Anarchy in Iraq?

Anarcho

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After the fall of Saddam's dictatorship, a wave of looting erupted in towns and cities across Iraq. The media was outraged, often more concerned about stolen property than the civilians wounded and murdered by the US invasion. It was proclaimed that Iraq was falling into "anarchy." This is unsurprising, if annoying, for anarchists. It is worthwhile to explain why the chaos in post-Saddam Iraq is not anarchy nor, in fact, a case against anarchism.

Kropotkin once said that *"without disorder, the Revolution is impossible"* and he was right. Every revolution has been marked by "disorder," by strikes, riots, looting and so on. However, in social revolutions such periods are short lived. Inspired by ideas and hope for the future, the mass of people quickly go beyond the destructive phrase of popular revolt and start the construction of a new world.

So Kropotkin argued against the idea of "one-day revolutions" and the idea that a revolution could occur independently of popular struggle and mass movements. A *"structure based on centuries of history cannot be destroyed by a few kilos of explosives,"* he correctly stated. Anarchy would be the product of collective struggle at the heart of society, not the product of external shocks. *"To make the revolution,"* he argued, *"the mass of workers will have to organise themselves. Resistance and the strike are excellent means of organisation for doing this."* Thus it was *"a question of organising societies of resistance for all trades in each town ... against the exploiters ... of federating them ... Workers' solidarity must no longer be an empty word but practised each day between all trades and all nations."* In the struggle against oppression and exploitation, we not only change the world, we change ourselves at the same time. So it is the struggle for freedom which creates people capable of taking the responsibility for their own lives, communities and planet. People capable of living as equals in a free society, so making anarchy possible.

Therefore, what happened in Iraq is not an example of anarchy. As George Barrett put it, the strength of the state lies *"in the superstition of the people who think that it is right to obey [it]. So long as that superstition exists it is useless for some liberator to cut off the head of tyranny; the people will create another, for they have grown accustomed to rely on something outside themselves."* This means that *"if, then, by some external means"* the state was destroyed then people would *"rebuild the old society."* However, if *"the people develop their ideas of freedom, and then themselves get rid of the last stronghold tyranny — the Government — then indeed the Revolution would be permanently accomplished."* Like Kropotkin, he saw anarchist revolution in terms of working class people self-organisation and direct action, with the capitalist class *"abolished by the people*

so organising themselves that they will run the factories and use the land for the benefit of their free communities, i.e. for their own benefit ... The only thing then that will be put in the place of government will be the free organisations of the workers."

This has not happened in Iraq. Rather, the government has been destroyed by quite a few kilos of explosives. Unsurprisingly, therefore, chaos rather than anarchy resulted. It cannot be denied that

the looting is, in part, a reaction to inequality and class society. It is a form of wealth redistribution. Nor can it be denied that some of the looters see their actions as a form of justice. *"Every single item that we take is the blood of the people,"* said one. However, it is not the end of private property, simply a change in who claims to own it. This can be seen from the irresponsible attacks on hospitals and other resources that should be held in common, not squandered by breaking them up and destroying them.

Aware of this, anarchists are not in favour of looting as such. Anarchists, to quote Luigi Fabbri, *"do not think of expropriation in terms of some sort of 'help yourself' operation, left to personal judgement, in the absence of any order. Even were it possible to predict as inevitable that expropriations, once disorder sets in, would take on an individualistic complexion ... anarchist communists have no intention of adopting that sort of an approach as their own."* In other words, collective expropriation must replace individualistic looting. Instead, he pointed out that the working class has its *"own, free institutions, independent of the state"* (such as federations of unions and co-operatives) to achieve the end of private property and that *"during the revolution other collective bodies more attuned to the needs of the moment will be set up."*

And this is the problem in Iraq. There has been no popular movement that created the framework of a new society while fighting the old. Rather we have people who, in the main (and so far), have not seen beyond statism and capitalism taking advantage of a break down of the state and its protection of property. Can we be surprised that chaos ensured?

Now the Iraqi people have three choices. They can accept the rule of the US, either freely or be forced to. This seems the most likely, although it will be imposed by force upon a population which, while anti-Saddam, is also anti-US, its occupation and the wealthy, westernised Iraqi exiles it wants to rule the country. Or they fall behind some new nationalist gang aiming for state power. This is less likely. Or, finally, they can start to construct their own ways of getting society back on its feet in a way that will be in their interests. This is the anarchist solution and would result in a true anarchy, a society of free and equal people co-operating together freely.

