Conceptions of Dual Power and Prefigurative Politics

written by Wayne Price | February 6, 2023

Libertarian socialists (including anarchists and autonomous Marxists) reject the state as a means toward a stateless and classless society, one without other forms of oppression (of gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, and others). The use of statist and capitalist means has consistently produced statist and capitalist ends. If we concentrate all our efforts on building a state, thinking that it will eventually "wither away" by itself, then what we will get will be … a state. Instead, anarchists believe that libertarian ends can only be achieved—if they can be achieved at all—by congruent libertarian means: dual power and prefiguration.

What are those means? Anarchists divide mainly into two broad schools of thought about prefiguration. One tendency (sometimes called, misleadingly, "life-stylist") advocates building alternate institutions, often referred to as a "dual power" strategy. These might include various types of co-ops, small workshops using advanced technology, associations with farmers, bicycle clubs, progressive schools, and so on. These would grow peacefully and gradually, overtaking and crowding out the state and capitalist businesses. (I think of this as the "kudzu strategy.") There would be little if any direct conflict with the state.

The other proposes to build mass movements and popular struggles, democratically organized from the bottom up. These include labor unions, anti-racist community associations, anti-war coalitions, tenant unions, and environmental struggles, among others. These would create alternate sites of power, which might also be called "dual power." At some point, it is expected that there would be a confrontation with the state and the capitalist class—that is, a revolution. If successful, the revolution would be followed by a period of popular rebuilding of society.

Alternate-institution Approach

The gradualist, alternate-institution, approach is sometimes held up as a new form of anarchism. It is not. It goes back at least to Pierre Joseph Proudhon, the first person to identify as an "anarchist." In France, he proposed a nonprofit "mutual" bank to link up peasants, small businesses, artisan shops, and workers' self-governing industrial associations. He called this "mutualism." Others at the same time in Europe proposed communist communes, consumer co-ops, and producer co-ops, to be associated in federations and growing within the marketplace. As the Marxists advocated using the state to establish socialism, this school of anarchism advocates using the market—which is at least as capitalist an institution as the state. Again, capitalist means are to be used to establish socialist ends.

Yet this approach has had successes. The consumer co-op movement has maintained itself. Producer co-ops have worked well, if at the margins of the national economy. The large Spanish co-op

Mondragon has been quite successful. Millions of people live in housing co-ops (or condominiums). Farmers use marketing co-ops. Credit unions (nonprofit co-op banks, often affiliated with unions) work well. In fact, this approach may be said to have "failed by success," as worker-run co-ops and co-op supermarkets flourish and are integrated into the overall economy. They do not threaten the semi-monopoly corporations that dominate the national (and world) market.

It has been argued that this alternate-institutional approach can end capitalism and the state in a way similar to how capitalism originally ended feudalism. Gradually, bourgeois businesses grew in the interstices of medieval Europe. Eventually banks and businesses grew ubiquitous. They became strong enough to replace the feudal aristocracy with the capitalist market. Therefore consumer and producer cooperatives and other democratic and alternate businesses can do the same to capitalism today.

As history, this account of the rise of capitalism leaves out some things. It leaves out the role of the state and other coercive, non-market forces in promoting early capitalism. Karl Marx discussed this under the heading of "primitive accumulation." Peter Kropotkin, the anarchist theoretician, also wrote on the role of the state in initiating and sustaining capitalism. It also leaves out the great revolutions that shook up the aristocracy and opened the way for the development of industrial capitalism: the English Revolution of the 1640s, the U.S. Revolution of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789, the revolutions of Latin America and the Caribbean, the failed German Revolution of 1848, the U.S. Civil War, and so on. Without these world-shattering popular upheavals, capitalism would not have grown as "gradually" and "peacefully" as it seemed.

It has been argued that the state is a relationship. If enough people stop relating to each other in a statist way, then the state and its repression would vanish. It is true that institutions are relationships. Institutions are patterns of mass behavior, of many people relating to each other and behaving toward each other in a patterned, repetitious way. (By "behaving" I am including communicating and thinking.) A changed society will require a lot of changed behavior. This much is true. However, what if most people come to relate in a different way, but a sizable minority continues to act in a statist fashion? What if the minority—and its armed minions—want to keep its privileges, its comforts, its wealth, its power, and its status? Wouldn't they recognize that all those expanding co-ops threaten their way of life and do something about it, through laws or market mechanisms? Won't a changed society require a conflict, even possibly a violent one?

