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Northeastern Anarchist on Dual Power Strategy

Kevin Carson

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The Northeastern Federation of Anarchists (NEFAC) has a new issue of *Northeastern Anarchist* out, #10. And it includes an excellent article by Wesley Morgan: “Where They Retreat, We Must Advance: Building Dual Power”

Reformists have been accused of sacrificing long-term goals to short-term expediency, and revolutionaries, on the other hand, have too often sacrificed the concerns of today to a vision of tomorrow. Building a revolutionary strategy means/implies thinking about how our short-term, medium-term, and long-term activities are linked, as what we do today influences what we do tomorrow...

James L. Wilson of Independent Country made a similar comment recently, from a free market anarchist perspective:

-Maintain a two-tiered political philosophy. One may cater to an anti-state view of the world. But the other must be a theory of the State. It would

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acknowledge that tax-funded interstate highways, public universities (with their basketball teams and all), and public broadcasting (with Big Bird and Lake Wobegon and all) are not going to go away. If the State is inevitable, what should be its purpose and how should it be managed?

Morgan goes on, in his *Northeastern Anarchist* article, to describe how dual power (the creation of grass-roots, alternative social institutions) can not only prevent a post-revolutionary society from degenerating into state socialism, but lay the groundwork for a future society today.

...In the chaos that often follows revolutions, so-called revolutionary groups have generally re-created the institutional life of the “Old Regime”.

Abstract promises of a grand liberatory revolution are simply not sufficient...

...The compelling force of a lifetime of direct experience with authority suggests that authority is necessary, although unpleasant... It is noteworthy, in this context, that a study of attitudes towards workplace democracy found that for both managers and workers the single greatest predictor of support for workplace democracy was experience with workplace democracy. Why? Because people who have experienced workplace democracy have had the experience of democratic workplace relations actually working... The only thing that can puncture the hegemony of dictatorial workplace ideologies is concrete, material, living proof of democratic workplaces, and practical experience with these modes of organizing...

of state banking laws designed to keep capital inaccessible to workers and force them to sell their labor on disadvantageous terms, the increased bargaining power of labor would result in even nominally absentee-owned firms becoming de facto producer co-ops. The financial system and distribution networks, likewise, would be cooperative in nature. In short, it would be a cooperative sea; and whatever capitalist enterprises managed to survive would find themselves to be the shrinking islands in a hostile sea, as cooperatives are now.

A market is nothing but the absence of coercion, an environment in which producers may peacefully exchange the products of their labor. And in the absence of state enforcement of special privileges, that enable owners of land and capital to draw artificial scarcity-rents on the means of production, all exchanges would be exchanges of labor. Since nobody is born with a claim to somebody else's labor-product, I'm hard-pressed to understand how "anti-market" people think labor-products would be distributed, except by voluntary means of gift or exchange. Any society in which individuals and work-units have full disposal of their product will be a market society, unless voluntary exchange-free market activity between consenting adults—is forcibly suppressed.

If anarchists can actually show people that self-management works, then we can be taken seriously when we agitate for a self-managed society.

However, beyond the "propaganda value" of dual power organizations, dual power is an essential element of going beyond an insurrectionary politics, towards a more broadly revolutionary politics. Beyond practically demonstrating that self-management works, building dual power organizations is valuable because it begins to develop the infrastructure of the revolution, to create the active capacity for self-management...

Social structure and organization are both crucial because an industrial society requires a high degree of coordination, which involves a great deal of complex organization. In every insurrectionary moment that we can observe, chaos and difficulties centering on issues of coordination were acute in the opening phases of the revolution. In each case, purportedly revolutionary juntas recreated the institutional structure of the "Old Regime". As deeply flawed as the "Old Regime" was, as much as these groups railed against it, they re-created it because at least it got things done... Unless revolutionaries have practical solutions, and have already begun to be able to provide revolutionary means of re-organizing social life, in all of its concrete details, chaos will ensue the insurrection. In general, in times of uncertainty people naturally fall back on what they know, their sense of "how things get done"...

The withdrawal, or retreat, of the State from the public sector opens up the space for the creation

of dual power, the organization of an autonomous, community-based public sector that is organized according to principles of self-management, an anti-State public sector.

It is difficult to understate the revolutionary effect of organizing to create, and support, self-managed community services. There are even examples of this in North America— the Black Panther Party, at their strongest, ran over 60 social programs, such as schools, meal programs, and shoe programs... In the case of the Spanish anarchist movement in the 1930's, part of their strength relied upon the mutual aid societies, schools, and workers' centers that they organized. Indeed, a not insignificant proportion of the literate working class was educated in anarchist schools in Spain in the 1920's and 1930's. It should come as no surprise that after the Spanish revolution/civil war broke out, anarchist schools flourished—anarchists had a great deal of experience at organizing and running schools.

By advancing where the state has retreated, by beginning to create a community-based, self-managed, anti-State public sector, anarchists can begin to generate a broad-based movement that has the organizational capacity to create a fully self-managed society...

Morgan concludes his article with some unfortunate remarks about markets:

Unfortunately, anarchist attempts to create “dual power” through the creation of cooperatives often create what might be termed “market syndicalism”. While these cooperatives are internally

self-managing, they exist as units in a market economy, they still rely upon access to the market. Building an autonomous public sector begins to develop the practical revolutionary infrastructure to make not only the State, but also the market irrelevant in social life.

So what the hell's wrong with markets? Apparently Morgan conflates them with capitalism. I've seen arguments in the past that producers' co-ops will inevitably take on a capitalist character because of the imperatives of market competition. But that's a mighty big extrapolation to make from the observed behavior of cooperatives in the present state capitalist economy. The “market” to the extent it exists today, is allowed to operate in the interstices of a fundamentally statist system, to the extent it serves the interests of a state capitalist ruling class. The dominant organizational style in the state capitalist economy is defined by the giant corporation. Cooperatives, in effect, are islands in a state capitalist sea, hamstrung by a capitalist finance system and competing against state-subsidized and state-cartelized giant corporations.

And there's not exactly a glut of empirical evidence on the emergence of an exploitative economy from a cooperative free market, without the help of a state imposing a capitalist revolution from above. Despite all Engels' trash-talk in *Anti-Dühring* (a lot of it politically motivated back-tracking from Marx's writing on primitive accumulation), capitalism—the divorce of labor from ownership—did not emerge naturally as a result of the “winners” and “losers” in free market competition. As Martin Luther King said, when you see a turtle on a fence post, you can be pretty sure he had help getting up there.

A true free market, with a decentralized economy of small-scale manufacturing for local consumption, would be fundamentally different. A much larger share of the workforce would be cooperatively or self-employed. And in the absence