Towards a Radical Ecology

an Anarchist Response to the Climate Crisis

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It is no exaggeration to say that we are at a turning point in history.

Our collective response to the global crises we are now facing will determine our success in not only the next few years, but the next few decades – perhaps even the next century. The coronavirus pandemic has, of course, become the dominant issue of 2020, but the climate crisis has not halted or even slowed its progress behind the scenes. Bushfires sweep the globe as summers come and go, and the tipping points beyond which recovery will become impossible are cascading one-by-one. Time is running out.

But this is not just a time of existential dread – it is also a time which holds the possibility of deeply transformative change. This *could* be an era of abundance and prosperity, if only the fruits of our collective labour were shared equitably amongst all people; if communities had the freedom and autonomy to determine their own needs and wants; if workers the world over had the power to direct their energies towards genuinely productive and rewarding work, not the wasteful and demeaning work forced on them by the 'invisible hand of the market', or the blunt arm of the state.[1] It is this gap between *what is*, and *what could be*, that is the revolutionary potential of our time. The possibility of a truly socialist and harmonious society is now within reach, if only we had the will and the courage to seize it.

This article intends to set the stage for a discussion that needs to happen if we are to truly address the climate crisis. We must, as anarcho-communists, determine how our ideas of libertarian socialist revolution fit with the material and scientific conditions pressed upon us by climate change and the natural environment, without compromising our commitment to a full and positive freedom for all people. We must define and defend these ideas firstly as Leftists, to guard against the co-optation of radical climate action by 'green capitalism' or 'market-based solutions'. But as anarchists, we must also critique solutions which rely entirely on a swollen state bureaucracy, such as the Green New Deal, as these solutions deal with only part of the problem.

This is not a discussion to be taken lightly, and we do not put forward these ideas simply for the sake of argument. This is not an academic exercise, but an earnest response to a dire, tangible, and immediate threat. We also do not pretend to hold the solutions to this crisis ourselves – we only intend to start a discussion so that locally relevant and effective solutions may arise organically.

The Third Road: the Anarchist's Approach

Faced with the two basic approaches to climate change, green capitalism and a centralised state-delivered intervention, we anarchists ought to feel caught between a rock and a hard place. One of the fundamental tenets of anarchist thought is that any state, even those that are nominally 'socialist', exists as an inherently violent entity that alienates the individuals whom it is created to govern. The natural function of a state is to centralise and bureaucratise power within societies, which limits the autonomy of communities and individuals and stifles the localised innovation needed to respond to crises as they arise.

So we don't oppose state-led solutions just for the sake of it. The key flaw is that the state is utterly inept at solving the specific problems of each particular community in its jurisdiction, and so is inherently unable to respond to the localised dynamics of the climate crisis. This flaw

[1] The invisible hand describes the unintended social benefits of an individual's self-interested actions, a concept that was first introduced by Adam Smith in 1759 in The Theory of Moral Sentiments, in reference to income distribution.

is due primarily to the issues of centralisation and authoritarianism inherent to the institution of the state under both capitalist and socialist economies. Centralisation can be defined briefly, in the context of state governance, as the concentration of decision-making power and authority into a single institutional body, which then delegates this power down to other institutions. Its supposed merit is its ability to ensure uniformity of policy and action, and to enforce the agreed upon rules and conditions of the society or territory in which it governs.

In the example of climate action, this would mean the ability to enforce a uniform transition to renewable energy sources across whole nations. However, the reality of centralisation is that it removes the autonomy of communities and individuals and separates them from the political processes which govern their lives. Instead of communities and the individuals within them deciding on how they ought to manage their surrounding environments according to localised natural and human needs, a central body (e.g. the NSW Department of Planning, Industry, and Environment) of technocratic officials is responsible. This presupposes that the community "doesn't know any better" than the bureaucrats and creates unnecessary hierarchies of power that lead to wasteful and often harmful outcomes. In dealing with a crisis as complex and variable as climate change, the solutions that we implement need to be as flexible and as responsive as the problem itself. As such, relying on a centralised bureaucracy to solve ecological crises is both ineffective and undesirable.

In fact, when communities are fully empowered to make democratic decisions on issues which directly affect them, these communities are often far more sensible managers of the local environment, natural resources, and waste than centralised state departments. In her Nobel prize-winning book, *Governing the Commons*, Elinor Ostrom uses behavioural economics to prove this point, citing, among others, the example of a group of Turkish fishermen successfully instituting a sustainable fishing model developed and managed by themselves. This by no means denies the importance of scientific expertise or advice. Of course, for the community to adequately manage their local environment, knowledge is vital. What we advocate and what Ostrom shows, however, is that local people are best able to put this knowledge into practice. Similar to the argument that workers are best equipped to govern the conditions and management of their own workplace, local communities are best equipped to manage the environments on which they rely. Consider the fact that First Nations peoples around the world practised effective management of their local ecosystems without any external 'experts' or governing bodies for millenia – a fact which is widely recognised but not truly respected. Indeed, if we are committed to decolonisation as well as anti-capitalism, the ideas of decentralised governance and anti-hierarchical democracy are critical to our revolutionary movement.

