

Four Futures

Thinking about the future

The Eclipse

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Forming a strategy requires thinking about the many possible futures that we might face. Today, it is hard to say with confidence where British society will be in 10 or 20 years. The state and capitalism seem to be in a slow decline, and the old established political parties are dying, but they still have time to reinvent themselves. Likewise, new political forces are on the rise, but the extent that they will attempt something genuinely different to the current ruling class consensus is unknown. On top of this, environmental problems, wars and natural disasters all effect politics and the economy in ways that are hard to predict.

While it is hard to say for sure what kind of future we might end up with, change is inevitable. Our current political-economic system is not maintaining itself because everything is fine. Instead, it has come at the cost of ignoring the many systemic and structural problems that society faces, which will eventually require changes to be made before they cause total collapse.

For anarchists in Britain, perhaps ironically, the 2029 election is a potential pivot point for such change. However, given the current weakness of the ruling Labour Party, there is also a chance that an emergency election may be called before then. We must think about what a change of central government might mean, and map out the different futures that might come from such a change because they will affect our strategy.

There are broadly four different futures that seem the most obvious:

1. The current political system tries to resist change and stay on its current course.
2. The system attempts to stabilise itself through progressive reforms, competently or otherwise.
3. The system attempts to stabilise itself by leaning more heavily on its authoritarian and oppressive elements, competently or otherwise.
4. Social collapse

Each of these futures will demand different responses if we want to push society in a genuinely libertarian direction, and they pose different challenges that we must consider and plan for in advance. Of course, there are far more possible futures than these four, but hopefully they will act as a basis from which the reader can start to think about possible futures and start planning for them with their comrades instead of just reacting to whatever happens in the moment.

The first possibility that we must consider is that the next election does not bring any major changes to the political-economic system. Here, whichever party gets into power mostly ignores the structural problems that face British society and attempts to run things as they have been run for the last few decades. This is the first possibility we discuss because the opportunities and challenges that it presents anarchists are broadly similar to those we face now.

Business as Usual

Such a result could come from any of the current political parties. The establishment wing of the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, or even a deradicalised Conservative Party would all likely take this approach, and both Reform UK and the Green Party might end up being forced to maintain business as usual if they are quickly co-opted or strong-armed by the entrenched economic and political actors who benefit the most from the existing status quo.

While the victory of business as usual would appear to indicate the stabilisation of the political-economic system, it would not deal with any of the problems that this system causes which have resulted in a combination of apathy and radicalisation among the general public and the rise of Reform and the Greens:

- The cost of living would likely keep rising as nothing would be done to reign in the current political and economic structures that enable price-gouging and rent-seeking.
- Workplace conditions would likely keep getting worse due to the systematic bias of the current system against workers.
- Key social infrastructure (such as the NHS, public utilities, and social third spaces) would continue to degrade as they are stripped down to make them more profitable or efficient.
- Very little would be done about a collapsing environment.
- Despair and anger would continue to spread among everyday people.

The continued stability of the political-economic system would be at the expense of the continued destabilisation of society at a deeper level.

Such a result would simply defer social change, putting off any major changes while ensuring a build-up of social pressure that makes future changes even more likely, and likely to be drastic. So business as usual would mean that anarchists would still need to prepare for a more radically oppressive or progressively reforming future government, but this has been put off for another election cycle.

The strategy we would have to develop in this situation is a continuation of the strategy we need to develop now. The system of the state and capitalism is awkwardly maintaining itself in Britain while continuing to make most people's lives worse, driving them either to apathy or to find alternatives in Reform or the Greens. Anarchists need to demonstrate how both apathy and electoral political parties on the right or left cannot improve people's lives in the ways that they desire. To do this, we need to actually be present in communities and workplaces in a way we simply are not right now. Anarchist organisations and propaganda currently have a very small reach, and some of this is due to anarchism being small in Britain. Strangely, we often seem comfortable for anarchism to remain small: we do not put a strong focus on getting our ideas out

there or intentionally growing the anarchist movement in a way that, by 2029 or earlier, puts us in a better position to contest the far right or a resurgent left reformism within society.

