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Do Anarchists Believe in Freedom?

Contents

Freedom under capitalism	3
What about the “rights” of Fascists?	5
The socialist-anarchist revolution must be freely self-organized	6
Freedom for all includes the right of national self-determination	7
References	9

Central to anarchism is the belief that people can organize themselves to efficiently meet their needs, without top-down hierarchies, coercion, or rewards and punishments. People will make mistakes, because we are imperfect, but we can learn from our mistakes and improve over time. This is the belief in freedom. Anarchism is usually presented as the most extreme form of a belief in freedom. It has often been said that anarchism is a synthesis of classical liberalism — carried to its extreme — and socialism. Another historical name for anarchism (and antistatist Marxism) is “libertarian socialism.”

Yet there is a certain amount of ambiguity among anarchists about freedom. There are topics on which some — many — anarchists reject the pro-freedom, libertarian, position.

For example, concerning freedom of speech. Some anarchists have generalized from our attitude toward fascists (where we attempt to physically drive them off the streets and break up their meetings). These anarchists (and other leftists) have applied this to other groups which are non-fascist — conservatives for example — breaking up their meetings (such as assaulting the platform at Columbia University in New York City of the group which organized “Islamofascist Week”). Or anarchists are often against admitting Marxist-Leninists to anarchist gatherings or bookfairs — not only denying them literature tables (which may make sense at an anarchist bookfair) but questioning their right to attend. This is especially true toward the Spartacist League, a Trotskyist group which specializes in “political combat” through being obnoxious, or the Revolutionary Communist Party, a Maoist group which would shoot us if it took power. This denial of free speech has been justified by some with a revival of the 1960s theory of Herbert Marcuse of “repressive tolerance.”

Freedom under capitalism

Capitalist politicians jabber about freedom, liberty, democracy, and more freedom. Revolutionary anarchists point out that freedom under capitalism is limited and hypocritical. Mostly the bourgeois (capitalist) politicians mean the freedom to get rich, including capitalists’ “freedom” not to be bothered by unions or by pesky anti-discrimination laws or environmental regulations. Capitalists want the “liberty” to not promote African-Americans or women at work or to rent out apartments without having to modify them for the physically disabled. This is the “freedom” to oppress others (to deny others their freedom). Needless to say, what I am for is the freedom of the oppressed to be free of their oppression!

Even the most democratic bourgeois state protects the rule of its capitalist minority. This minority gets rich by exploiting the working class majority of

the population. The people vote for one or another candidate of the rich to rule over us for 2 or 4 to 8 years. But day-to-day we go to work and take orders from unelected bosses who serve the unelected minority which owns the economy. These capitalists decide (under the pressures of the market) whether employment should go up or down, whether prices should rise or fall, whether or not pollutants should be spewed into the atmosphere, and so on. There is “free speech,” but one side owns the printing presses, the radios, and the television, while dissenting voices can barely be heard over the roar of the mass media. That is why even a capitalist democracy is rightly called a “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.”

In its heroic period, the revolutionary bourgeoisie promised all sorts of freedoms: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” or “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” of the U.S. and French revolutions. This meant the end of all pre-capitalist discrimination and oppression based on anything except wealth (ending oppression based on race, skin color, gender, religion, nationality, etc.). Of course, the bourgeoisie has never lived up to its protestations, as we can see by the slaveholders who made the U.S. revolution. They do not live up to it today, in the epoch of semi-monopoly capitalism and imperialist decline.

Every bit of freedom which the people enjoy was won by the struggle and blood of the people, fighting against the feudal lords or against the capitalists themselves. This makes these freedoms precious to us. They are ours. We mean to hold on to them (see my chapter on “Democracy versus the State” in Price [2007]).

Bourgeois democracy has benefits for the rich. It lets them settle differences between competing factions without having to shoot it out. It lets them get rid of a lousy leader (e.g. Bush) without a coup. It lets them pretend to the working people that the people control their government. It lets them coopt talented individuals from the bottom of society into the ruling strata (e.g. Obama).

