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Three Approaches to a Revolutionary Program

Sectarianism, Reformism, and the Revolutionary
Approach

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he made several errors in analyzing the period and in moral evaluations.) In its essence the revolutionary method is a commitment to trying to connect day-to-day struggles and needs to the goal of a libertarian socialist revolution. We have to work at it on every occasion, in every way.

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A revolutionary organization is built around its program. It embodies its program, which is why people join it. The program includes its ultimate goals, that is, its vision of a new, self-managed, society. The program includes an analysis of what the existing society is and how it works. It includes a strategy for getting from where we are to where we want to go. I do not mean only a discussion of how the workers in the course of a revolution could begin to build the new society (such as Kropotkin's Conquest of Bread), but how to get from the existing, nonrevolutionary, situation to that revolution. These are all essential parts of a program for revolutionary, working class, libertarian-democratic, socialism. (I will refer to this as "anarchism," but, for the purposes of this essay, I am including autonomous Marxism, Left Communism, pareconism, etc.) In broad outline, there are three possible approaches: sectarianism, reformism or centrism, and a truly revolutionary approach.

1) Sectarianism

This is also called the ultra-left approach, although not by me. ("Ultra-leftism" is usually a term of abuse by leftists for those who are further left.) This approach also starts from a vision of a better world and even of how a revolution could start to build it. This vision could be excellent; that is not the problem with it. But it lacks a strategy for getting from a situation where most people, even when they struggle, do not aim for anarchism, to one where they will participate in an anarchist revolution. Quite the contrary.

The sectarian approach says to nonrevolutionary people: Stop struggling for what you want. Forget about your goals. Instead, you should fight for our goals, which are so much better. You workers may want a better standard of living for your families, but we say that consumerism is corrupting and these are just crumbs to buy you off. Instead we urge you to demand what we regard as

a liberated life. You want to form unions in order to win benefits and better working conditions, but unions are agencies of the bosses and not worth fighting for. You want freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, an end to gender or racial discrimination, but these are only bourgeois-democratic demands, consistent with capitalism, rather than socialism. Workers and small farmers in exploited countries want to determine their own future, without the domination of foreign countries, but we want you to ignore imperial rule in favor of proletarian internationalism, which we counterpose to national self-determination. The same goes for any other goals, such as clean air, ecological balance, ending nuclear energy, withdrawing from immediate wars, etc. Since these are presumably not the same as libertarian communism, drop them in favor of our ultimate program.

For example, recently there has been a massive rebellion in Iran due to the fraudulent election. The outrage has spread through much of society, from the middle class to organized labor. Yet, I am told that certain Iranian Left Communists have refused to endorse the struggle against the stolen elections. Not that they have been staying home, but they pose their demonstrations as distinct from the demand for honest elections (although in fact, their opportunity to mobilize is only due to the mass rebellion). Of course, revolutionary libertarian socialists could not endorse any of the election candidates (all of whom are openly pro-capitalist and supporters of the "Islamic Republic"). But they could have chosen to support the right of the Iranian people to determine their own government (or non-government someday). They might have made demands on the bourgeois politicians or on the unions to call a general strike for political democracy, in order to expose the politicians and union officials.

Such situations arise repeatedly. Right now a similar struggle for the right of people to elect their government is happening in Honduras. Should anarchists be "too pure" to look for ways to participate in these struggles? It was just such sectarian logic which

The program starts not from present consciousness but from an objective evaluation of needs. If humanity is to avoid a deep depression, fascism, nuclear wars, and ecological catastrophe, then an international revolution by the workers and all oppressed is necessary. This is both an objective analysis (that humanity is threatened with these evils) and a value judgment (that a depression, wars, etc. are evils). Anyone who concludes that there is little or no threat of war or destruction should stick with reformist methods.

There is no guaranteed technique for making appropriate "transitional demands." The goal is to raise limited issues to class-wide, society-wide, demands. Loss of jobs or incomes at a few places should be countered with demands for guaranteed jobs for all, provided for by the government (which claims to represent the community) and managed by the workers. When businesses are closed down, the demand should be for expropriation of the owners and turning the businesses over to worker and community cooperatives. And so on. While such demands are not anarchist-communism in its full form, they are part of an anarchist-communist society...and therefore something which supporters of capitalism cannot endorse!

Methods of struggle should be advocated such as plant occupations and general strikes, which are much more effective (if more difficult to do) than current forms of union struggle (particularly lobbying bourgeois politicians!). Again these are not methods which pro-capitalist union officials are capable of using in any consistent fashion.

The aim is NOT to get people to fight for goals which cannot be won. Some reforms can always be won. And overall, given the decline of capitalism in this period, NO reforms can be won on a consistent and stable basis. The aim is to increase the depth and militancy of the struggles.

There is no guaranteed textbook method. (The "transitional program" approach was codified, but not originated, by Trotsky, but

ism, in favor of building mass labor unions (syndicates, hence “syndicalism”). In this, he was right. But Malatesta, while for unions, was concerned that revolutionary anarchists would dissolve themselves as a force into the unions. Therefore he advocated that anarchists maintain revolutionary organizations which would work inside and outside the unions, supporting strikes and other actions but also being involved in every possible struggle—while always raising the anarchist goal.