And while business as usual may present many of the same kinds of problems that we see today, they will likely intensify the longer the status quo remains unchanged:

- People will become more isolated and disillusioned with the status quo.
- People will become poorer and more desperate for organisations that will fight for them in their communities and workplaces.
- The welfare state and other public infrastructure will become more dysfunctional.

Any political movement that can step in and provide solutions to these problems outside of the existing system will be able to embed itself deeply within society, and while anarchism might be best placed to do this in theory, it will still require concerted action by anarchists to make this a reality. Otherwise, the far right can take that position and use it to support a fascist government, and left-wing reformists can build a social movement to introduce or reinforce a reformed version of the state and capitalism instead of replacing it with something radically better.

Reform

Successful Progressive Reform

An approach that a future government might take to deal with the current systemic problems is to actually implement some set of limited reforms that improve the lives of everyday people, defuses some of their ill will towards the current system, and helps reproduce a functional and productive society in the long run that can continue to be controlled and exploited. Such an attempt is most likely to be made by the Greens, a Labour party that has been captured by a resurgent left-wing faction, or some other left-wing party.

However, this is easier said than done. Under normal conditions, governments are more accountable to powerful businesses and their own internal technocratic bureaucracy than they are to everyday people, and both of these have interests that conflict with the needs and desires of everyday people. Capitalists are driven to make profit by competition in the market, and technocrats are driven to build power by competition within organisations. This often leads to exploitation and oppression of those at the bottom of society in order to create that profit and power, and often these drives end up being quite short-termist in how they manifest: when your social position is defined by profit and power, what is the point of trying to build a stable society tomorrow if it doing so comes at the cost of going bankrupt or being thrown out of power today? Because of this, most governments, regardless of ideology, end up protecting these short-term interests because they need the cooperation of capitalists and technocrats to function, even if this leads to social disintegration in the long term.

Therefore, there are two ways that a reformist government can get its reforms through:

- It can work out a set of reforms that are agreeable to enough of the capitalists and technocrats in society that they can pass them on those merits alone. Such reforms are often very limited and end up looking more like business as usual.
- If a force outside of capitalism and the state's bureaucracy can create enough of a short-term threat to cause many capitalists and technocrats to fear that they might completely lose their positions of power and privilege, then more serious reforms can be pushed through to stabilise the system.

Such a threat can be external, such as a threat from another state or the immediate risk of a natural disaster, and cannot be controlled by any political party. Due to those pressures previously mentioned, for a party like the Greens or Labour to push through major reforms, they would need to be combined with a social movement outside of capitalism and the state which can apply enough pressure to make reform look like a better option than ignoring the social movement and risking a revolution. If we look at the golden age of social democracy in Europe, we see it came out of a combination of these threats: the fear of an external Soviet superpower and the fear of the kind of internal radical workers' movements that had launched revolutions in several

countries provided the motivation for many European states to build strong welfare states as a way of defusing internal tensions and guaranteeing the loyalty of their citizens.

For anarchists, successful reform offers a mixed bag of opportunities and challenges. The limited changes brought about by a competent government might start to restore the faith of many in the system in a way that undermines our ideas and desires for a better way of living. On the other hand, once people start to see that change is possible, it will become easier to argue that we can use that possibility to push for even more radical change. To face such a reforming government, we need a strategy that encourages people to look beyond immediate survival and make more ambitious demands that are not possible within the bounds of reform. It will be important to emphasise and argue for changes that undermine the very system of the state and capitalism itself and so cannot be implemented by any government. For example, the government may be able to accept better working conditions or a less brutal border regime as the price of social peace, but it can never accept full worker control of the means of production, or the abolition of the police and controlled borders.

Failed Progressive Reform

While social movements can be a necessary tool for a far-sighted political elite to push through reforms that are needed for the long-term stability of the system, they are also potentially dangerous. These social movements have to be far enough outside the state's and capitalism's systems of power that they can threaten them, but also integrated enough that they can still be controlled and even disbanded when they have done what their leaders desire. This was the ultimate fate of the mainstream workers' movement in much of Europe, which saw much of its bottom-up infrastructure outside of the state undermined and then destroyed when they became no longer useful to left-wing political parties.

