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Letters on class to Freedom

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June 23, 2009

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Two letters on why class analysis is important for anarchism,
as well as trying to dispel common misconceptions of what
such an analysis means and implies.

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the means of creating both a substantial and serious anarchist
movement today and an anarchist society tomorrow.

Iain McKay

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capitalism? I doubt it. It serves capitalism far better to deny class and class struggle.

He states that “definitions” of class “currently present us all as innately and inevitably capitalistic animals.” Given that any definition of (modern) class only makes sense within the capitalist system, obviously it will present them as parts of that system. The question is, of course, what part of this system has an interest in destroying it and which an interest in maintaining it. The answer is obvious. As Scott notes, “people are interested in what anarchists have to say.” Very true, but what kinds of people? Those subject to wage labour or those who whom they serve?

Perhaps we are discussing different things? Scott talks about the middle class and the working class, yet does not mention the ruling class. Most “middle class” people, as he acknowledges, are workers (i.e. wage slaves like the rest of the working class). Nor do “class struggle” anarchists reject the contribution of those who were not, originally, working class. How could we? Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta were not working class but they rejected their class backgrounds and participated as equals in the struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors.

Finally, Scott argues that we must “muster sufficient ingenuity to elaborate new systems of relations.” Very true. Anarchists from Bakunin onwards have argued we need to form self-managed associations of producers now in order to, firstly, fight the class war and, secondly, to create the facts of the new world in the current one. The struggle against oppression must be the forum in which we apply our ideas. Only by applying our ideas in our workplaces and communities, creating libertarian organisations which combat wage labour by self-management and statism by self-government, can an anarchist society be a possibility.

Simply put, rather than being a “red herring,” class struggle is an essential aspect of anarchist theory and practice. It is

archist thinkers on this subject as well as of modern day “class struggle” anarchists. What the issue seems to boil down to is what does this struggle against class actually mean.

According to Scott, this struggle is “not an internecine struggle between classes.” He argues that the “means are the ends” and that “internecine class war now can only give rise to further class war in the future.” I must admit to being unsure what he means by this. Obviously class war now means further class war later, but only in the sense that until such time as the class war is won, it will go on – whether we want it to or not. In other words, class society produces class struggle, not vice versa. “Class struggle” anarchists argue that only those subject to class oppression have a direct interest in ending it. By encouraging class struggle, by making its causes understood, we simply point to the only way that classes can be abolished – by the direct action of those subject to class domination. For this reason most anarchists stress class struggle and the need to fight it in such a way as to end class systems once and for all.

However, I expect he does not mean this truism. I think he means that by pursuing the class struggle as the means of creating anarchism, we ensure that class war will always be with us. I wonder if he applies this logic equally to other struggles. Would he argue that internecine struggle between governors and governed now can only give rise to further struggle between rulers and ruled in the future? I doubt it.

Scott states that “class is a red-herring – a way of splitting us up that serves capitalism only too well in its attempts to divide and rule us.” Which, I suppose, explains the recurring attempts by politicians to deny that we live in a class society. Does it mean that when Blair and Major declared Britain to be a classless society, they were doing capitalism a disservice? Does it mean that when Mussolini and Thatcher stated they had ended class conflict, they were simply trying to undermine

First letter

Dear *Freedom*

It seems to me that Tavis Reddick (**Freedom** 6th April) totally misses the point in his comments on class struggle. I will ignore the comments on “those who would divide ... may be seeking to rule” as the slanderous nonsense they are and concentrate on the key issue, namely the importance of class analysis and struggle.

Travis simply does not understand the nature of the society he lives in. He argues that “capitalism can’t really be said to exist for the benefit of anyone, can it?” The fact that the capitalist class seems intent on maintaining both the system and its position in it suggests otherwise. Simply put, capitalism benefits capitalists. “Capitalists aren’t evil,” he asserts, “but mistaken. The desire for infinite acquisition of wealth is a symptom of mental illness.” So we have it, capitalists are just mad and the desire to acquire wealth has nothing to do with capitalism. Sadly for this argument the need to accumulate “wealth” is driven by the capitalist economy, irrespective of the “desires” of individual capitalists. If capitalists are mad it is simply because they operate in a mad social system, one which encourages and rewards such “insanity.”

Travis argues that the “path of anarchy can presumably start in any society. So why the emphasis on an apocalyptic showdown between ‘working class’ and ‘capitalists’?” The answer is simple. We do not live in “any society.” We live in the current one, which is capitalist. This means we have to place “emphasis” on the here and now rather than flights of fancy. Looking at modern society we are struck by the fact it is marked by social inequalities, with a few ruling over the many. In order to change this, we have to ask a simple question: “Who has an interest in changing this society, the rulers or the ruled, the exploiter or the exploited?” Once we ask that question, the “emphasis” on class struggle is obvious. Only those at the bot-

tom of society have a **self**-interest in freeing themselves from the burden of those at the top

As such, class struggle is the key to creating a free society. The struggle by the exploited and oppressed to resist their exploitation and oppression can be turned into a struggle to end both. Struggles do not start with such a perspective, of course, and Travis is right to state that there is “no great sign of solidarity” in workers’ struggle and that “many of them seem to happen in order to maintain a group of workers in their place in the social hierarchy.” However, to leave it at that simply shows ignorance of social change. Struggle is a process. Ideas change and develop in struggle. It can also create new forms of organisation based on libertarian principles (such as self-managed assemblies and bottom-up federations) which accustom those involved to manage their own affairs directly, without leaders and rulers. This experience of “anarchy in action” helps change ideas by showing that anarchism is not a utopian vision but rather a viable alternative. Thus “a new paradigm” is generated from struggles that may, initially, appear limited but which can grow into the possibility of a free society.

This explains Nick’s comments that “we should try and prosecute more effectively the war between classes.” Only by anarchists taking an active part in such struggles can we encourage their libertarian elements and vision as well as creating a power which can resist and finally overthrow hierarchy. Thus the “concept of class” is essential to understanding how capitalism works and how, ultimately, how we can end it.

Membership of a class, Travis argues, is “defined by their relation to the means of production.” This means that the position of “children, unpaid carers, elderly, sick and unemployed” is clear. They do not own/control the means of production and have little (official) power and so are part of the working class. The working class *is* divided. That is part of the problem (and it is not surprise that this is encouraged by those in power to maintain their position). Anarchists are not blind to the fact

that the working class is riddled with inequalities and hierarchies (e.g. sexism, racism, homophobia). I for one see the class struggle as a struggle to end all forms of social hierarchy and oppression. By changing society, those involved change themselves and so become open to the need to end all forms of oppression, not just those based on class. This, again, indicates why class struggle is important.

Travis wonders “why is it a good thing if somebody thinks of themselves as being working class before [they] think of themselves just as a person?” The answer is simple. By being aware of the objective facts and their position in society, people will want to change them. They can realise that in order to become a person they have to abolish class society (while, of course, not postponing personal change while taking part in social struggle). Class consciousness does not mean perpetuating classes. It means being aware that they exist, why they exist, and how we can abolish them along with every other form of oppression and domination.

Ultimately, the class war goes on independently of whether we recognise it or not. To wash our hands of it does not make it go away and to deny its existence simply helps those at the top win it (which explains why the ruling class and their agents are at such pains to deny it exists!). If anarchists ignore the class struggle then our ideas will stagnate and become impoverished as our ideas will not be applied in practice and so become cut off from the spring of life.

Iain McKay

Second Letter

Dear *Freedom*

I was always under the impression that, as Scott Wakeham argues, “the class struggle should be a struggle against class itself.” This was the underlying assumption of all the great an-