Impossible, it will be asserted. Far from it. No society could survive without its libertarian elements, elements which often come to the fore in periods of intense struggle and change. Every struggle and revolution has seen anarchist ideas and practices develop spontaneously as people draw the obvious conclusions from their own experiences, they have seen free, self-managed, organisations develop whenever the people have freedom of initiative. The French revolution had its sections and communes, the Russian revolution its soviets and factory committees, the Spanish revolution its unions, collectives and co-operatives. These were the bodies that turned riot into revolution, expropriating capital for the benefit of all and allowing society to be run from the bottom up (at least for a time). So in terms of what anarchism is, we don't need to speculate about how Iraq shows the failure of anarchism. Its necessary preconditions do not exist. The historical examples of anarchism in practice show how very different real anarchy is.

The creation of new socialist and libertarian institutions is, therefore, always a possibility. The Iraqi peoples' experiences may push them towards anarchist conclusions, the awareness that the

state exists to protect the wealthy and powerful few and to disempower the many. That while it is needed to maintain class and hierarchical society, it is not needed to organise society nor can it do so in a just and fair way for all. This is possible. There is a history of Shoras (workers councils) in Iraq, so many have an example of working class self-organisation that can be applied. So we cannot dismiss the possibility that the chaos in Iraq may be replaced by true anarchy, the self-organisation of a self-managed society.

Unfortunately the odds are stacked against this. The Iraqi people have had their state destroyed for them and are now subject to an occupying power. So although developments towards real anarchy are possible, it is unlikely to happen. But we can hope. And if this does happen, the Iraqi people will have to defend their freedom from two enemies. Firstly, the US/UK occupation forces. These have no interest in seeing a functional grassroots democracy be built from below. And, secondly, those in Iraq who seek to maintain inequality in wealth and/or power. Without a conscious anarchist presence any libertarian tendencies are likely to be used, abused and finally destroyed by parties or religious groups seeking political power over the masses.

During these events the US occupying power has made its priorities clear. While letting essential services like hospitals and priceless historical treasures be looted, the US army secured oil fields and defended only two government ministries (namely of Oil and of the Interior). When US officials boasted that oil production would restart soon, people across Iraq were wondering when the same would be said of their water, food and electricity supplies. But, of course, this war was not about oil so this must be a coincidence.

Nor should we be surprised by the fact that the US is reintroducing the old regime's police force. They did the same all across Europe and the Far East after defeating the fascists, where they replaced popular anti-fascist committees with fascist politicians and businessmen. We can expect to see the Baath state resurrected, but with a new leaders at the top. And who knows, perhaps this policy of tolerating chaos and looting is part of a plan to "win hearts and minds," to get people used to the idea of a US dictatorship presiding over Saddam's police force as the alternative would be chaos?

And, lastly, it is doubtful that the US and UK government's tolerance for "public disorder" in Iraq will be applied in regards those seeking meaningful regime change at home. Number 10's recognition that oppression and exploitation produces resistance and rebellion will not be applied here. We will be expected to obey the state like good citizens and be punished if we step out of line. After all, we live in a democracy. It's not like the government simply ignores the wishes of the population in favour of pursuing policies that only benefit the few at the expense of the many and the planet we live on...

2008 Addition

Looking back after 5 years, the first thing to note is that the article completely failed to predict how religious organisations stepped into file the vacuum created by the US invasion. That is not too surprising, as my knowledge of the Middle East was not that great at the time (it has grown, as the occupation and resistance to it developed). Equally obviously, my hopes that the Iraqi people who develop towards a libertarian perspective has failed to happen but, to be fair, I did note that that was optimistic! Lastly, the occupation is still there and the US imposed a formally "democratic" regime, a regime that it ignores as and when required. Did it recreate the

Baath state, but with a new leaders at the top as the article predicted? No, but mostly because of popular opposition (for example, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's call for elections could not be ignored due to the non-violent protests of his followers). So we have an occupied country, with the trappings of "democracy" but whose state, in practice, does what the occupiers want or is ignored.

I would just point out, in my defence (so to speak), that the aim of the article was not to predict the results of the invasion but to refute claims that there was "anarchy" in Iraq and that the disorder that occurred after the invasion somehow caused problems for anarchists or anarchist theory. It did not, as the article shows for obvious reasons given a basic understanding of how anarchists see social change happening as well as how hierarchy shapes those subject to it.

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