

Which way to the revolution

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1996

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From the 1870's the world has been rocked by revolutions, but all have gone down to defeat. Anarchists believe they understand why previous revolutions have failed, but do we know how a successful revolution can be made? Are there steps we can take today to prepare and nurture such a revolution, or is it a question of waiting for the ripening of time?

The first thing to consider is the kind of revolution that we are fighting for, because the ends we have in mind will, to a large extent, determine the means we use. We are not interested in exchanging one set of rulers for another; when we speak of revolution we do not mean a coup d'état. Anarchist revolution is a fundamental change in the way society is ordered — we want to replace the dictatorship of a minority, not with the dictatorship of another, but with freedom for all.

What we reject is political revolution. Whether they use the ballot box or the Armalite, we know better than to trust our would-be leaders. No matter how well-intentioned they may be, a minority cannot deliver real change from above. Real socialism comes from below, through mass participation. As Daniel Webster (American revolutionary) said, *In every generation, there are those who want to rule well — but they mean to rule. They promise to be good masters — but they mean to be masters.*

A social revolution, on the other hand, is a much broader change in society, involving a much greater number of people. An anarchist revolution cannot happen without both this widespread mood for change, and some idea of what change is necessary. The best example of this is the revolution in *Spain in 1936*.

What is striking about the Spanish Revolution, particularly in Catalonia and Aragon, is how profoundly life was transformed. Certainly, the economic changes were amazing enough, with most industries in Barcelona being collectivised, run by the workers, as well as many farms in Aragon. The revolution was not limited to economic change, rather this went hand in hand with social change. Of course, the revolution wasn't perfect, and in the end was defeated by a combination of Stalinism, fascism, and the mistakes that were made.¹ For a time though, living, breathing socialism could be seen, and this in a spirit of liberty, with no need for, indeed sometimes contrary to, orders from any central authority.

Of course, the whole point of the Spanish Revolution was that it took place from the ground up, and the same effects could never be produced through seizing government in a political revolution (How do you legislate for freedom?). But could a similarly far-reaching change take place this way, introduced by a caring and progressive party? The historical evidence would suggest not (not that we can point to many examples where it's been tried). Why is that? To understand that, we have to examine those factors that lead to a revolution.

What causes a revolution?

The simple answer to that is, of course, capitalism. Capitalism, as an economic system, and its chief weapon, the state, are dedicated to one thing — maintaining the ascendancy of a minority over the majority. It is the major cause of wars, of famines, of sexism, racism, poverty, unemployment and too many other social ills to list, let alone describe. All these things mean that most

¹ For more details, see *Anarchism in Action*, a brief history of the Spanish Revolution (available from the WSM Bookservice).

people have little stake in keeping society from changing, indeed most would welcome change. The problem is that people don't see any alternatives, or dismiss those they are presented with as utopian and unreachable.

Although this problem is exacerbated by the low level of struggle at the moment, this does not mean that people's minds are totally closed to radical ideas. Capitalism sows the seeds of its own destruction. It brings workers together into workplaces, forcing them to organise collectively, and the relentless drive for profit constantly reminds workers that they have collective interests, diametrically opposed to those of the ruling class. This means that, even when the confidence of the class as a whole is at its lowest, there will still be areas where people are fighting back. For example, in the past few years, the WSM has been involved in struggles for union recognition, for abortion rights, against racism, and against increasing taxation of working class people. Even though these campaigns may have started small (and some of them stayed small!), people got involved because they knew that things had to change. This recognition that there are problems in the way society is run, though it may be focused on one issue initially, can lead people to realise that tinkering with the system isn't enough, real improvement requires real change — revolutionary change.

In theoretical terms, the direct cause of a revolution is generally expressed in terms of two sets of conditions — objective and subjective factors.

Objective Factors are the things outside your head, independent (at least directly) from your thoughts and emotions. If you get laid off work, if a war starts, if it rains on you on your way to the pub, you can't change things by closing your eyes and wishing them away. Of course, your thoughts may have an indirect effect, when they lead to action, like joining a union or remembering your umbrella, but generally you don't have much control over what happens in the world.

