

Letters on “property is despotism”

Anarcho

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Letter on “group issues” in a free society

Dear *Freedom*

Richard Garner’s letter (**Freedom**, 21st April) raised some interesting questions.

He states that under his system there would be no “group issues” and so the “*problem ... lies not with anarchism but with communism.*” Taken literally, of course, this implies that Garner’s version of “anarchy” there would be no forms of association at all. No groups, no families, no clubs: nothing but the isolated individual. It implies no economic activity but peasant farming and one-person artisan workplaces. Why? Simply because any form of organisation implies “group issues.” Two people deciding to live together or three people working together becomes a group, twenty people forming a football club becomes a group. And these people have joint interests and so group issues. In other words, Mr. Garner is implying a social situation that has never existed nor ever will.

I doubt he is suggesting this. Like any society, his particular form of “anarchy” will have groups. Now, Mr. Garner is right to state that “*anarchism, is not, has not always been, and need not always be communist.*” But it has been, has always been and will always be **socialist**. Anarchists like Proudhon, Tucker and Bakunin rejected communism but called themselves socialists. They opposed capitalism, they opposed profit, rent and interest as exploitation. Their ideas automatically suggest workers’ self-management of production and so the end of wage slavery (i.e. capitalism). Proudhon and Bakunin stated this explicitly, Tucker’s ideas logically imply it.

There are two ways of having a group. You can be an association of equals, governing yourselves collectively as regards collective issues. Or you can have capitalists and wage slaves, bosses and servants, government and governed. As Proudhon put it, “*either the workman... will be simply the employee of the proprietor-capitalist-promoter; or he will participate... he will become an associate.*” He stressed that “*in the first case the workman is subordinated, exploited: his permanent condition is one of obedience*” and “*in the second case he resumes his dignity as a man and citizen... he forms part of the producing organisation, of which he was before but the slave; as, in the town, he forms part of the sovereign power, of which he was before but the subject ... we need not hesitate, for we have no choice... it is necessary to form an ASSOCIATION among workers ... because without that, they would remain related as subordinates and superiors, and there would ensue two ... castes of masters and wage-workers, which is repugnant to a free and democratic society.*”

Simply put, anarchism is based on self-management of group issues, not in their denial. Mr. Garner, by arguing that “group issues” will not exist in his form of “anarchy” shows that it is not anarchist. He is an “anarcho”-capitalist, a supporter of the authority of the property owner over the worker and the tenant. In other words, private statism.

This private statism can be extreme. Henry Ford, for example, employed over three thousand private police and had his own spies (organised by his own secret police). He ensured that his employees were denied freedom of association (no unions), speech (no talking union) and so on. He, like other employers, could employ various private police to enforce their rule over their property. Yes, indeed, no “group issues” existed, only Ford’s dictatorship. As Proudhon argued, “*property is despotism.*”

In the “anarcho”-capitalist perspective, Ford’s workers were not oppressed or exploited. They were totally and utterly free as they could leave the company and join another. Which also means that Mr. Garner is totally free — he can leave the U.K. at any time and join another state. No one forces him to stay here. He even presents a country (Somalia) which approaches his vision. That

he does not go to it implies he is happy with his current landlord (the U.K. state). “Anarcho”-capitalism exists to justify tyranny by arguing that private power and authority do not count. Sadly, its faulty logic equally applies to the state.

Let us look at his example of Somalia. Ironically, Somali may be an example of “anarchy” working, but it is not capitalist.

I visited the webpage he gave. It is by a group aiming at “*economic government*” (and I had always thought anarchists were against government. Apparently “*private police*” enforcing private power and authority is freedom). It discusses how Somalia does not have a “*central government*” but indicate that it has tribal structures. As they put it, “*Africa’s tribal governments are organised as follows. In each village one finds a chief... The role of the chief is to execute the decisions of the Council of Elders, who, in turn, must seek the consensus of the village assembly.*” Yet in his letter, Mr. Garner explained how communes, assemblies and consensus do not work. How strange, then, that his example of an “anarcho”-capitalist society is one marked by the institutions on which communist-anarchism is based!

Indeed, rather than being an individualist society, it is based on “*group issues,*” namely those of the tribe/clan as well as the family: “*Compensations and fines are not due to the victim, but to his family, just as they are not paid by the criminal ... but by his family.*”

Nor is it capitalist. It is based on collective ownership of land: “*Land is allotted by the tribe to individuals and subject to private grazing rights. There are no tribal laws against freedom of contract and voluntary exchange, except that in some tribes or clans tribal land cannot be owned by people from another tribe.*” It also has “*public*” watering places (access determined by custom).

Ironically, for a political theory so in love with property, “anarcho”-capitalists do not really analyse it in any depth. They do not realise that different societies have different definitions of property and that different societies generate different social relationships based on these different forms of property. Somalia tribal society is based on common (tribal) ownership of land, with individuals given use rights over specific parts of it.

