

Unit 22: Roots of modern anarcho-syndicalism: freedom, oppression & rebellion

This Unit aims to

- Summarise the main origins and motivations in the development of modern anarcho-syndicalism.
- Recap on some of the achievements that have been brushed under the carpet of capitalist history.
- Emphasise the sheer extent of anarchist influence on revolutionary movements.
- Examine the lessons from these experiences that are still relevant for us to apply today and in the future.

Terms and abbreviations

Primitivist: Someone who believes that civilisation has gone too far and we need to dismantle it and return to a simple way of life without modern technology.

Blanquists: adherents of the trend in the socialist movement of France headed by Louis Blanqui. The Blanquists believed that small revolutionary groups could overthrow capitalist rule and bring about Socialism.

Introduction

There remains much to discover of the misrepresented and under-emphasised history of anarchism, libertarian socialism, and anarcho-syndicalism. Totalitarianism and oppression, the dominance of Marxism, and the prejudice of western academia towards a movement, which has remained outside the control of the media leadership and experts, have ensured that this is the case. Now that anarcho-syndicalism is emerging as a force for change across the world, a fuller history can unfold, as more activists begin to trace its roots. Above all else, anarchism stands for freedom. This term has been defined in all sorts of ways, so it needs precise qualification. Anarchist freedom is the freedom for everyone to pursue self-fulfilment and happiness, and all those things that contribute to their quality of life. Briefly, we are talking about the freedom for every human being to be able to develop his or her talents, capacities, knowledge and awareness to their fullest extent, allowing them therefore to maximise their life experience and life quality.

Many capitalist governments would claim they are for freedom and opportunity. However, while capitalism exists, this principle tool of modern-day oppression will ensure that such talk is just that – empty rhetoric. No-one can be free while they are constantly threatened with the sack or with withdrawal of the means to survive. Capitalism fails to deliver in a myriad of ways. Indeed, for the most part, it is the antithesis of freedom. Anarchism is therefore opposed to capitalism. But it doesn't end there - anarchism is a movement of struggle against all forms of oppression - the state, the church, patriotic fervour and sexism, to name a few. We could also extend such oppression to wider human relations; for example, environmental destruction is an oppressive act.

The problem with this definition of anarchist freedom is that it quickly becomes entwined with those forces that are opposed to it. So often anarchism is defined in terms of what it is against and opposed to. What it is for is often not well developed, beyond the notion that it aims to achieve ever-greater human freedom. The Spanish Civil War (see Units 15-18) provides an example of a movement in which this initial vision was developed in detail and put into practice extremely successfully in everyday reality. Given that this was possible over 60 years ago, we must surely now be able to define in the abstract what it is that 'achieving greater ever-human freedom' really means in some detail.

The essence of freedom

Let us take as our starting point the fact that we have defined our 'freedom' in terms of the individual. Anarchism is, in essence, a celebration of individuality. In developing their talents and achieving their aspirations, each individual will be enriching society as a whole and so adding to humanity as a whole. Thus, there is a direct link between individual freedom and human progress.

So the starting point for anarchism is the individual, and the aim is to create the conditions that will best allow the development of each and every individual. However, individual development and quality of life can only happen within society, for every individual grows within society and is therefore shaped by it. To pursue this concept further, put simply, human beings are born into the world more-or-less anti-social, and they become more-or-less social as a result of their environment.

Indeed, the human species itself only took shape through operating successfully in social groups. Equipped with a brain that is capable of making complex judgements, early humans found they could make a better living and have a better life by practising mutual aid – helping each other out in their mutual interest. It was this adaptation that allowed the species to survive, and thrive, despite being physically inferior in many ways to other competing mammals. They may have initially sought safety in numbers, or other relatively simple mutual benefits. However, in the course of banding together in society, the 'beast' slowly gave way to a complex species, which discovered many and varied benefits from increased socialisation.

In society then, the human 'beast' was 'humanised', freed from the slavery of external nature and its own animal instincts. Through collective and social labour, humans were able to shape their environment to improve their life and ensure their physical survival. As an aside, it is only very recently that human-induced environmental change has come to threaten our future survival, and the reasons for this are not primarily socialisation, but capitalism. Through the process of collective labour a common humanity began to emerge. We felt, and began to practise, solidarity. Language, thought and will were developed, enabling conscious thought to take precedent over instinct.