But bourgeois democracy also has benefits for working people. It is simply easier to live from day to day in a bourgeois democracy than under a one-party police state. Besides that, it is easier for radical minorities (such as anarchists) to organize, to develop our theory, to publish our literature, and to reach out to others, than under a police dictatorship. We can argue that the bourgeois-democratic regime is hypocritical, contradicting the principles it claims to stand on.

Anarchists, socialists, communists, and revolutionaries are a small minority in the U.S. and most industrialized countries. Most working people strongly disagree with us. One of our best defenses is our appeal to traditions of free speech, democracy, and fairness. Anarchists benefit greatly by being able to make this appeal. We would be foolish to give it up.

After World War II, in the anti-Communist McCarthyite Red Scare, the capitalists benefited greatly from the fact that everyone knew that the Communist Party was antidemocratic. Everyone knew that if the Communists ever came to power, they would do as they had done in Eastern Europe and set up a one-party police state. So why defend their free speech? people asked themselves. Similarly, the capitalists have previously attacked the anarchists by portraying us as bomb-throwing terrorists, a danger to everyone, and not deserving of free speech. In our own time we have seen how the fear of terrorism can be used to justify the denial of civil liberties — and that many ordinary people were willing to accept this denial out of fear of being blown up by random bombs. Therefore it is important that we do not make it easy for the state to portray anarchists as terrorists and anti-free speech.

There is a line, based on the theory of “repressive tolerance,” which says that, since the bourgeoisie (also) benefits from free speech and other freedoms, once we radicals take power we will deny free speech, etc. Right now, of course, we are a minority and use free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association, etc. But once we take over, this says, we will deny these freedoms to people we disagree with! This is not presented as the control of ACTIONS (such as our stopping counterrevolutionary armies or organized sabotage) but of SPEECH and writing. Its advocates do not apply it just to exceptional circumstances (e.g., if things should develop into a civil war, we would not allow the enemy to make propaganda behind our lines), but even to a peaceful, stable, period, on principle.

As everyone knows, this is the position of the fascists as it is of the Communist Parties. However for anarchists to openly state this program is pretty stupid. By doing so, we would forfeit all the sympathy which others give us on the grounds of our right to free speech. That is aside from the sheer wrongness of these politics.

What about the “rights” of Fascists?

In a number of Western countries, the making of racist, pro-fascist, or Holocaust-denying statements are illegal. Not so in the U.S., with its First Amendment. However, most anarchists do not call on the government to suppress fascist or reactionary statements. We oppose laws limiting fascist speech. In this, we are in full agreement with free-speech civil libertarians (such as the American Civil Liberties Union). Quite simply, we do not trust the government, this bourgeois-patriarchal-racist state. Even if suppressing right wing speech were good, we would expect the state to use any speech-suppression powers to focus on suppressing left-wing speech, that is, ours. And so it has.

Instead, we organize workers, students, African-Americans, and immigrants, to counterdemonstrate at fascist demonstrations, and, where possible, to bust up their forces, driving them out of the neighborhoods. Why?

When people organize a Nazi outfit, they are not organizing the equivalent of a Conservative Discussion Club. They are deliberately choosing to identify with those who broke up unions and left parties, who overthrew bourgeois democracy in favor of bourgeois dictatorship, who exterminated millions of Jews and others, and who waged aggressive wars. Similarly, people who identify with the Ku Klux Klan are choosing to imitate those who covered their faces to gather at night in order to murder African-Americans and their white supporters. By calling themselves Fascists, Nazis, or Klansmen, they are declaring their readiness to engage (in the fairly short-term) in violent, extralegal, ACTIONS against others. It is like forming a chapter of the Mafia. It would be foolish for us to wait until the police catch them doing something illegal. We have every right to protect ourselves, our friends, and our communities from this threat.

In 1930s Germany, the problem with the Nazis was not what they said or wrote. It was that they beat up socialists and communists selling their papers, they attacked union or socialist party meetings, they burned down union halls, and they murdered prominent leftists and even liberals. The police would not arrest them, or if they did, reactionary judges let them off with a slap on the wrist. This, not Free Speech for Fascists, was the issue, and should have been the justification for the left to unite and physically drive the Nazis from the streets (see my chapter on “The Fight Against Nazism in Germany” in Price [2007]).

