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A few comments on Allan Armstrong's use of 'anarchism'

Mike Sabot

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Allan Armstrong's article on the development of the International Socialist Group (ISG) is thought-provoking and most helpful in understanding the recent development of left politics in Scotland and, in particular, the prospects of the Radical Independence Conference.

He rightly criticizes the Trotskyist groups' farcical spectacle of forming fronts, their paper membership drives, wishy-washy social democratic politics and secretive, top-down decision-making. For us, this is part and parcel of their ideology: vanguardism, pure and simple.

You would think that he would then draw on the arguments made by anarchists, who have, after all, been critiquing vanguard and party socialism since it began. In fact, Allan mentions anarchism a number of times but only to obfuscate and rubbish what it stands for. It's as though going so far in arguing against mainstream socialism he has to distance himself from those of us who go 'too far'.

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Allan suggests that anarchists are ‘the most consistent advocates of ‘Anti-capitalism’’ which he argues is a flexible, vague term much like ‘radical’. Undoubtedly, anarchists have become a major part of the global ‘anti-capitalist’ movement which unites a number of disparate groups and tendencies against the common enemy of capitalism – which itself is often defined in different ways. This is summed up in Paul Kingsnorth’s phrase ‘one no, many yeses’.

I would argue that the rise of anarchism in this global movement has led to a greater influence of our core ideas: direct democracy, direct action and class solidarity. However, the anarchist label is also seen to be used in this movement, but especially on the Internet in general, in very different, sometimes contradictory ways. This is great for those who want to denounce our politics; all you have to do is point to any of the numerous dire examples. Allan does this by suggesting that our ‘thinking overlaps with some pro-capitalist ideas’ – helpfully illustrated by the Libertarian party logo.

In reality the main organized anarchist groups in Scotland, the Anarchist Federation (AFed) and Solidarity Federation (Solfed), are both communist groups. AFed is a political group which stands for anarchist communism and Solfed is a revolutionary union initiative which aims for ‘libertarian communism’. We have absolutely nothing in common with right-wing libertarians. This could be only be argued if one thought, as Allan seems to do, that we ‘base [our] politics around opposition to secondary aspects of capitalism’ such as the state in this case. In fact, we see the state as an intrinsic part of capitalism and oppose both *as communists*.

For us, communism means not just a society of freedom and equality but the movement which seeks to bring that society about and which must at the same time live up to these ideals. It must then be organized on directly democratic grounds. This leads us to Allan’s other point. He suggests that:

the Left could be described as anarcho-bureaucratic. Despite the linking of 'anarcho' and 'bureaucratic', this phrase is not an oxymoron. The 'anarcho' side draws upon Bakunin's model of having a secret inner organisation directing wider organisations. The 'bureaucratic' side, which is usually pursued by Parties or wannabe Parties, draws upon the model of those front organisations run by the old official Communist Parties.

In terms of describing Bakunin's method as one of a small secret organization, I could spend a lot of time arguing that although Bakunin was not perfect his involvement in secret organizations was shared by many other socialists such as Marx and, nonetheless, his main vision was genuinely concerned with direct democracy. What's really important, though, is what anarchists such as AFed and Solfed do in practice today, and both our groups are founded on direct participation, recallable delegates and federalism. Not secretive cliques or, indeed, representation. We also aren't Bakuninists but choose the best of his ideas and ditch the rest – like we do with Marx.

In short, what's really being described in the quote above is just typical vanguard organization. I'm not interested in writing a sectarian rant against Allan or the Republican Communist Network. We would be happy to have a comradely debate about the differences in our politics, in our interpretation of communist organization but in the first place this should be based on an honest description of each other's politics. Allan's article does not do this, which is a shame because there is so much we agree on. An example of this is his excellent assessment of the independence referendum:

As the ongoing economic and political crisis deepens, the SNP government, and SNP controlled or influenced local councils, will become responsible

for more and more attacks upon the working class. This is one reason why the SNP government is determined to gut the democratic demand for Scottish self-determination of as much of its meaningful political and economic content as possible before 2014. Self-determination has to be confined to what is acceptable to its big business backers, whilst simultaneously being acceptable to the US and British ruling classes.

As anarchists we believe we should organize for change now and are committed to the economic, social and cultural resistance in Scotland that Allan speaks of – although we would differ over the campaigns we're involved in and in our respective strategies. In one case Allan acknowledges that anarchists have been actively involved in the Anti-fascist Alliance (AFA) and have shown to co-operate with other socialists in confronting fascism directly whilst opposing those in the UAF/SWP who have physically tried to prevent this. Let's have more of this sort of co-operation and less strawman arguments against anarchists.