However, the fact that such social movements need to be somewhat outside of the system of the state and capitalism and powerful enough to genuinely threaten it means that they have the capacity to break with any political party that is attempting to use them, and push for more radical reforms or even revolution. If a social movement develops a new elite with competing interests to the existing elite, as was the case with the Leninist and national liberation movements of the 20th century, or develops bottom-up structures that put the movement under the control of its members as a whole, then they can become a genuine threat to the current elite or, in the latter case, even to the system of state and capitalism itself. Successful progressive reforms can also create the space for this to happen by providing people with more time and resources, breaking them out of apathy and despair, and encouraging them to engage more with social movements and take more prominent roles in running them. One of the things that brought the golden age of social democracy to an end was an explosion of worker, countercultural and social justice movements that could not be contained within the acceptable bounds of reform, requiring the state and capitalism to pivot to the more oppressive strategy of neoliberalism that has led to our current conditions.

This future would provide the most obvious opportunities for anarchists, but it also represents a potential danger. On one hand, an uptick in social movements will provide spaces for anarchists to spread our politics, argue for bottom-up structures and encourage social movements to move in a more radical direction. On the other hand, facing a political party that is deliberately trying

to leverage these social movements in order to push its own objectives will mean that there is the potential for anarchists to get involved in social movements that ultimately use us as useful idiots for their political masters. We will bring the skills to make the movement work, only to be marginalised and discarded when the movement has played its role, as has happened to us many times in the past. To avoid this latter result, we **must not** get involved in social movements in a thoughtless and haphazard way. We need to be ready to:

- Contest reformism within them.
- Persuade members to support methods of anarchism in practice.
- Spread anarchist thought.
- Leave those movements and start new ones if they end up as tools to reinforce authority.

Ideally, we start these social movements ourselves, and immunise their structures and ideas against reformism from the very start so that any attempt to co-opt such social movements for mere reformism will result in failure. However, attempting to proactively be the first movers in social movements will require an anarchism that is more confident, committed and coordinated.

Repression

Successful Political Repression

Possibly the worst future that anarchists might face after the next election is one of competent political repression. This would be a government that, looking at the current problems that are causing unrest, does not attempt to relieve any of those problems but instead attempts to repress the unrest they cause through:

- Implementing widespread surveillance so that enemies can be tracked
- Progressively increasing violence
- Deceiving people into supporting the regime, capitalism, etc. or to turn their unrest on each other through prolific propaganda and the widespread indoctrination of the youth and possibly political prisoners.

Such a future can easily follow one of failed reform, where a government moves to destroy a social movement that has escaped their control.

This is the kind of oppression that helped break the anarchist movement in the first half of the 20th century. This kept it suppressed in many places through most of the latter half, and we are still recovering from this today.

This could come as the result of an openly fascist Reform or Conservative government, but could also come from something like a Labour government that refuses to reform, attempting to maintain the British state in the face of increasing systematic problems. At time of writing, this seems to be the road that the current Labour government is heading down, although their recent election defeats may change their strategy in various ways.

It is important to note that, looking at historic examples, such oppression has often involved a variety of non-state and semi-state political organisations as well as formal governmental and private security forces. Fascist authoritarian governments especially have often relied on right-wing street movements to impose their political goals on society when the bureaucratic structure of the state was not responsive enough for the job or when state agents were not yet fully on board with fascist policies. If we expect to face competent political repression from a far-right party like Reform UK, we must be ready to face paramilitary forces that do not even pretend to stay within the limits of the law.

In terms of state repression, we must expect that many of the ways we communicate and organise will become far more dangerous:

- Aboveground anarchist and anarchist-adjacent organisations may be entirely banned, whether in law or informally (whether enforced by the state, non-state actors or both).

- Many of the tactics we rely on may be made illegal, or be confounded by paramilitary groups regardless of their legality.
- The internet may become increasingly censored and surveilled in ways that make communication, organising or even simply reading radical texts online risky or impossible.