It is different when dealing with a real Conservative Discussion Club. For us to just call everyone on the right “fascist” and try to break up their meetings is to put ourselves in a false and vulnerable position. The issue is not really “free speech for reactionaries” any more than the right to a fair trial is “civil liberties for criminals.” We want freedom of speech for ourselves, therefore we must defend it for others, even those whom we hate. The same goes for free speech for Communists, Maoists, and orthodox Trotskyists, who would, after all, establish totalitarian states and throw us in jail, if they could. Yet attacks on their free speech, by the government or anyone else, are attacks on the whole left, on everyone. (So we should allow the Spartacists to attend our gatherings.)

The socialist-anarchist revolution must be freely self-organized

The bourgeois-democratic revolution was based on a lie. Although it may have improved life for most people, its real function was to place a minority elite in

power, to rule over and plunder the mass of people. This it could not say openly. Therefore the mass struggles which carried it out had to stay within certain limits. But this was acceptable for the capitalist revolution, because its main task is to break down the barriers to the market. Once the capitalist market is freed-up to run more-or-less automatically, then capitalism can take off in its historic role of capital accumulation and industrialization. How democratic or authoritarian the government is, is not the central issue for capitalism.

The revolution of the working class (and its allies among the oppressed) will be qualitatively different. It needs the truth, that all elites must be overturned and the big majority must take power. It needs people to be conscious of what they are doing. It replaces the automatic market with a democratically planned cooperative economy. All this requires awareness, consciousness, and deliberation among the mass of people. This only happens when there is open discussion and democratic decision-making.

Of course, a movement can be built on lies, on obedience to leaders, and on unthinking emotionality. That is how the fascists build their movements, how the Communist Parties build theirs. In reality, it is how liberal and conservative movements are built. They do not need — they cannot tolerate — free speech and democracy within their movements. But we do!

Concerning freedom of speech, “Here is a proposition: There can be no contradiction, no gulf in principle, between what we demand of this existing state, and what we propose for the society we want to replace it, a free society . . . What we demand of this state does constitute our real program . . . The kind of movement we build now, on a certain basis, will determine our new society, not good intentions . . . Our aim by its very nature requires the mobilization of conscious masses. Without such conscious masses, our goal is impossible. Therefore we need the fullest democracy.” (Draper, 1992; pp. 165–166 & 170; Draper, the coiner of the term “socialism-from-below,” was no anarchist, but he was insightful on this topic.)

Freedom for all includes the right of national self-determination

Capitalism cannot fulfill its own bourgeois-democratic program. But the working class can, and can create a society a thousand times more democratic than Jefferson could ever dream of. We revolutionary anarchists must be the champions of every democratic freedom, every struggle against oppression, whatever its immediate relation to the class struggle as such.

This includes the struggle of oppressed nations for self-determination. This is often treated as a special case, but it is not. It is just one of the democratic struggles of masses of people (that is, the workers, peasants, extreme poor, and small shopkeepers) for freedom. Almost all libertarian socialists agree that most of humanity is oppressed by imperialism, but many libertarians do not like the choices which the oppressed peoples would make. At this time in history, oppressed nations are unlikely to chose horizontalized federations of self-managed workplaces and communes. Unfortunately, the Palestinians and Iraqis, say, will (at first) chose national states with capitalist economies. Since this is not what we internationalist anarchists advocate, many anarchists decide that they cannot support the freedom of the Palestinians and Iraqis to make their own choices. These supposed libertarians then refuse to take sides between the imperialist power of the U.S. and the oppressed people of Iraq and Palestine.

People of oppressed nations, like everyone else, learn to want anarchist revolution only by open debate, new experiences, and living the alternatives. They will not learn if anarchists turn our backs on them and their struggles, refuse to engage with them, and refuse to show solidarity with them against their imperialist and colonialist enemies.

What we advocate is no small change in society but a total one, involving a complete transformation of popular consciousness and practice. That is why anarchists are advocates of extreme freedom and radical democracy, of popular participation in every sphere of society and in every way.

References

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