Before society, then, individuality, to all intents and purposes, did not exist - there was only a daily struggle for survival. Society gave birth to individuality. Only then did human beings free

themselves, enabling instinct to be subordinated to conscious thought, and in the process creating choice and free will. Through free will came personal expression and the concept of individuality. Science, from anthropology to archaeology, supports this logical progression in the growth of humanity. The only alternative idea is that human beings were placed on earth by some god or other fully formed, each with their own individuality - an idea for which there is no evidence and which flies in the face of all the evidence we do have about the early phase of human development.

The result is that, without a society based on collective labour, we would cease to function as human beings. Life would return to a ruthless struggle for survival. Only in society can we collectively ensure such basic needs as food, heat, shelter, health care, education and so on. Capitalism shuns collective effort and tries to project an image of humans as being selfish and naturally anti-social. As we have already seen, nothing could be further from the truth. Yet, even with this baggage, we still operate collectively today, caring for ourselves, families and friends through collective work and mutual aid and, for the most part, ensuring our basic needs are met within society.

Even if we could survive physically outside society, we would quickly become unrecognisable as human beings. Existing in isolation, individual human beings would drift away from what we know as humanity and become mentally unstable through lack of social interaction and the security and quality of life that it brings. It is only through the company of others in society that human beings maintain their humanity, and remain conscious of their common situation.

Society is both the provider of our basic and social needs, and the source of our individuality. It is the means by which we overcome our instincts and reach a better quality of life based on co-operation and solidarity. Through it, our selfish instincts become subordinated to social instincts (well, most of the time!), such as solidarity, compassion, empathy, humour, guilt, senses of personal responsibility and common decency, etc. Without the notion of collective solidarity, society would collapse and we would all be condemned to a solitary life that was, indeed, 'nasty, brutish and short'. Since society is not just a means of ensuring our physical well being, but also provides us with our individuality and emotional well

Oppression defined

being, so it follows that collective solidarity is the source of human liberation.

Another facet of society is its role in human development. Humans learn things and are conscious; instinct is therefore only of relative importance to our capacity for learning and awareness. Our individuality develops mainly through education and experience. Emotional and intellectual development simply will not happen to any extent without society. Babies are born with the capacity to feel, to will, to think and speak, but these are rudimentary faculties without content. The content is provided by society. Impressions, facts and events, blend into patterns of thought, that rightly or wrongly, are transmitted from one individual to another. These are modified, expanded, and mutually complemented and integrated by individuals and groups in society into a complex system of social information exchange, which culminates in a common level of consciousness; the collective thoughts of society.

As children develop, they receive, interpret and become part of society through their interaction with people and their individual and collective thoughts. In a collective society, the child can gain access to and use the accumulated knowledge based on the experience of previous generations, and build on it during their life - through the process of individual development. In other words, where education and social interaction is freely available, children can grow up to find self-fulfilment and personal development. In the process, they will further enrich the collective thoughts of society and the quality of society itself. Thus, under these conditions, society and the individual continue to be mutually beneficial to one another. Since anarchism is a celebration of human individuality, the nature of the society on which it depends is critical. Since society is the source of our individual liberation, the aim of anarchism must be to strive for a truly free society as the means of achieving the fullest possible development of human individuality, which is an infinite but well-defined social goal. We strive for a free society, for only then can each individual have access to its full riches as the means of making best use of their natural talents. And only then can they maximise their contribution to the continued improvement in the quality of society.

Oppression - one individual exercising control over another – is the antithesis of freedom. Development of the oppressed individual is inevitably restricted, because they lack freedom. An extreme example of oppression is slavery, where one human being is owned by another, and denied any rights of free expression at all. Condemned to a lifetime of commands, with no will of their own, it is as if the slave does not exist as a conscious being - only as a commodity. He or she becomes the mere extension of the master's will. This ultimate denial of the slave's individuality indicates how removal of freedom reduces human beings' individuality, which is the basis of our humanity. It 'dehumanises' us.

