drawing supplies to the afflicted region of scarcity. But what draws supply are not high prices but sufficient money in their purses to pay high prices. A characteristic phenomenon in times of dearth is that it generates unemployment and empty purses; in purchasing necessities at inflated prices people cease to be able to buy inessentials [causing unemployment]

... Hence the number of those able to pay the inflated prices declines in the afflicted regions, and food may be exported to neighbouring, less afflicted, regions where employment is holding up and consumers still have money with which to pay. In this sequence, high prices can actually withdraw supply from the most afflicted area.”

Surely anarchist-communism would just lead to demand exceeding supply?

It's a common objection that communism would lead to people wasting resources by taking more than they need. Kropotkin stated that “free communism ... places the product reaped or manufactured at the disposal of all, leaving to each the liberty to consume them as he pleases in his own home.” [The Place of Anarchism in the Evolution of Socialist Thought, p. 7]

But, some argue, what if an individual says they “need” a luxury eight bedroom house or a personal yacht? Simply put, workers may not “need” to produce for that ‘need’. As the British syndicalist Tom Brown put it, “such things are the product of social labour...it is improbable that any greedy, selfish person would be able to kid a shipyard full of workers to build him a ship all for his own hoggish self.” [Syndicalism, p. 51]

Therefore, anarchist-communists are not blind to the fact that free access to products is based upon the actual work of real individuals — “society” provides nothing, individuals working together do. Therefore, the needs of both consumer and producer are taken into account. This means that if no factory or individual desires to produce a specific order then this order can be classed as an “unreasonable” demand — “unreasonable” in this context meaning that no one freely agrees to produce it.

There are plenty of examples today to indicate that free access will not lead to abuses. Let us take just three everyday examples, public libraries, water and pavements.

In public libraries people are free to sit and read books all day. However, few if any actually do so. Neither do people always take

What this amounts to is that perhaps up to ninety per cent of effort expended by human beings in the industrialised countries today is entirely pointless (an estimate by the Socialist Party of Great Britain). So it is quite ridiculous to talk about ‘how to make sure people work if they’re not paid for it’. If just ten per cent of the population worked, and the other ninety per cent stayed at home watching telly, we’d be no worse off than we are now.

But there would be no reason for them to watch telly all the time, because without the profit system work could be made enjoyable. Playing football or climbing mountains are not essentially any more enjoyable than building houses, growing food or programming computers. The only reason we think of some things as ‘leisure’ and others as ‘work’ is because we get used to doing some things because we want to and others because we have to.

In a moneyless world work would be a completely different affair. Those tasks that are unavoidably unhealthy or unpleasant, such as coalmining, would be automated or the jobs rotated so that nobody has to stay doing an unpleasant job for the rest of their life.

But not every country will go anarchist at once. Although modern mass communications and easier travel will mean that the positive experience of the revolution will be known pretty quickly in most parts of the world, there will still be unevenness in the growth of the revolutionary movement.

In the period between, say, Western Europe making a revolution and the rest of the world catching up, how will we cope?

It's one thing to make non-exportable goods and services (like electricity, basic foodstuffs, housing, health and so on) free — but if everything is free what's to stop capitalists like Tesco sending their trucks over here to load up with our free foodstuffs?

I would suggest that we will need a customs service (or if we want to sound more radical, a workers inspection team!) to stop abuses like that.

1652: There shall be no buying and selling ... If any man or family want grain or other provisions, they may go to the storehouse and fetch without money. (Gerrard Winstantley).

We must not suppose that it is therefore destined to remain a utopian dream. Today there is an entirely new element in the situation: Plenty.

All previous societies have been rationed societies, based on scarcity of food, clothing and shelter. The modern world is also a society of scarcity, but with a difference. Today's shortages are unnecessary; today's scarcity is artificial.

The world is haunted by a spectre — the spectre of Abundance. Only by planned waste and destruction on a colossal scale can the terrifying threat of Plenty be averted. Wine lakes, butter mountains, cars built to fall to pieces after less than 10 years, etc.

Money means rationing. It is only useful when there are shortages to be rationed. No one can buy or sell air: it's free because there is plenty of it around. Food, clothing, shelter and entertainment should be free as air. The only excuse for money is that there is not enough wealth to go round — not a valid excuse in a world which has developed the means of production to a level capable of satisfying everyone's needs.

If we made a list of all those occupations which would be unnecessary in a Moneyless World, jobs people now have to do which are entirely useless from a human point of view, we might begin as follows: Wages clerk, Tax assessor, Stockbroker, Insurance agent, Ticket puncher, Salesman, Accountant, Slot machine emptier, Industrial spy, Bank manager.