“Whatever may be the practical results of the struggle for immediate gains, the greatest value lies in the struggle itself. For thereby workers learn that the bosses’ interests are opposed to theirs and that they cannot improve their conditions, and much less emancipate themselves, except by uniting and becoming stronger than the bosses.... They will in the end understand that to make their victory secure and definitive, it is necessary to destroy capitalism....

“While...demanding complete freedom, we must support all struggles for partial freedom, because we are convinced that one learns through struggle...We must always be with the people, and when we do not succeed in getting them to demand a lot we must still seek to get them to want something; and we must make every effort to get them to understand that however much or little they demand should be obtained by their own efforts...” (Malatesta, 1984; pp. 191 & 195).

The aim is to build a bridge (or “transition,” hence “transitional”) between the partial, limited, struggles and the ultimate need for a socialist-anarchist revolution. We have to find out what people want, not in order to start the program from that but in order to show people that the way to definitely win what they want is through anarchist revolution (“by their own efforts”).

caused the Communist Parties to refuse to make alliances with Socialists and anarchists against the Fascists in Italy in the 20s and against the Nazis in Germany in the 30s. (see Price 2007; chapter 11, “The Fight Against Nazism in Germany”).

2) Reformism and Centrism

An apparently alternate approach is that of reformism. Unlike the liberals, reformists aim for a new and better society than capitalism. Like the liberals, reformists hope to improve society by step-by-gradual-step changes, without the need for an overturn of the capitalist class and its state. However, there are those who are (sincerely) for a revolution but in practice act like reformists. They are in the political center between reformists and revolutionaries and have been historically called “centrists.” Quite a number of anarchists are in this category: revolutionaries in word but reformists in deed. (Although this is sometimes called “opportunism,” it is not a matter of personal sincerity or integrity, but of program.)

Reformists and centrists seem like the opposite of sectarians, but this superficial. Like the sectarians, they have no strategy for going from the unrevolutionary present to the revolutionary goal. There is an unbridgeable gap between the two. In practice, sectarians and centrists just chose different sides of the gap. (This is why the same people can be centrist on one issue, such as unions, but sectarian on another, such as national self-determination.)

Their method is to start from where most people are and, at most, to advocate moving just a bit to the left, to the “next step.” The reformists and centrists see themselves as the “best builders” of the unions or the anti-war movement or whatever, and proclaim that their program is simply a logical extension of unionism, nationalism, bourgeois feminism, etc. They do not present the revolutionary program as a qualitative break from business unionism, nationalism, or bourgeois feminism.

The reformists are likely to justify this as due to a need to maintain good relations with union officials and movement leaders—liberals who are overt supporters of capitalism. As the reformists may point out, the union officials are sometimes to the left of the ranks, at least in their formal programs. This may be so, but the union bureaucrats, as a layer, are representatives of the capitalist class within the working class. They tie the unions to the Democratic Party and are committed to keeping the system working. When push comes to shove, they will hold back the struggle. It is certainly useful to have good relations with the officials, all other things being equal, but not at the expense of abandoning advocacy of the revolution.

Alternately, centrists are likely to justify a nonrevolutionary approach by pointing to the nonrevolutionary consciousness of the workers. If we radicals are too far to the left, supposedly the workers will not listen to us. We must not get ahead of the workers, they say. Gradually, the workers will move step by step to the left, until they become revolutionary.

This assumes a static consciousness on the part of the workers. It ignores the way in which crises push workers to re-think their assumptions and to become open to ideas which they had previously rejected—so that consciousness may change by leaps, not gradual steps. It ignores the way in which working people change, not everyone all at once, but in layers of workers. If revolutionaries are trying to stay on the level of the most conservative workers, we may miss the movement of the most radicalized, advanced, workers.

Popular consciousness is mixed. Workers and oppressed people hold both conservative and radical ideas. They are patriotic and anti-war, for universal health care but anti-“socialist”, for civil liberties but for repressing “terrorists,” etc. This is the expected result of capitalism’s impact on consciousness. A minority of workers and oppressed come to a consistently revolutionary consciousness. Their job is to organize themselves and to educate other workers.

Otherwise, the advanced workers will be behind the mass of moderate and conservative workers, instead of in front. (This centrist method has been called “tailism,” for good reason.)

The Maoists call this approach “the mass line.” This means to find out what the workers want and then organize for that. They use this method precisely because they dare not tell the workers and peasants what the Maoists will really “give” them, namely totalitarian state capitalism. So they claim to be for what the people want. The same is true of the reformists, when it comes down to it. They cannot say that they intend to maintain capitalist exploitation, war, ecological destruction, racism, and patriarchy. So they “give the workers what they want.”

3) Revolutionary or Transitional Approach

In *The Communist Manifesto* (a work which revolutionary anarchists can mostly agree with), Marx and Engels wrote, “The communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present they also represent and take care of the future of that movement.... The communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. In all these movements, they bring to the front, as the leading condition in each case, the property question...” (section IV; pp. 45–46). 160 years later, this is still a valid approach (actually, in this passage, they are mostly writing about the need to participate in struggles for bourgeois-democratic rights, so that the “workers may straightway use [them] as so many weapons against the bourgeoisie”; p. 45).

At the 1907 International Anarchist Congress, there was a dispute between Pierre Monatte and Errico Malatesta. Monatte argued that it was time for anarchists to end their existence as small propaganda groups, let alone advocating insurrections and terror-