The objective factors in a revolution are events outside the control of any individual or small group, such as a stock-market crash or an invasion, which lead people to re-examine their society, and, possibly, act to change it. For example, changes in British society at the end of the second World War² were triggered to a certain extent by the hardships of war. In Russia, in 1917, rather than lead to renewed optimism, the experience of war generated a deep anger directed towards the Tsar and the system that was causing so much hardship.

Subjective Factors, on the other hand, are the things inside your head — your thoughts on life, the universe and everything, down to whether you think it will start raining while you're on your way to the pub (it will — bring your umbrella!). Since the subjective factors in a revolution are those that depend on individual people, they are obviously the ones that revolutionary groups try to change. Of course, there can be no strict division between subjective and objective factors — it is the thoughts in your head that decide whether or not you will join a union, vote for a strike or pass a picket, which side of the barricade you will be on. Equally, your decisions, and the actions that result from them, will have an effect on the ideas of the people around you.

Opportunity for revolution only arises at particular times, when both the subjective and objective conditions necessary for success are present. In other words, some crisis occurs, and the level of consciousness of the people is such that they choose revolution. Even though tension is usually building for some time beforehand, when the moment comes it can come with breathtaking speed, and can be triggered by even the smallest events.

² i.e. the introduction of the welfare state.

For example, in France a massive increase in strikes in 1967 was followed in 1968 by student demonstrations which grew into a general strike that almost toppled DeGaulle's government. In Budapest in 1956, it was a student march that started the Hungarian Revolution, which saw, in the short weeks before it was crushed by Soviet tanks, over twenty independent newspapers set up, and a Parliament of Workers' Councils which proclaimed the right of the workers themselves to manage their workplaces.

Although these uprisings can sometimes look as if they come out of nowhere, this is far from true. Rather it is as if a rising tide of militancy reaches some critical point and breaks the dam – sudden, yes, but not spontaneous. Before the Hungarian Revolution strikes were widespread, before the October Revolution in Russia there was a series of strikes and struggles, which themselves followed on from the unsuccessful revolution in 1905. So with hindsight, every revolt can be seen as part of a process, the continuation of previous struggles.

More Than Marking Time

Anarchism is a very simple and very natural idea, but when you're used to capitalism it can seem a little weird just because of this simplicity. Although people may want change, nearly everybody thinks, at first anyway, that all that's really needed are a few adjustments to the system, and everything will be fine. Then when you pass that stage, and realise that the whole world needs to be 'adjusted', it is easy to think that such a jump needs a vastly complicated body of theory, and possibly a few great leaders, if it is to succeed.

On the other hand, when anarchism is put into practice, it works, and it's always more convincing to point at a house than to point at a blueprint. In Spain during the Revolution, huge numbers of industries and farms were collectivised by their workers, and the militias were run on anarchist lines. Would all of this have happened if people had not already seen that anarchism worked?

What role then does the revolutionary group have to play in the build-up to a revolution? In general where there is no established channel through which the desire for revolutionary change is expressed, those that arise will tend to have a libertarian form,³ but sometimes there are established 'alternatives'. In France in '68, a potentially revolutionary movement got side-tracked into voting for the Communist Party, because they were seen as the only potential alternative to capitalism. We must remember that vanguardist ideas and organisations will not automatically become irrelevant. If people have had little prior experience in politics, it can take time for them to realise how manipulative and deceitful vanguardist groups are, by which time it may be too late.

Rather than waiting for the revolution to come, and then hoping that people don't go down another initially promising dead-end, we have to think about what kind of organisation we would like to see arise, and then start laying the framework for it today. In Spain we had an example of how things could work. For all our problems with anarcho-syndicalism (see last issue), the fact that the *CNT was established* as a revolutionary union long before 1936 meant that, when people started looking for a different way of doing things, they could see that anarchism wasn't

³ i.e. non-hierarchical, decentralised, controlled by all of those involved rather than a select few. A contemporary example would be the network of groups organising against the Criminal Justice Act in Britain. More consciously anarchist, or directly revolutionary examples could be given, but this should give you the idea.

just a nice idea, it actually worked. Most people, in Catalonia and Aragon at least, would have had some experience with the CNT, and so would have seen that things could actually be run by the workers themselves.

