

Democracy

Thinking About Anarchism

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Contents

Simple	3
Revolution	4
The Best Place	4

ANARCHISM is about individual freedom. But it is also about building a society that has a fair system of wealth distribution. For this reason, anarchists consider themselves to be democrats. As anarchists we don't believe that other people can bring about the changes that we need – we believe that we must do it for ourselves. This means putting in place a type of decision making system in which all people can participate in – this is the best way to ensure equality.

Take one example – work. Under anarchism, the workplace would be democratic. Unlike now, workers would decide on the main matters in their own workplace: What type of work should be done? Where and how? Under what type of working conditions? Where should the profits from work go?

In today's world, it is done the opposite way. Most decisions about any place of work are taken by the management. These management's, in turn, are usually appointed by shareholders – people who do not work. This situation would not be tolerated in an anarchist society. Matters concerned with the workplace are for the workers alone to decide on. Under anarchism it will be the workers' assembly and not the (elected) manager who will be the supreme authority in any workplace. This will be one of the major contrasts between today's world and a future anarchist society.

Simple

For some people, this general emphasis on democracy sounds like a tall order. Many people agree that anarchism is a good idea, but a fair proportion don't accept that it is a practical option in today's world. Some people argue that society is getting more complex all the time. Consequently the problems facing society are too large – and getting larger – for your ordinary person on the street to understand, let alone solve. Anarchist style democracy simply wouldn't work, it is argued.

Anarchists recognise these criticisms. While being advocates of democracy, we are not blind to the problems of human society, or to the fact that a new society will bring with it new problems. Our belief in human capacity is very strong, but we would be the first to accept that a revolutionary society will have some problems similar to now – competition between different individuals, or between factories or, even, between localities over the allocation of supplies. These differences will have to be accommodated and sorted out, most importantly, in a peaceful manner.

Another problem is that lots of people and areas must co-operate to provide some of the basic services that we depend on today. For instance, a modern health service relies on hospital workers, on the ambulance service and on nurses and doctors. But, also, it relies generally on drugs and equipment that come from outside the immediate locality. A revolutionary society will have to provide these services too. In many ways it will have to provide them in a better way than they are provided now – given the general problems of inequality and poverty that cut access to services under capitalism. How then do anarchists propose to solve such issues?

Revolution

We can learn a lot from past experience. Already, in the last one hundred years, there has been a good number of revolutions and near revolutions. Workers have had to face problems such as these before. Past experience tells us this:

The operation of most industrial enterprises or social services is generally understood by the vast majority of its constituent work force. For instance, the operation of a city wide transportation service is known to the drivers, mechanics, etc. who drive and maintain the service. There is nothing particularly complicated about it. Workers operate them now and, as is often the case, they have plenty of ideas on how improve these services further. Moreover, past experience shows that revolutions usually release a great deal of human ability and talent that capitalism mostly shuts out or doesn't bother to avail of. This can be a major bonus in a revolutionary society.

A problem area concerns matters traditionally covered by management under capitalism: coordination of work, future planning, financial budgeting, etc. Under capitalism, workers are often excluded from these important areas. This can be a major problem in a revolutionary society — particularly so in the early, transition period when it is important to provide the essentials of life.

The Best Place

So, there are two problems. The first one is running the service, whatever that may be. The second is running it in a democratic way. After the revolution, more people will be involved in decision making, more people will have a say. Consequently more interests will have to be taken on board when decisions are taken. It will no longer be case of saying: This is the way things are going to be done and you're fired if you don't agree. Those days will be over for good — thankfully.

What do anarchists propose? Our solution to inexperience is to try and get as much experience as possible — confidence in one's ability can only be built in that way. This is why anarchists are such strong advocates of democracy in the here and now. The best place to gain experience about organisations and organising is along the road to change. Here there will be plenty of opportunities to learn.

In past times this is exactly what has been done — by workers, by students and by all those fighting back. Building unions, building for strikes, organising community groups or building for campaigns is all about working with people and taking decisions — the very areas that we need to get experience in. This work requires planning, administration, budgeting, etc. in abundance. For reasons of experience alone we should conduct them in a democratic way. That is what anarchists say.

Not all problems, of course, can be ironed out on this side of a revolution, but this is one area in which we can make inroads now. Just as importantly, it raises the issue of democracy and what democracy should be about in a world that mostly ignores it.

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