In milder forms, oppression dehumanises us more mildly. Under the wage system we sell ourselves to capitalism for a set period in return for the means to survive. This can be dressed up and concealed but the basic fact remains the same. We may be given certain rights that the master may stick to, but the basic arrangement remains the same. While at work, we are there to do the master's bidding. We become an extension of his (sic) will. This arrangement negates freedom and, as such, prevents the development of our individuality. However, this is not directly a problem for capitalism, for its aims have nothing to do with individuality.

Under capitalism, the aim is to create a market and supply more products to it. The (flawed) idea is that, along the way, people will get 'utility' or happiness out of these goods. More business is critical to capitalism – freedom, individuality and being human is not. In fact, the idea of a society of individuals, each striving for happiness and fulfilment to the benefit of society as a whole, directly conflicts with capitalism, which would prefer a society of wage slaves geared to its 'needs'. The needs may change as capitalist technology changes but the aim remains the same. Under capitalism, education through society is not a means of liberation but primarily a means of enslavement, geared to continuation and intensification of a system of wage slavery.

For anarchism, oppression in all forms and shades is tantamount to slavery. It limits free will and free expression, and stunts individual development. In every case when people actually go about oppressing others the control mechanism involves fear. Often, the fear is obvious, such as the prospect of losing access to housing, health and food, in a world where these are controlled so

closely that in most cases only a wage can ensure any sort of bearable life. Whatever the case, the effect is the same - oppression restricts life through fear.

Freedom from fear is an important human goal - and a motivation at the core of anarchism. The inescapable logic is that all oppression is based on fear and removal of freedom, which restricts our humanity, therefore anarchism opposes all forms of oppression. The aim of anarchism is a situation where no section of society or individual in it has power over another.

The notions of freedom and oppression are also relative and continually changing. If I am hungry, the struggle for freedom may not go beyond the need to be fed. However, once hunger is overcome, the desire for greater freedom increases. The notion of freedom is also intrinsically linked to human development. Advances in health care can and do allow many societies to be free from various illnesses and diseases. To deny access to such advances is a denial of freedom. As the sum of human knowledge and experience develops, the notion of freedom widens, and so does the struggle to attain it. Anarchism is a constantly evolving movement. It is not seeking some 'final', static utopia. Instead, it aims towards a dynamic, ever-changing social system, geared towards searching for more worthwhile human development and therefore ever-greater freedom.

The challenge for capitalists, on the other hand, is a society which is dynamic in the sense that it creates and consumes more products, and that it therefore requires different skills and arrangements to make these products. However, it is static in the basic arrangement of one group of human beings having control of the means of production. Even if there are occasional personnel changes, the *Class* structure is the same. It is also static in the sense that there must and will always be exploitation and oppression at the centre of any capitalist system.

Having control over the workplace and wages enables one group in society to force another group to work for them on their terms. In other words, capitalism is not primarily about humanity or quality of life, or social development, but about one section of society exploiting wealth from another in the form of profit. The capitalist means of production, far from allowing human beings to liberate themselves, becomes the means by which people enslave and exploit each other. It stands to reason that, since anarchism is a movement

against oppression, it must oppose capitalism, which is based on exploitation and inequality. Here, it is worth briefly differentiating between economic, social and political forms of this exploitation and inequality.

Capitalism is primarily concerned with creating economic inequality. It is this, which 'drives' the system, although it is clearly bound closely with social and political inequality. Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all oppression stems from economic inequality. It is possible to have a society under which there is economic equality but oppression based on non-economic power, state communism. It is not just 'capitalism' that anarchism opposes. It seeks an end to all human relations based on power and fear. In its place, it seeks a society where human beings can come together in freedom on equal terms in order to confirm and extend their common humanity as the means of extending themselves as individuals.

'On equal terms' does not imply 'sameness'. Anarchism does not seek a society that is equal by virtue of everybody being the same. This would be the regimented society of state communism, a society of slavery to the state. Anarchism seeks a society of rich diversity and slavery to no-one, where everyone can pursue their talents in the way that they think will best enhance their quality of life, without damaging or removing the same rights of others. Anarchism does not seek to measure or regulate talent or endeavour. Equality of action or behaviour does not therefore even apply. How can you measure the talents of those in society who take pleasure in pure mathematics against those who take pleasure in working the land? People are diverse and anarchism seeks to celebrate that diversity, arguing that all human endeavour aimed at expanding and developing talent is of equal value to society as a whole. Diversity will then be inevitable and assured - society will be as diverse as people wanted it to be - it will reflect the diversity of their own free activity.

