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Post-Left Anarchy?

Jason McQuinn

There remain large numbers of anarchists who continue to identify closely with the political left in one form or another. But there are increasing numbers ready to abandon much of the dead weight associated with the left tradition. Many pages of this issue are devoted to beginning a new exploration of what is at stake in considering whether or not identification with the political left has outworn any benefits for anarchists.

For most of their existence over roughly the last couple centuries, consciously anarchist activists, theorists, groups and movements have consistently inhabited a minority position within the eclectic world of would-be revolutionaries on the left. In most of the world-defining insurrections and revolutions during that time—those which had any significant permanence in their victories—authoritarian rebels were usually an obvious majority among active revolutionaries. And even when they weren't, they often gained the upper hand through other means. Whether they were liberals, social-democrats, nationalists, socialists, or communists, they remained part of a majority current within the political left explicitly committed to a whole constellation of authoritarian positions. Along with an admirable dedication to ideals like justice

and equality, this majority current favors hierarchical organization, professional (and, too often, cults of) leadership, dogmatic ideologies (especially notable in its many Marxian variants), a self-righteous moralism, and a widespread abhorrence for social freedom and authentic, non-hierarchical community.

Especially after their expulsion from the First International, anarchists have generally found themselves facing a hard choice. They could locate their critiques somewhere within the political left—if only on its fringes. Or else they could reject the majority opposition culture in its entirety and take the chance of being isolated and ignored.

Since many, if not most, anarchist activists have come out of the left through disillusionment with its authoritarian culture, the option of clinging to its fringes and adapting its themes in a more libertarian direction has maintained a steady allure. Anarcho-syndicalism may be the best example of this kind of left-anarchism. It has allowed anarchists to use leftist ideologies and methods to work for a leftist vision of social justice, but with a simultaneous commitment to anarchist themes like direct action, self-management, and certain (very limited) libertarian cultural values. Murray Bookchin's ecological anarcho-leftism, whether going by the label of libertarian municipalism or social ecology, is another example. It is distinguished by its persistent failure to gain much of a foothold anywhere, even in its favored terrain of Green politics. A further example, the most invisible (and numerous?) of all types of left-anarchism, is the choice of a great many anarchists to submerge themselves within leftist organizations that have little or no commitment to any libertarian values, simply because they see no possibility of working directly with other anarchists (who are often similarly hidden, submerged in still other leftist organizations).

Perhaps it's time, now that the ruins of the political left continue to implode, for anarchists to consider stepping out of its steadily disappearing shadow en masse. In fact, there's still a chance, if enough anarchists can dissociate themselves sufficiently from the

myriad failures, purges and ‘betrayals’ of leftism, that anarchists can finally stand on their own.

Along with defining themselves in their own terms, anarchists might once again inspire a new generation of rebels, who this time may be less willing to compromise their resistance in attempts to maintain a common front with a political left that has historically opposed the creation of free community wherever it has appeared. For the evidence is irrefutable. Libertarian revolutionaries of any type have consistently been denied a presence in the vast majority of leftist organizations (from the break in the International on); forced into silence in many of the left organizations they have been allowed to join (for example, the anarcho-Bolsheviks); and persecuted, imprisoned, assassinated or tortured by any leftists who have attained the necessary political power or organizational resources to do so (examples are legion).

Why has there been such a long history of conflict and enmity between anarchists and the left? It is because there are two fundamentally different visions of social change embodied in the range of their respective critiques and practices (although any particular group or movement always includes contradictory elements). At its simplest, anarchists—especially anarchists who identify least with the left—commonly engage in a practice which refuses to set itself up as a political leadership apart from society, refuses the inevitable hierarchy and manipulation involved in building mass organizations, and refuses the hegemony of any single dogmatic ideology. The left, on the other hand, has most commonly engaged in a substitutive, representational practice in which mass organizations are subjected to an elitist leadership of intellectual ideologues and opportunistic politicians. In this practice the party substitutes itself for the mass movement, and the party leadership substitutes itself for the party.

In reality, the primary function of the left has historically been to recuperate every social struggle capable of confronting capital and state directly, such that at best only an ersatz representation

of victory has ever been achieved, always concealing the public secret of continuing capital accumulation, continuing wage-slavery, and continuing hierarchical, statist politics as usual, but under an insubstantial rhetoric of resistance and revolution, freedom and social justice.

The bottom-line question is, can anarchists do better outside the left—from a position of explicit and uncompromising critique, than those who have chosen to inhabit the left have done from within?

Jason McQuinn, Editor