Discussing the Centre-periphery Model of Class Struggle

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This article does not represent an official position of ACM but is intended by the author to facilitate discussion around topics which may contribute to the development of theory and analysis in so-called Australia. ACM believes that the continual development of modern anarchist theory is vital to building up revolutionary anarchism in this region and we hope to be able to play a role in furthering those discussions.

The Centre-Periphery model of class struggle, as elaborated by FARJ (Anarchist Federation of Rio de Janeiro) in Social Anarchism and Organisation (2008), has been a much debated topic within ACM. This article will seek to explain the concept by analysing FARJ's source for the concept in Rudolf De Jong's 'Some Remarks on the Libertarian Conception of Revolutionary Change' (1975) before discussing the possible uses and applications for anarchists within so-called Australia.

Before going into the topic it should be stated that both central texts appear to have some problems with translation and have now become somewhat dated, meaning that it is possible that the texts as we have read them may be misrepresentations of the ideas presented, or the ideas themselves may have been adapted or changed in the intervening period. In saying that, I still believe that these are important topics to discuss as they provide an alternative method of looking at and participating in class struggle that breaks away from the reductive view of a single monolithic working class. I call this reductive as while it may be true that all those that do not own the means of production are the 'working class', such a view can effectively hide the fact that such a class is not homogenous, and great disparities and differences within it exist that, often result in revolutionaries struggling to understand why segments of the working class are consistently entrenched in the dominant system.

FARJ sees social transformation through class struggle as not being simply the terrain of the working class – by this they refer to what is traditionally thought of as the working class, those that are employed to perform labour for a wage – but of all exploited classes, with no particular segment having a special role in this process. FARJ positions the exploited classes as inhabiting 'peripheries' which are exploited and dominated by 'centres'. Based off De Jong's work, FARJ defines the exploited classes and peripheries as including groupings such as workers, the peasantry, students, unemployed people, First Nations Peoples, countries and people subjected to imperial-

ism and colonialism and specifically oppressed groupings such as women, LGBTQ people and people of colour. Centres on the other hand are institutions and systems such as the state, capitalist corporations, landlords, imperialist countries, armies and bureaucracies, as well as individuals seeking to extend or protect systems of dominations for their own benefit. According to De Jong, peripheries only exist as peripheries due to their relation to and domination by the centre. The method of social transformation then is the dismantling of the centre by the peripheries through struggle, replacing centre-periphery relations with a horizontal interconnected web of relations free of domination without centres or peripheries.

De Jong does not present the centre-periphery model as a drastically new idea, rather he argues that such an outlook is how anarchists have traditionally organised and viewed class struggle. In the early days of the split in the First International one of the points of contention between Marx and Bakunin was that of the revolutionary actor. Marx believed it was the proletariat (industrial workers) in the highly industrialised capitalist centre such as the UK or Germany that would be the revolutionary class – with little faith that the lumpenproletariat or peasantry could be anything more than a supplementary force at best and a counter revolutionary one at worst. Bakunin on the other hand believed that while the workers would have an important part to play in a revolution, the lumpenproletariat and peasantry could be just as important and that no specific class had a historically ordained vanguard role. Bakunin also believed that it would be the countries outside of the capitalist centre, such as Spain, Italy and Russia, that would be the most likely to rise up in revolution, as they were the ones with the most to gain from a revolutionary insurrection. History has largely shown that it was Bakunin rather than Marx whose ideas proved to be correct in this instance. In terms of the centre-periphery model, you could say that Bakunin viewed peripheral areas to the capitalist centre as being the most likely to attempt change through a revolutionary insurrection as they benefited the least from the centre and had the most limited recourse to change through other methods such as parliament or a social reform movement due to their peripheral position.

The other major contention between Marx and Bakunin, and Anarchists and Marxists since, that of the role of the State in social transformation, can also be seen in terms of the centre-periphery model. Marx advocated for the utilisation of the centre by those on the peripheries to achieve social transformation, whereas Bakunin advocated for the destruction of the centre by the peripheries, to be replaced with an interconnected web of associations. To put it another way, Marxism views the centre as a tool to be used for liberation whereas anarchists have argued that the centre is only capable of domination and therefore needs to be destroyed. Looking at the revolutionary experiences of the 20th century, in which revolutions from the peripheries were co-opted through their utilisation of the centre, I would argue that again Bakunin's analysis was proven correct.