Of course, the itemising of those jobs which are financial does not end the catalogue of waste. All production today is carried on purely for profit. The profit motive often runs completely counter to human need. 'Built-in obsolescence' (planned shoddiness), the restrictive effects of the patents system, the waste of effort through duplication of activities by competing firms or nations — these are just a few of the ways in which profits cause waste.

the maximum number of books out at a time. No, they use the library as they need to and feel no need to maximise their use of the institution. Some people never use the library, although it is free.

In the case of water supplies, it's clear that people do not leave taps on all day because water is often supplied freely or for a fixed charge.

Similarly with pavements, we do not spend our free time walking up and down the street because it doesn't cost us anything extra.

In all such cases we use the resource as and when we need to. Why would we not expect similar results as other resources become freely available?

In effect, the anti-free access argument makes as much sense as arguing that individuals will travel to stops beyond their destination if public transport is based on a fixed charge! And only an idiot would travel further than required in order to get "value for money."

However, for the defenders of capitalism the world seems to be made up of such idiots. It would be interesting to send a few of these clowns to hand out Progressive Democrat or Fianna Fail leaflets in the street. Even though the leaflets are free, crowds are most unlikely to form around the person handing them out demanding as many copies of the leaflet as possible. Rather, those interested in politics or current affairs take them, the rest ignore them.

Part of the problem is that capitalist economics have invented a fictional type of person, whose wants are limitless: someone who always wants more and more of everything and so whose needs could only be satisfied if resources were limitless too. Needless to say, such an individual has never existed. In reality, our wants are not limitless — people have diverse tastes and we rarely want everything available nor do we want more of a thing than is necessary to satisfies our needs.

Anarchist-Communists also argue that we cannot judge people's buying habits under capitalism with their actions in a free society. After all, advertising does not exist to inform us about the range of products available but rather to create needs by making people insecure about themselves.

Advertising would not need to stoop to the level of manipulation that creates false personalities for products and provide solutions for problems that the advertisers themselves create if this was not the case.

Crude it may be, but advertising is based on the creation of insecurities, preying on fears and obscuring rational thought. In an alienated society in which people are subject to hierarchical controls, feelings of insecurity and lack of control and influence are natural. It is these fears that advertising multiples – if you cannot have real freedom, then at least you can buy something new. Advertising is the key means of making people unhappy with what they have (and who they are).

It is naive to claim that advertising has no effect on the psyche of the receiver or that the market merely responds to our needs and makes no attempt to shape our thoughts. Advertising creates insecurities about everyday things (how we dress, how we look...) and so generates irrational urges to buy, urges which would not exist in a libertarian communist society.

However, there is a deeper point to be made here about consumerism. Capitalism is based on hierarchy and not liberty. This leads to a weakening of individuality and a loss of self-identity and sense of community. Both these senses are a deep human need and consumerism is often a means by which people overcome their alienation from their selves and others (religion, ideology and drugs are other means of escape). Therefore the consumption within capitalism reflects its values, not some abstract "human nature."

This means that capitalism produces individuals who define themselves by what they have, not who they are. This leads to

consumption for the sake of consumption, as people try to make themselves happy by consuming more commodities.

In other words, the well-developed individual that an anarchist society would develop would have less need to consume than the average person in a capitalist one. This is not to suggest that life will be spartan and without luxuries in an anarchist society, far from it. But what I am arguing here is that an anarchist-communist society would not have to fear rampant consumerism making demand constantly outstrip supply.

As for when investment is needed, it is clear that this will be based on the changes in demand for goods in both collectivist and communist anarchism. As Bakunin's colleague, James Guillaume put it this way, "by means of statistics gathered from all the communes in a region, it will be possible to scientifically balance production and consumption. In line with these statistics, it will also be possible to add more help in industries where production is insufficient and reduce the number of men where there is a surplus of production." [Bakunin on Anarchism, p. 370]. Today it makes more sense to talk about the use of bar codes to track demand.

Obviously, investment in branches of production with a high demand would be essential and this would be easily seen from collected statistics. Tom Brown states this obvious point: "Goods, as now, will be produced in greater variety, for workers like producing different kinds, and new models, of goods. Now if some goods are unpopular, they will be left on the shelves... Of other goods more popular, the shops will be emptied. Surely it is obvious that the assistant will decrease his order of the unpopular line and increase his order of the popular." [Syndicalism, p. 55]

The abolition of money is an ancient dream, the most radical demand of every social revolution for centuries past.

400BC: Hey all you thirsty people, though you've got no money, come to the water. Buy corn without money and eat. Buy wine without money and milk without price. (Isaiah).