Against such authoritarianism, anarchists will have to fall back to underground methods of organisation, communication and resistance.

Such a turn to oppression will also affect how the state and capitalism approach propaganda and indoctrination of the youth. They will likely find it hard to maintain the pretence of pretending to care about human freedom and wellbeing, ideas which we can argue to anarchism from, and will have to elevate other ideas, like nationalism, white supremacy and patriarchy, which are completely incompatible with anarchist ideas. The general cultural environment that we operate in will likely become hostile to anarchism, even outside of institutional oppression.

For anarchism to have the best chance of surviving such a future, we must start preparing for it **now**. Any competent repressive government will make use of not only the information it can gather while in power, but also whatever information previous governments have collected on its opponents, meaning that lax security in the present will get people imprisoned, exiled or killed far into the future. The kind of organisational forms, technical skills and equipment necessary to survive such totalising political repression is best developed beforehand instead of waiting for repression to strike and having to develop it on the fly where any mistake could mean disaster. However, we must also remain aware that unnecessary paranoia about security can make anarchism unwelcoming and hence prevent its growth as a movement in times when such high security is not necessary.

We should look to places like Russia, Belarus, Turkey, Iran and China for ideas on how a competent repressive government might attempt to deal with resistance. Comrades from those countries have important things to say about operating under a surveillance/police state, what could have been done differently as those countries became more oppressive, and what they wish they had prepared for beforehand.

It is important to note that such an oppressive government will not automatically lead to a revolutionary response against its domination. People are just as likely, if not more so, to yearn for a return to mild social democracy or liberalism as they are to reject all hierarchy and turn in an anarchist direction. Many of the most repressive states in recent history successfully suppressed radicalism and, when they did finally fall, those societies transitioned to generic capitalist liberal democracy instead of abolishing the state and capitalism in a social revolution. Because of this, it is important that anarchists both work out how to survive under such oppression and spread our ideas, so that resistance might head in a truly libertarian direction.

It is also important to note that all competent repressive governments have historically ultimately ended up as victims of their own success: they suppressed internal opposition, but in doing so, they suppressed the internal forces that might have held the leadership accountable to basic standards of diligence, competence and sanity. Such oppression has always led to a ruling class that became increasingly corrupt, negligent and detached from reality. Competent repression lays the groundwork for oppressors to become incompetent, and for the system to collapse or be overthrown.

This future is also heavily contingent on how technology develops and is implemented. Ubiquitous surveillance and advanced data analysis could open the possibility of a permanently total-

itarian state that makes organised internal rebellion nearly impossible. However, such systems could instead accelerate the collapse of the state and capitalism by removing some of the pressures that prevent them from giving in to their most self-harming tendencies. Likewise, technological development can open up new avenues of resistance just as it makes old tactics harder. This development and implementation is itself something that is not pre-determined, and can be influenced by what we do now both in terms of organising against state surveillance and developing technologies that enable resistance.

Failed Political Repression

While authoritarian governments like to project an air of hard-headed competence, this is often more a myth than a reality. Often, political repression is incompetent from the very start and fails to achieve the ends of those imposing it. However, just because such repression is not effective does not mean that it is not also horrific in terms of the suffering that it causes. Indeed, an incompetent repressive government may end up causing far more harm than a competent one, as it uses increasing amounts of violence in a vain attempt to achieve its aims.

Such incompetence can take many forms:

- Using enough oppression to anger people without using enough to bring them into obedience
- Using violence or surveillance without doing the necessary propaganda work to justify it
- Using so much violence that resistance becomes a necessity for survival
- Using violence or propaganda/indoctrination without having the surveillance apparatus or understanding of society to ensure that it is used against the right targets

Successful anarchist preparation for a repressive government makes it head towards these kinds of failures. Ensuring that our movements are not easily identified or understood by hierarchies, ensuring that the technologies and techniques to evade repression are widespread, and embedding a broader culture of resistance and disobedience into British society are all ways to make political repression harder to use successfully.