It should be noted that the centre-periphery model is not meant to be viewed as static. Rather De Jong argues that new centres are frequently forming, creating new peripheries and that through struggle peripheries are capable of transforming themselves into centres. A hypothetical example of what this could look like is that through a revolutionary period that sees the overthrow of the state and capitalism, a powerful urban working class could potentially assert itself as a dominating force over the rural peasantry and working class, therefore establishing itself as a new centre of domination. Historical examples of this can be seen in the 20th century decolonisation movements throughout Africa and Asia where multiple revolutions occured, usually based in the peripheries that forced out colonising countries, before being re-subjugated by

a native ruling class which reconstituted itself as a new centre. It should be noted that in this view, while the new ruling class is acting as a centre over the exploited classes of that country, the country as a whole remains as a periphery to the global capitalist system. The point is that multiple centres and peripheries exist, often overlapping with each other and with groupings often being in a position of both centre and periphery. It is for this reason anarchists need to struggle to abolish all centres while fighting against peripheries reconstituting themselves into new centres of domination.

Another example of the overlap of centre and periphery closer to our own experience in Australia is that of the white Australian working class. While the working class in this country has always been exploited and oppressed by capitalism, it has also greatly benefited from its position close to the centre of that system, and has often worked to defend that position through further exploitation and mistreatment of non-white or non-Australian workers. One of the clearest examples of this is the white working classes' great enthusiasm for the 1901 White Australia Policy. Remnants of this still exist today in much of the working classes' attitude towards unemployed and hyper-exploited workers as well as immigrants and refugees. My point here isn't to demonise the white Australian working class or to place blame on them – it is clear that capitalism proactively encourages this 'us against them' mentality to maintain control – simply to point out the overlapping nature of a centre-periphery analysis.

While it is easy (and not inaccurate) to say that there are two classes – the exploited and the exploiters – it is equally accurate to say that segments of the working class benefit greater from this system than others, while some are exploited or oppressed in manners completely different to others. To put the analysis into practice you could argue that while much of the Australian working class exists on the periphery regarding our relations to the economic and political systems within this country, we still inhabit the centre in relation to the domination of the exploited global south, as well as internally oppressed groups such as First Nations People, long term unemployed workers, migrants and trans people. Even within the working class it is clear there are large differences in conditions and experiences. While the monolithic working class talked about in the early days of socialism never truly existed, the conditions of the working class are now more diverse than ever. Casualisation, the rise of the gig economy and increasing self-employment and subcontracting has created a situation in which the working class's relation to the means of production and the method of their exploitation is increasingly varied.

Using such an analysis allows us to break away from the reductive image of a homogenous working class that simply needs to unite to overcome capitalism and helps us see the differences within the exploited classes in Australia. Through this we can begin to see which actors are in open struggle against capitalism and the State and which actors continue to have a vested interest in the status quo and the different organising strategies needed for each. This is an important question to tackle as there is yet to be a successful revolution based in the global centre. Rather than revolutions occurring in places such as Australia, the UK or the US, they have consistently taken place in global peripheries such as Russia, Vietnam, China, Cuba and Spain. This isn't to say that revolution cannot be built in a country like Australia, simply that to accomplish it we need to understand the differences within the exploited classes in our country in order to discover where the centres and peripheries exist. I would argue, for example, that the union bureaucracies have constituted themselves into a centre, through which rank and file workers are excluded and consigned to a periphery, thereby forming an important sphere of revolutionary struggle. If we

don't understand the intricacies of the conditions and actors around us, our ability to act and agitate will continue to be limited or focused on the wrong sectors.

While I believe that the centre-periphery model provides an important opportunity for a more nuanced view of class struggle within Australia as it currently stands, it is wrong to say it is not without its limitations or flaws. By emphasising the periphery as those with more to gain from revolution and providing a view of workers closer to the centre as more entrenched to it, this analysis could potentially lead to a form of anarchist third worldism in which the western working class is seen as unable to do anything more than provide support for the base of the 'real revolution' in the global south. Such a view should be actively fought against as a return to the reductive view this article is proposing we move beyond. Rather than providing an argument for third worldism, the centre-periphery model should be seen as providing a class struggle vision of intersectionality focusing more on the structural rather than individual level. Arguing that certain segments of the working class are positioned closer to the centre than others and so have more buy-in to the system shouldn't be seen as a condemnation of those workers or as a claim that they have no revolutionary potential but as a structural reality we have to work within. The solution isn't to ignore that reality or to use that as a basis of third worldism but to use that knowledge to develop strategies to break down that entrenchment.

While being aware of its limitations, the centre-periphery model has the potential to provide us with a more nuanced view of class struggle and the exploited classes within Australia. This view can allow us to break out of the reductive view of a homogenous working class while avoiding the pitfalls of third worldist fatalism regarding the western working classes' revolutionary potential. By analysing the centre-peripheries within our own conditions, and the positions different actors find themselves in, we can adapt our strategies and propaganda as needed rather than attempting to utilise a one size fits all model. In my view the centre-periphery model as presented by FARJ and De Jong is not a rejection of the traditional view of class struggle, but a more nuanced method of viewing and participating within that struggle which anarchists could greatly benefit from discussing and expanding upon.

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