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Book Review: “The Abolition of the State”

(Wayne Price, Author House, 2007)

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November 4, 2007

The regular contributor of Anarkismo.net, Wayne Price, comes back with a book that details the anarchist-communist criticism of the State both from a theoretical as well as historical point of view. Because of the magnitude of such a task, it is impossible for such a book to examine in length the various aspects of this. But the book is full of ideas and notions that can be developed further. The whole of the book is free of heavy academic jargon, quite easy reading and thought provoking.

The biggest merit of the book is to put forward the anarchist case against the State in a very commonsensical fashion, free of any deliberately hard to follow rhetoric. Anarchism is desirable and easy enough to grasp, and when properly explained—as this book does— it is hard for anyone not to share the basic anarchist outlook of a cooperative and truly democratic society.

Although a number of leftists and anarchist, including the famous Platform of the Dielo Trouda group, to which the author

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Retrieved on 22nd December 2021 from www.anarkismo.net

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subscribes, reject the very concept of “democracy” for considering it too intertwined with capitalism, this, as proved in the book, is really a discussion of form but not of content. What really matter are the core ideas more than the words employed. Wayne uses the term democracy in its original and literal sense and not in the distorted and opportunistic way in which western politicians tend to manipulate it. In capitalism, as proved by the experience of Chile, Bolivia, Argentina, Spain, Greece, etc., “democracy” (limited, bourgeois, invigilated) and dictatorship are nothing but two facades of capitalist rule which often go hand in hand. This fact only demonstrates how quick the capitalist clique is willing to abandon its “lofty” democratic principles when they see their economic privilege challenged.

Anarchism, as Wayne says, is nothing but democracy without the State, a genuine form of democracy, since capitalist democracy is nothing but the illusion of majority rule while actual power is held by a tiny minority of rich men who control the economy, the bureaucracy and the military, thus controlling the lives of the powerless millions. On the contrary, anarchism is an organic form of democracy, emanating from below, from each and all of those who are part of a society which is built by everyone. For this democratic society to exist, not only the State, but also the unequal distribution of wealth and the reign of private property need to be challenged.

But anarchism, as emphasised by the author from the very beginning, is not merely an economic and political programme, but it also challenges the network of daily oppressions we experience at all levels of our lives. It therefore advances a new ethic that sticks strongly together its political and economic alternative with a new way of relating between diverse equals.

The main case of the book is that ordinary people, on a number of revolutionary situations throughout history (of which Wayne goes to review only the Spanish and Russian revolutions, as well as the Paris Commune, although he mentions many others, from Chile to Germany), have, again and again,

replaced State for other forms of direct democracy to run their own affairs. So therefore, the whole argument of “how would society be without the State” is answered just by a simple exercise: look at the history of working class revolutions and many answers will be provided there. Of course historical experiences cannot be replicated; still, they provide insights in the future possibilities and more importantly, they prove the anarchist case for a Stateless society as viable and desirable.

Wayne does not pretend for a second that anarchism has all of the solutions to magically create a new society, but has a number of powerful criticisms, outlooks and proposals. This is why he resorts to dialogue with other political currents in the social movement: mainly Marxists, but also radical liberals, as well as market socialists. He proves in various cases the existence of common perspectives in many of these political currents and the existence of a libertarian and an authoritarian trend in every single one among them. Anarchists, therefore, do not come from the moon: it is only the articulate and coherent political elaboration of tendencies to be found widespread among the working class and ordinary people. Because of this, revolution after revolution, we see the same elements emerging in proposals for social construction: the egalitarian character common to all of the communist tendencies and an emphasis on direct democracy that has developed better in anarchism than in any other current.

I’m particularly fond of Wayne’s approach in engaging in respectful dialogue with other currents of the left. This, because for most of the left, the main, long-term goals are the same; the problem, as Wayne poses it, is the transition period. Most Marxist currents have argued that during the transition period, in a transitory fashion, the State would remain necessary: some form of State would be required mainly for the necessary coercion against the class enemies. Therefore, there’s an emphasis in centralisation in the revolutionary endeavours to build a new society, drive which has turned good intentions

into nightmarish totalitarianisms. Though we can sit back and say the road to hell is full of good intentions, we ought to acknowledge the need of engaging in that dialogue –because different to a Hitler who knew what he was doing (and who talked the language of authority and supremacy), the development of socialist totalitarianism was an ugly result, unavoidable because of the tactics employed, of a programme which genuinely tried to change society for the better. Then bureaucratism and the development of the totalitarian State ended up burying any good intentions left –often, burying with them those very revolutionaries which helped build the new regime.