Yet the term "dual power" originally came from the Russian Revolution of 1917. There was a "Provisional Government" (unelected) and the popular soviets ("councils" rooted in factory committees, peasant village assemblies, and army unit councils). Both the Provisional Government and the soviets had power (it was also translated as "double sovereignty"), one representing the capitalist class and one representing the workers and peasants. Sooner or later, one or the other would win out. Eventually the soviets overthrew the capitalist state—only to face another form of dual power as the Bolshevik bureaucracy overran the soviets and other popular councils.

A revolutionary approach to anti-authoritarian socialism does not necessarily mean opposition to workers' co-ops, credit unions, co-op supermarkets, artisan workshops, and such. These things are good in their own right. They do not need to be justified as contributing to a strategy for changing the world. Further, they can serve as models of how a free and cooperative society might work. Revolutionary anarchists may still learn a great deal about how anarchism might function in a decentralized but modern technological society from Paul Goodman, Colin Ward, and Kevin Carson, among other gradualists.

Criticisms of Revolutionary Dualism

The alternate-institutionalists point out that a single upheaval, a one-time "seizure of power," cannot be relied on to change society in a stable, thorough, way. No one disputes this, certainly not any type of revolutionary socialist. To pick an historical example, the U.S. Revolution began with years of increasing tensions between the colonies and Great Britain. This included building local radical clubs, inter-colony "committees of correspondence," and other organizations to prepare for a revolution. Then there was a flare-up of violence at Lexington and Concord, followed by the siege of Boston. After this came eight years of war with Britain (including an internal civil war with the Loyalists). Even after independence was won, it took years until the Constitution was established. Even then there had to be one final war with Britain, in 1812.

Anyone who studies the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, or the Chinese Revolution (and revolutionaries study revolutions) knows that they went through lengthy developments, of which an actual insurrection was only one stage. But an insurrection, or some such direct clash with the state, has always been necessary at some point. However, for anarchists, unlike revolutionary statists, it would be necessary for the people to "seize power" but not to "seize state power." This means that the workers and all oppressed people would need to overturn the state and other institutions of oppression. They would begin to replace them with new, radically democratic institutions of their own: federations of workplace councils, community assemblies, a popular militia (an armed people), and more. However, they would not create a new, elite, bureaucratic-military-police body standing over the rest of society—a state.

Gradualist anarchists are among the many anti-revolutionists who express concern that a revolution, anarchist or otherwise, would be "bloody" and destructive of human lives. The aim of anarchism is a peaceful world, with differences being settled through the creative use of intelligence and nonviolence. Would a violent revolution, with armed people on both sides, contradict the principle of prefiguration? Would it not be trying to use bad means to create good ends?

Revolutionary anarchists are not absolute pacifists. In general, their principle is to be for only as little violence as absolutely necessary. Violence must be appropriate; there are limits (anti-authoritarians would not support the use of nuclear bombs even by a federation of free communes). However, they do not equate the violence of the oppressed with that of the oppressor. There is no equation between a colonial imperialist seizing land from Indigenous people with arms and a violent Indigenous resistance. They do not equate violence used by slaves to escape bondage and the violence used by slave masters to recapture their slaves. They are not embarrassed to physically fight against fascist bands in order to protect workers, African Americans, Muslims, or LGBTQ people.

Neither are they fooled by the "peaceful" appearance of the existing society. It may seem "nonviolent" to get laws passed through the legislative process—but the laws depend for their enforcement on the police and the other governmental agencies. The U.S. Civil Rights laws passed in the sixties were won through massive nonviolent civil disobedience. Once won, they only became meaningful when enforced by the armed power of the state.

The main reason for rejecting revolution as a goal is really the level of popular consciousness. Nowhere in the world is there a mass revolutionary-anarchist consciousness. The U.S. population is particularly conservative; it is the only imperialist country which has never had a large socialist, communist, or labor party. Probably this is due in part to its history as a colonial-settler state, one rooted in stealing land from the Indigenous peoples and in African slavery. Yet it has had great upheavals, such as the Revolution, the Civil War, the great union efforts of the thirties, and the Black liberation struggles, anti-war movement, and other movements of the sixties and thereafter. In any case, history is not over.

Conclusion

There are two main streams in libertarian socialism today: one proposing alternate institution building and one building oppositional movements with the strategic aim of a revolution. These are not absolutely antagonistic. Revolutionary anarchists have a history of community organizing, tenant-union building, and so on, while alternate-institutionalists are likely to join in any popular struggle. The issue is their long-range strategic orientation.

How does a class or a people learn self-government? The existing capitalist society, for all its vaunted “democracy” and “freedom,” mainly teaches political passivity and reliance on “leaders” and bosses. It is through popular struggle, fighting for demands, and opposing the people’s will to that of the ruling minority that people learn to collectively stand up for themselves and to make their own decisions. They oppose their power to that of the capitalist class and its state in the process of revolution.