

Smash the state!

Thinking about Anarchism

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ONE OF THE best known catch phrases of Anarchism has got to be “Smash the State”. It’s also one that’s easily open to misunderstanding. Particularly in Ireland, where the 26 counties once had the rather humorous title of “Free State”, many see state as meaning the geographical area of a country. This slogan has also been misrepresented by anarchism’s opponents as meaning opposition to all forms of organisation and decision making. Obviously neither of these is what anarchists mean, but what exactly is the state and how do we smash it?

Anarchists see the state as a mechanism by which a minority imposes its will on the majority of the population. To maintain its hold of power the state forms whatever armed forces and judicial apparatus are deemed necessary to keep the level of dissent manageable. This is different from how most Marxists define the state, concentrating on the mechanism by which the state stays in power (bodies of armed men) rather than the function of the state. It is the characteristic of minority rule which defines the state for anarchists, the ‘bodies of armed men’ serve to protect this minority rather than defining the state in itself. This distinction has some important consequences.

The state apparatus cannot maintain a permanent separation from the ruling economic power. In fact most of the time its function is carrying out a crude expression of the wishes of the ruling class. It represents the limited ability of this class to control and plan the economic life of a country. In advanced capitalism the state is used to regulate the level of exploitation of the workforce through various labour laws.

THE ‘CARING’ STATE

At the outbreak of World War 1 Britain found that a huge percentage of the working class had been so exploited that they were unfit for military service. Although the almost unhindered exploitation had been good for individual bosses up to that time, in the war when it came to using the working class to win colonies and markets it turned out to be against their collective interest. At the end of the war revolutions and army mutinies swept across Europe.

To defuse the level of class struggle and prepare for the next war the bosses used the state apparatus to impose limitations on themselves and the level of exploitation they could use. It also started to use it to divert part of every workers’ wage to form a new social wage which would be used for the education of workers and limited social security. In this it hoped to head off future periods of struggle.

The state is the collective body through which the bosses keep themselves in power. It’s judiciary and police force protect each boss from his own workers, intervening where necessary to smash strikes, criminalise activists and censor critics. This is its most direct and obvious intervention but through its control of the education system and its ability to criminalise social behaviour which goes against the bosses wishes it intervenes into every aspect of workers lives.

SCAPEGOATS & SAFE CHANNELS

In it’s scapegoating of single mothers, immigrants or Travellers it directs the anger of workers away from the real causes of their poverty. It ensures that much of the care for the sick and the raising of new generations of workers is kept cheap by keeping it in the home. It therefore is

hostile to non-family relationships, or even family relations which might challenge the prevalent ones and thus pose an indirect threat. This is why the state is so opposed to single parent families or families where both parents are of the same sex.

The state in modern capitalism provides safe channels for dissent. By funding unemployed centres it achieves a political veto on their activities, effectively ensuring a concentration on services like the production of CV's — with campaigning limited to minor tinkering with the system. Through the use of elections it creates a veneer of ordinary people being in control while the decisions are being made elsewhere. By pretending neutrality it can set up and arbitrate on disputes between workers and bosses through the use of bodies like the Labour Court. All these are methods to defuse and control social unrest.

The state can also be the organ of transformation and creation of a new ruling class. With positions in the state hierarchy come powers over both people and goods. Well placed individuals can make a fortune in bribes. After the Russian revolution a minority, in the shape of the Bolshevik party, came to control the state.

'STATE SOCIALISM' — A CONTRADICTION

Their distrust in the ability of workers to run the economy themselves was to result in armed force being used against the very workers they claimed to be liberating. From that point on the party attracted power seekers, within a short period of time this resulted in a new ruling elite. Socialism can not be built through use of the state structure, the existence of such a structure will lead to the development of a new ruling elite.

The anarchist rejection of the state as an organ for the transformation of society is often deliberately misrepresented. Leninists, for instance, typically try to confuse undemocratic and unaccountable state regimes like those of the Bolsheviks with democratic bodies like workers councils or 'soviets'. In general it is implied that anarchism is against all forms of organisation.

This says a lot about the people making such arguments. Do they believe that the only form of organisation that is feasible is one where the mass of society are told what to do by a leadership? Anarchists say socialism can only be created by mass democracy, that why we define the state as being an unaccountable leadership capable of forcing its will on society. We explicitly reject any form of running society that relies on such methods.

Against the statist we propose; decision making at the lowest possible level: election of recallable, mandated delegates for decisions that cannot be made by mass assemblies, and for all delegates to remain part of the workforce where possible. Where this takes them away from their workplaces their positions should be held for short periods only, and without any special privileges. This, a society based on mass democracy, is our alternative to the state. Its not just our aim to achieve such a society after the revolution but also to use such methods now in our struggle for such a society. We argue for such methods in our unions, associations and campaigning groups.

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