While acknowledging that some of those tasks currently undertaken by the State will be necessary in a post-revolutionary society –even coercion-, Wayne convincingly argues that democratic, grassroots organisations can carry them perfectly, without the burden of a bureaucracy, of an elite placed above the rest of society making politics instead of the people –and without the risk of restoration of a new class society inherent to any State. Of course this type of grassroots political organisms will vary greatly from place to place, according to the needs of particular peoples, or their history and traditions. It is certainly impossible and not desirable to come up with a mould to apply everywhere at any time. It would not be libertarian to proceed in such a way either. It is the popular genius which has proven wise enough to come up with the best solutions for specific contexts in history and we know that this same genius will be always looking for its way forward in history through its own experience. Because of this, Wayne thinks it is much better to talk of an “experimental” rather than a “transitional society”. The sole guideline we need, as Wayne brilliantly sums it up avoiding any false dichotomy, is that there is as little centralisation and hierarchy as possible, and as much decentralisation, autonomy and grassroots decision making as possible. And here lies another merit of his work: he refuses to see federalism as

*poor and tolerated by those with the resources, the technology and the political power to end it*². We have to state clearly that this crisis is not only “tolerated” by those with the wealth and power: it is they who have actually created it. It is the direct result of capitalism at a global scale. And these nasty “side-effects” of capitalism have not been ameliorated with time – they’re getting worse and worse each passing day. Added to the ecological crisis, caused also by the senseless waste of capitalist society, it is capitalism the main responsible of periodical famines in many parts of the Third World. So much has been written about the “black book” of communism or fascism, but capitalism has as many skeletons in its closet and its black book is jet black as anything.

As Wayne correctly states, the State, even the most democratic of them is not properly democratic. But not only is it undemocratic. It is murderous too. For those reasons it should be abolished. All of the conditions are there for us to start with this task. And Wayne’s book is definitely a contribution to explore the possibilities of a genuinely free society.

² Human Development Report 2006, “Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis”, p.1.

a term that may be problematic to some anarchists but which any honest reader will not fail to understand in context as free of any authoritarian connotation.

Only challenging those sources of power –what can only be done through revolutionary means as proven by experience– can we aim at building a truly democratic and humane society. Because, we can't forget that capitalism not only is undemocratic and alienating, but also is a system plagued of atrocities. Although we often insist on the abominations of both Nazism and Stalinism, it is not too often that we focus on the evils of Capitalism. And I'm not even thinking on the evils of colonialism, closely linked to the development of the capitalist system. We actually could go on forever on the atrocities practised by the Belgian in Congo, by the French in Algeria, or the famines caused by the British authorities in India. I won't even focus on the murderous slaughters caused by imperialist aggression in the XXth Century. We could talk forever on the US invasions of the Philippines, their atrocities in Central America, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Vietnam or the carnival of mayhem taking place currently in Iraq. We could talk forever of the English in Kenya or Dresden.

But I won't refer to any of this. I am just thinking on the silent massacre of 25,000 people a day out of starvation, not to talk of those who die for lack of safe access to water and preventable diseases –all this in a world of abundance. This figure alone should be enough condemnation of the capitalist regime –if we lived in a sane society. This is not just an “unwanted” result of otherwise good politics that over time can be ameliorated. This is the direct and well known result of the application of deliberate economic policies and structural adjustment programmes designed in the capitalist centres of the world, unconcerned of the tragedies that they unfold, and reinforced by a myriad on international financial institutions. Even the UN report on Human Development (2006) states that *“Like hunger, deprivation in access to water is a silent crisis experienced by the*

an absolute opposite to centralism. Federalism, at least in the anarchist sense of the word, means nothing but the right balance between the minimum reasonable and necessary level of centralisation and the maximum viable level of autonomy.