There **is** a danger for the people of Somali. The webpage argues that “*the only way of letting the Somalis travel the way to peace and prosperity is by establishing a small model country in their midst, populated with dynamic foreign businessmen who base themselves on the fundamentals of Somali society.*” I doubt that these businessmen will base themselves on common ownership of land or on tribal assemblies (history shows that the bourgeoisie always destroys popular assemblies in favour of centralised government). These businessmen will desire to own land and hire workers, so turning themselves into the masters of Somali. Property will generate despotism and theft.

Mr. Garner quotes the webpage as stating “*the Somalis have a holy respect for private property.*” As Stirner argued, “*Property in the Civic sense means **sacred** property, such that I must **respect** your property... Be it ever so little, if one only has somewhat of his own — to wit, a **respected** property! ... in practice people respect nothing and every day the small possessions are bought up again by greater proprietors, and the ‘free people’ change into day labourers.*” If Somali is turned into a capitalist nation, then this will be the means. Sacred property will ensure real people are sacrificed to the new god, the market.

The Somali people **are** at a turning point. Either they strengthen their communal assemblies and ownership or they will break down to be replaced by rule by the rich. This process has constantly been at work in history (see Kropotkin’s **Mutual Aid** for details). Somali may be stateless, but it is so because it is not capitalist. Once capitalist property dominates, the state will develop. It may be private bosses hiring their own police or it may be a public state, but a state

will appear to enforce the power of property owners over their property (land) and those who use it.

Anarchism and capitalism are incompatible, as history and logic show.

Iain

Letter on “Capitalist Acts” in anarchy

Dear Freedom

Mr. Garner asks Nel two questions. Firstly, would an anarcho-communist society “permit workers to exchange their labour amongst themselves.” Secondly, would such a society ban capitalist acts between consenting adults.

Well, I have discussed question one with Mr. Garner in the pages of Freedom before and will not do so again (suffice to say, he knows the answer so why is he asking?). As for the second, the question arises “what is a capitalist act”?

Does it mean exchanging the product of your labour? No, as that predates capitalism. So it must mean “can people become wage slaves in a free society?” The answer then becomes, why would they want to? While the idea that people will happily become wage slaves may be somewhat common place (particularly with supporters of capitalism) the evidence of history is that people, given a choice, will prefer self-employment and resist wage labour. As E. P. Thompson notes, at the start of the 19th century, the “gap in status between a ‘servant,’ a hired wage-labourer subject to the orders and discipline of the master, and an artisan, who might ‘come and go’ as he pleased, was wide enough for men to shed blood rather than allow themselves to be pushed from one side to the other. And, in the value system of the community, those who resisted degradation were in the right.” Over one hundred years later, the rural working class of Aragon showed the same dislike of wage slavery. After Communist troops destroyed their self-managed collectives, the “dispossessed peasants, intransigent collectivists, refused to work in a system of private property, and were even less willing to rent out their labour.” (Jose Peirats).

Moreover, the would-be capitalist would have to provide such excellent conditions of labour that it would be unprofitable for him to do so. With the possibility of managing your own work and working conditions available for all, few, if any, would take up the offer. Combined with the constant dangers of agitators organising strikes, unions and boycotts, the possibility of someone turning possession into property is slight in the extreme.

Ironically, capitalism must forbid “capitalist” acts between consenting adults. For 40 hours plus a week, workers are employed by a boss. In that time they are given resources to use, under instructions of their boss. They are most definitely not allowed to use the resources they have been given access to for furthering their own plans. If they do, they will be fired. Moreover, private property involves the continual banning of socialist acts between consenting adults. For example, if workers agree to form a union, then the boss can fire them. If they decide to control their own work, the boss can fire them for not obeying orders.

Now, it is true that a very small percentage of people do not sell their liberty to a boss to survive (around ten per cent are not wage slaves, some being bosses, others self-employed). As a generalisation, the comment that under capitalism people are obliged to sell themselves to a boss is true. A handful of exceptions just proves the rule. Under capitalism, a very small percentage of the population owns the means of life. The vast majority has to sell their liberty to them in

order to survive. This, obviously, restricts liberty. It has absolutely nothing to do with workers being forced to supply goods to other workers, as Mr. Garner knows full well. It is, rather, the monopolisation of the means of life by a few and the exclusion of the rest of society from them (as Proudhon put it, “we who belong to the proletaire class, property excommunicates us!”).

And as for “Richard A” stating that Proudhon “seems to have had no problem with the private ownership of property” I would suggest he consult my earlier exchange with Mr. Garner where I proved that Proudhon argued for the abolition of private property in favour of possession.

yours,

Iain McKay

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Retrieved on 29th January 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com
A couple of letters in reply to an “anarcho”-capitalist who wrote to **Freedom**. Sadly, the person in question used to consider himself a mutualist, before leaving anarchism for propertarianism. As can be expected, he fails to consider the authoritarian aspects of private property, something anarchists have been pointing out since (at least) 1840.

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