Such incompetence is also likely to show itself in more than just how the state and capitalism deploy repression, but how they run other parts of society. Political repression does not solve social problems, but only covers them up by suppressing obvious discontent and resistance so that they fester under the surface. For instance:

- Workplaces and infrastructure are likely to be run in a negligent or corrupt way.
- Services that not only make people's lives better, but are key to keeping society running from the perspective of its rulers, will likely be underfunded and mismanaged.

A future in which we suffer under a government that is both incompetent and repressive is the one most likely to lead to deeper social collapse.

Such a future is likely to be one in which anarchists must be well-prepared to deal with severe oppression, but in which there are also gaping vulnerabilities in that system of oppression that

anarchists can exploit to resist. Failed political repression is likely to see bottom-up movements of resistance that grow to oppose it, which anarchists can launch, take part in, and propagandise in. Failed repression is also likely to create gaps in social provision which anarchists can build mutual aid organisations in that can act as both a logistical backbone for resistance and the seeds of a future libertarian society. But again, we cannot assume that these movements will be naturally revolutionary without anarchists arguing for our position. Left to their own devices, they are just as likely to be movements simply for “good governance” or a return to liberal capitalism. The failures of a repressive government will create openings for change, but the direction of that change will be determined by whoever can best advocate for their ideas and structures and prove them in practice.

Collapse

The last possible future we have to think about is where there is some level of collapse in many of our political and economic institutions. This does not necessarily mean a total collapse in which both the state and capitalist businesses no longer exist, but one in which both the central government and big corporations abandon large swathes of society and many people are no longer able to get stable wage work, nor access consumer markets to buy the things they need, nor rely on state welfare to provide for them. For most of us, society as we know it today would collapse, while the rich and powerful would retreat to their own strongholds of power and profit.

This may sound extreme, but if we start thinking in terms of decades instead of years, this is a future we must take seriously. For example, if both the 2029 and 2034 elections lead to business-as-usual governments, the social fabric of society will continue to weaken as more and more people fall into isolation and poverty, and a series of economic shocks caused by a worsening environmental situation and geopolitical conflicts could tip society over into some form of collapse before 2039. Another possibility would be an unsuccessful reformist Labour or Green government elected in 2029 that leads to a runaway far-left social movement, which then leads to a fascist Conservative or Reform government being elected in 2034 that causes widespread economic and social destruction in attempts to destroy this social movement, which leads to a society in 2039 that has collapsed in many places.

Collapse is also not a binary state that happens instantly or everywhere all at once. Some parts of British society could be said to be already collapsing whilst others are thriving. The government is likely to try to prevent the City of London from collapsing for as long as it possibly can. On the other hand, there are many small post-industrial towns or vulnerable neighbourhoods that already feel like the state and capitalism have abandoned them to their own devices outside of occasionally sending the police in to keep them in line.

Anarchists can build mutual aid movements and other forms of bottom-up provision in the gaps where the state and capitalism retreat, providing infrastructure that proves anarchist ideas through action. Mutual aid is one of the key organising pillars of anarchist movements, and there are already bottom-up organisations such as Common Ground Collective and Mutual Aid Disaster Relief in the United States that we can look to for ideas suitable for even the harshest of conditions. But we cannot assume that doing this alone will be enough to build a movement that can overthrow the state and capitalism, as it is possible that we may end up simply filling in the gaps for them by building key infrastructure from the bottom up, ultimately stabilising society so that the state and capitalism can continue to exploit people without having to provide any services themselves. Anarchist mutual aid projects must be accompanied with anarchist politics that spread an understanding as to why the state and capitalism have abandoned people and why we should abolish both, and should also be ready to deny their services en masse, ideally to the state and capitalism specifically, as a form of general strike.