This respectful dialogue with other political currents is much required, not only to build “bridges” with those sections of the people who hold ideas different to us –although their intentions may be equivalent– but also to reach a proper understanding of why revolutionary experiences have failed and often have gone internally rotten by authoritarianism. A political understanding of, for instance, the Russian failure needs to acknowledge the problem of means and ends, instead of the moralistic muddle-headed platitudes of goodies and baddies which, unfortunately, plague anarchist literature. This means also to start getting rid of ill-definitions which add up nothing to our understanding of reality, but actually obscure it. Terms like “red fascist”, to refer Leninism, only clarify that those who use it whether don't know anything about fascism or they don't properly understand Leninism. Interestingly, Wayne analyses the failure to stop the rise of Nazism in the '30s Germany and deals with the ill-definitions of the German Communist Party, borrowed from the maniac sectarianism of Third Period international Communism. They labelled basically anyone out of its ranks as a fascist: thus, the social-democrats being social-fascists and anarchists being anarcho-fascists, they were unable to tell the real danger of fascism coming. This sectarianism did actually open the doors for fascism to get in without many problems. It is not too difficult to draw parallels between the sectarianism of Stalinism with the sectarianism often prevalent amongst some anarchists. The elitist attitude is the same and so is generally speaking the frame of mind of both extremes.

Another important aspect of Wayne's work is to challenge the belief, still prevalent among the old-fashioned left, that centralisation in the economic arena is more efficient or even

as necessary as usually assumed. Therefore, anarchist federalism is dismissed as unsound to deal with the complexities of modern production and life. The actual evidence, though, contradicts this simplistic view: recent economic transformations show that actually capitalism in its drive to increase productivity has moved from centralism to increased levels of decentralisation. Most modern and post-Fayol theoreticians of management, stress the need to tear down strict hierarchies in the workplace, rotate workers in chain production, get rid of unnecessary repetition and routine, introduce limited levels of participation of workers in some decision-making and planning, what they even disguise in theory as forms of “self-management”, etc. with an overall view at de-centralisation. I’m referring to authors such as Tom Peters (“Liberation Management”)¹. This, they have proved, leads to an increase productivity and motivation of the workforce.

This tendency, however, pose its own problems for workers as a class: often, these privileges are reserved to the most specialised and well-off segments of the working force (such as professionals, technicians or specialists with a high degree of training) and, generally speaking, the main idea of this is to make workers accomplices of their own exploitation. In as much as property is not touched and the upper hand remains in the hands of the bourgeois few, the bosses can allow no problem some levels of “democracy” inside of the workplace.

Also, we have to bear in mind that decentralisation and outsourcing, are all terms frequently used by the capitalist class,

¹ A very good discussion of Peters work and the new trends in management can be found at mutualist.blogspot.com. Although the author has a reformist mutualist-libertarian position, this document is highly recommended. On capitalist concepts of self-management you can check Abbasi, Sami M. and Kenneth W. Hollman. “Self-managed teams, the productive breakthrough of the 1990s”. *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 9 (December 1994) or Elmuti, Dean “Sustaining high performance through self-managed work-teams” *Industrial Management* (March 1996). A lot more is available on these issues.

sometimes aiming at dismantling the mammoth State corporations and facilitating capitalist intervention; other times (as in Chile after the Piñera labour laws of 1980) to make it easier to divide workers and weakening their unions. What I want to stress, is that decentralisation *per se* is not inherently revolutionary. It can be used by the capitalist class to the achievement of its own purposes as long as property is untouched. While Wayne spends a significant amount of effort demonstrating how centralism has been used by capitalism for financial and political purposes, he fails to spend a similar amount of time proving the same case about decentralisation. It is relevant to insist on this point, particularly in the IT era where we are standing when centralisation has been made, in just a decade, altogether redundant.

Whatever the case, the development of modern capitalism demonstrates that even some limited amounts of self-management and human resource management techniques aimed at motivating workers, prove the case of anarchists: workers control is not only best for workers, but also for productivity. This was already proved in revolutionary terms by the Barcelona commune during the Spanish Revolution of 1936. Over half a century later, it wouldn’t be such an exaggeration to say that it is the very capitalist system, through the IT and management developments of the last decade, which has done more for the advancement of the communist cause than all of the left together. However, we know that none of these transformations, while developing and expanding the “objective” conditions for an emancipated society, will lead mechanically to a new society. In fact, they are only serving to increase levels of alienation of the working class and increase the gap between the classes by maximizing profits in a way never seen before in history. Without a conscious organised anarchist and revolutionary political force, we can wait forever more. And this force has to challenge the sources of power of the bourgeoisie –this is what Wayne refers as “taking power”,