Our Role Today

How we can provide examples of anarchism working today, and prepare the ground for the development of forms of organisation that could play a part in an anarchist revolution, is linked to the second main role of an anarchist group, to spread the ideas of anarchism.

Earlier in this article, we looked at the objective and subjective factors that lead to a revolution, and said that the subjective factors were the ideas people had, about contemporary society, and about other, different societies. Also, we said that, in situations of potentially revolutionary change, people can sometimes get drawn into groups and organisations which will lead nowhere. These two are linked, in that people are more likely to be drawn into dead-ends when they are just looking for something that will change their society, but don't know what kind of change they want, or what kind of society they would rather live in.

If our aim was just a political revolution, then we would be happy to channel general discontent into equally general support, not for our ideas, but for us. A social revolution, though, has to be a positive revolution, directed towards some goal. Therefore, if we are to be successful, we must start by informing people about what anarchism means, about what an anarchist society would be like, so that, when people think of revolution as a real possibility (which, at the moment, most don't) they will know what there is to be fought for. Producing papers, pamphlets and books is an important way of achieving that, but when people don't see the relevancy of revolution, they are hardly likely to be interested in reading about the kind of society that a revolution should create.

This is not always the case, though. When people are involved in struggle, even for limited goals, this causes them to question wider issues, and become more open to new and radical ideas. For anarchists, involvement in these struggles means that, as well as getting the chance to spread anarchist ideas, by putting forward democratic methods of organisation, you also demonstrate how anarchism works in practice. When anarchist forms of organisation are shown to be effective, they are more likely to be used in other struggles.

We should always be ready to work in campaigns, to add our experience and commitment to the struggle, but if people are always looking to us to set up campaigns, and to provide the ideas, then we are failing as anarchists. Self-activity is the key to anarchism, that is the self-confidence to do what needs to be done without looking for others to step in and take over. For this reason our role is to work with people and not for people. It is important that others gain experience in organising activities and so in the future will institute campaigns themselves. Our aim should not be to organise revolutionary activity, but to inspire it in others.

It's not over yet

In 1967, George Woodcock said that anarchism, though a good idea, had missed its chance, and could now only serve as an aspiration, never to be realised. A year later, the French government was brought to its knees by a wave of strikes, riots and marches that were definitely libertarian

in their forms of organisation. Though revolution may sometimes seem no more than a distant dream, we would do well to remember how fast things can change, sometimes when we least expect it.

After all, anarchism is a good idea, and an anarchist society would fulfil people's needs much more successfully than capitalist society ever could. It's not as if we have to convince everybody that capitalism is a bad system, it is continually creating and recreating the conditions of its own downfall. Poverty, starvation, unemployment, alienation — everybody's lives are lessened by capitalism, and at some stage, people always think, 'There must be a better way'.

At the same time, we are surrounded by examples of how life could be, if we were to have the confidence to reach out and grab it. Workers who know that they could run their workplaces much better than their bosses, and have found that, when they stand together, they are stronger. Volunteers who, in caring for others prove that there are stronger motives than greed. Even any normal group of friends, who show that we don't always have to be divided into leaders and led, into rulers and ruled.

There will always be revolts, but if they do not have any aims, or any idea of how to get there, they will probably end up being bribed away by reforms, or led into the blind alley of statism. What we can do today, what we must do now, before things have already started and it becomes too late, is to spread the ideas of anarchism, and, in our campaigns, demonstrate how real democracy can be achieved, and how well it can work.

Society will change, but even if there were a million anarchists we could not set a time and date for this change, we can only know that it is coming. We don't want a revolution led by anarchists, the revolution doesn't even have to call itself anarchist. What is important, and what will happen, if we work now (and have a little luck), is that it will be anarchist.

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Retrieved on 8th August 2021 from struggle.ws
This article was originally printed in *Red & Black Revolution* no 2.

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