This is especially important in the case of society facing some kind of general collapse. In such a future, there is no guarantee that, even if the state and capitalism retreat from the lives of most

people, people will replace those institutions with anything more liberatory. In times of stress, people are likely to fall back on the organisational forms and social assumptions they already know, so we would probably see society shatter into a patchwork of smaller authorities that continue exploitation and oppression locally until one of those authorities can re-unify Britain under centralised rule or Britain is conquered by an imperial power from the outside. Often, when a state falls, central authority is replaced with decentralised warlordism that then re-solidifies into up to a few imperial states. As the classic historic example of this, when the Western Roman Empire fell, it did not usher in a new age of freedom. Instead, it left behind a decentralised patchwork of feudal kingdoms which then slowly centralised into the early modern empires that often looked back to Rome as an inspiration, not as a warning.

If there is a general collapse, anarchist ideas and structures will need to be well-distributed across society if we want to ensure that what gets built out of that collapse is not just a more decentralised form of authority. We need to be building our structures in as many places as we can as the state and capitalism retreat, and we need to make our politics explicit so that people understand and trust anarchism as a complete alternative framework to hierarchical rule.

What Needs to be Done

To bring everything we have discussed together, there are a few things that anarchists in the British Isles need to be prepared for in order to be ready to deal with the possible futures we might face after the next election:

1. Regardless of what happens, even if it is business as usual, we must embed ourselves more in our communities and workplaces, both demonstrating our ideas through practice and directly advocating for them. Without this, other forces in society like fascists or left-wing reformists will be able to organise in the gaps left by the state and capitalism instead of us. We must also be prepared for more and more areas to open up for us to do this if the state and capitalism start to retreat due to internal failures.
2. We must attempt to combat reformism in all left-wing social movements that develop. Where possible, we ourselves should build social movements from the ground up that are immunised against reformism and hierarchy. Part of this involves making demands for things that reformism cannot possibly provide, such as complete worker control of their workplaces, directly-democratic community control of infrastructure, the abolition of the institution known as work, or the abolition of the police and prisons and their replacement with anarchist alternatives, and convincing people of those demands. If we only demand higher wages, better state welfare or real equality before the law, then there is a high chance that we will be outflanked by a progressive reformist government that can provide those things without undermining the state and capitalism.
3. We must be prepared to survive extreme political repression. Any anarchist movement that is successful is going to push social movements beyond demanding reform to the point that reform is no longer a successful tactic to manage social unrest. When this happens, the only tool left in the state and capitalism's toolbox of social control is brute oppression: violence, indoctrination and surveillance. We must harden our own organisations and social movements against widespread surveillance and extreme violence to the point that they can defeat any attempt to subjugate them. Then we can start to build towards a fifth future that we often do not dare to think about any more: *social revolution*.

We expect that none of this will be new to most anarchists, who already agree with these three main points in theory. However, having a good strategy is only a necessary first step, and it is useless if we do not build the capacity to implement it. It should be noted that the early-20th-century anarchist movements were far more powerful and well-embedded in society than our current movement, and they were almost completely destroyed by the one-two punch of repression by fascists and Leninists, and reform by liberals and social democrats. We are in a far more precarious position right now and we must quickly, significantly improve what we are doing if we want to survive the possible futures we might face.

We must also remain flexible in the face of different possible futures. The security culture that is appropriate for a future of severe repression might be a hindrance in a future where anarchists need to be more open and public facing in order to influence a left-wing social movement. We need to be ready for many different challenges, be aware of the trade-offs we are making with our tactics at any given moment, and be able to react to shifting circumstances.

If there is one other point that we want to drive home, it is this: Whether we are facing a future of business as usual, reformism, oppression or outright collapse, **we cannot assume that things will automatically go our way**. We cannot (just) count on impersonal historic forces without us actively spreading anarchist ideas, ways of relating to each other, tactics, strategies and structures, and obtaining spaces and resources. The state and capitalism will happily keep doing what they are doing until they destroy society, unless there is an active attempt to prevent them from doing so. People will not automatically see the limits of reformism unless we explicitly persuade them. Oppression will not breed more anarchists unless we offer anarchism as the most effective way to fight oppression. If society collapses, it is likely to collapse into a mess of smaller authorities unless we demonstrate a better alternative. Liberation will not happen automatically: we must fight for it and eclipse the state, capitalism, fascism, and all rulers.

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