Ecology as Radical Science

This critique of state-centralisation and bureaucratic power is a fundamental anarchist notion. However, the application of this critique to the issue of environmental degradation and climate change is built on the logic of *social ecology*, as pioneered by Murray Bookchin.

We propose that Bookchin's framework provides a strong basis from which we can build a modern understanding of revolutionary ecosocialism. Essentially, this framework understands society, the economy, and the environment not as separate issues, but as intertwined elements of a broader ecology that is dynamic and interdependent. The most effective management of

any one of these spheres requires an understanding of the complexity and needs of the others, just as in the management of a natural ecosystem. This logic is inherently critical of the state – Bookchin writes that even states which are 'radical', 'worker controlled', and 'democratic' naturally function to entrench the interests of the bureaucratic elite who have been afforded the authority of said state. The only truly democratic forms of social and economic organisation are those whose power comes from the bottom up – the kinds of organisation which recognise the autonomy of the individual and their community, and that facilitate higher-order coordination where necessary, but remove the need for permanent institutions of top-down governance.

Bookchin notes that this way of thinking is what animates modern and historical anarchist revolutionary movements worldwide. In these movements, "control over the larger organisation lies always with the affinity groups rather than with the coordinating bodies, [and] all action, in turn, is based on voluntarism and self-discipline, not on coercion and command." This form of organisation, collective action, and decision-making relies on the ecological notion of *spontaneity* – the spontaneity of individuals, of affinity groups, of organisations, and of communities – which is only possible in a movement based on freedom and decentralisation.

Spontaneity, in this sense, refers not simply to chaotic or erratic actions, but to the deeper belief in 'spontaneous development'. That is, the belief that projects, plans, and other developments should be free to find their own equilibrium, achieved through the creativity of free, independent individuals and collectives, and mediated through the material and cultural conditions of their context. In this framework, spontaneity not only fosters the efficient and organic development of projects and movements, it also promotes the internal liberation of the revolutionary individual, who is empowered to take up direct action where they can, and to embrace the spontaneous development of the self within the context of the collective. Imagine the difference in outcome between a 'mass' which is directed from above, and a collective which has embraced and encouraged the creativity of each independent individual in its movement.

As the climate crisis is an ecological crisis, this means that we must embrace these concepts of anti-hierarchical decentralisation and developmental spontaneity. Recognising that our climate crisis is multi-faceted is essential. Global warming means more erratic climates which leads to increased food scarcity, raised sea levels, increased population density, and more extreme weather events that threaten global supply lines. For Pacific Island communities, climate change looks like smaller land mass and greater exposure to storms. In Australia, regional communities suffer more frequent and intense fires, floods, and droughts, while asthmatics the country over suffer from bushfire smoke. For all, it will require a greater flexibility and responsiveness to local environmental dynamics, which is impossible under a globalised capitalist economy *and* under an economy guided by a bloated state bureaucracy.

Ecology describes a total and holistic harmony with the natural world which allows humans to flourish in their natural environments without exploiting or mismanaging them. It is not merely about saving one particular species from extinction or this particular forest from logging. An ecological response to the climate crisis would recognise that some regions may be more suited to hydroelectricity, while others may best be served by large solar arrays. Just considering the sheer complexity and diversity of natural environments and human societies across the world, it should be clear that ecology is a truly anarchist science.

Conclusion

The question of our time, then, is not how we should respond to the climate crisis, or the coronavirus crisis, or the current economic crisis. The real question is twofold: firstly, how can we take hold of the revolutionary potential of this moment to attack the root cause of each of these crises – capitalism, and all its oppressive and destructive effects; and secondly, how can we build in its place a system that will truly value and secure the freedom of every individual, community, and society around the world.

In dealing with the first question – the destruction of the old – we must recognise that the revolutionary dynamic of our time is one of intense potentiality. The gap between what we currently have, and the possibility of what we could have in terms of resource abundance, technological development, and individual freedom has widened to the point of breaking, and the possibility of a post-scarcity society is now irresistible. Anyone can see that our modern technology should be freeing us, not facilitating our further exploitation; anyone can tell that there is food enough to go around, if only we had the freedom and the means to share it. We must recognise that the potential for change is no longer a dream but a *necessity*, and that if we do not seize on the energy and the hope that lies within this revolutionary potentiality, we will fail and this system will collapse upon us.

On the second question – of building something new – we must always be working to interpret and explain the dynamics of the current era through the lens of the world we are seeking to create. As anarchists, our responses to the immediate issues facing us must be guided not just by the need to deal with the issues themselves, but by the greater goal of fundamental societal change, a goal grounded in the desire for human freedom, social justice, and material prosperity for all.

Recommended Reading

Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, 1971, in particular, "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought"
Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 1990.

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