Origins of rebellion

It is the desire for ever-greater freedom which anarchism sees as the driving force behind human development. Through accumulated experience of many thousands of years of society, we have developed a deep sense of our individuality, and we continuously seek ways of expressing it. Faced with any form of oppression, which by its very nature restricts individuality; human beings will react and oppose this restriction.

This is no mere abstract idea. Everyone, child or adult, irrespective of cultural background or belief, must recall the feeling of bitter reaction within themselves when ordered to do something against their will by someone else. Even when this order is dressed up in social niceties, the reaction persists, even if it is not as sharp. As time goes by, we grow accustomed to this treatment, we become *conditioned* to it, and the reaction - the spirit of rebellion - dims. Nevertheless it always remains ready to be re-ignited.

The deep resentment towards being ordered around is ever-present. Indeed, referring back to the differences between economic, social and political exploitation, the day-to-day friction at work is often centred more on the basic relationship of 'order giver' and 'order taker' rather than economic matters such as wage differences or 'extraction of profit'. Being bossed around causes bitter reaction in most workplaces.

The friction between order-giver and order-taker - oppressor and oppressed - is a principle source of rebellion. Much of the time, due to *conditioning*, we accept the relationship, and our spirit of rebellion is reduced to little more than a belief that things can only get better (sic), or that the situation is 'not right'. What is left is a feeling of unease, that the alternatives *could* be worse like they say; that the system is wrong but we have to put up with it. From time to time, open resentment and anger may well up between the oppressed and the oppressor, manifested in "us and them" hatred. The capitalists have come to understand this and, as a result, whole legions of "human resource managers" have arrived, designed to break down the barriers between worker and management and develop 'team working'. This particular development is deeply patronising. They seriously expect us to accept that helping 'them' manage 'us' will make us feel better, that it will make us converts to capitalism; eager to help them sell more and make more profits (for them).

Relationships between oppressor and oppressed are often

highly complex as there is always a lot at stake for both sides - otherwise, why would the uneasy and unequal arrangement continue? Open rebellion by the oppressed is to be avoided at all costs by the oppressors - they must offer enough to avoid this eventuality. Nowhere are oppressive relationships more complex than those based on affection, love or otherwise around the family. The long historical battle for equality by women has centred the oppression that exists between men and women within personal relationships.

Wherever there is oppression, there are distorted human relations. No army of human resource management workers, however large (or polite) will alter that fact. For the most part, the distortion results in little more than a sense of unhappiness or lack of fulfilment. In every case, the reason is that, within ourselves as human beings, we are left with the feeling that the reduction of freedom which oppression brings is simply 'wrong'.

Where there is oppression, at some point, those who are oppressed will rebel. History is packed full of examples. Inevitably, the overwhelming desire for free expression will cause human beings to rebel against whatever gets in the way of it. And this is not surprising. The slave, denied the right of free expression, is reduced to an object existing only to do his or her master's bidding. To regain any humanity, the slave must rebel. To do otherwise would be to deny his or her own humanity.

There is always a degree of inertia acting against the initial instinct for rebellion. For example, in rebelling against slavery, the slave must deny the society on which slavery is based. Since there are always things in society, which allow survival and some sort of life, even in slavery, the act of rebellion involves overcoming the 'second thoughts' of having something to lose and realising the importance of what must be regained. The only reason a society could have slaves is if they accept themselves as being less than human. This notion is enough to justify rebellion against slavery and the society upon which slavery is based.

Another potential stop on the instinct to rebel is the idea that you will be alone, pitched against greater forces in society. It is difficult to rebel in isolation. However, in reality, generations of social instincts passed down from generation to generation will invariably ensure that rebellion breeds further rebellion from the like-minded

Aiming high

oppressed everywhere. Even in slavery, human beings will come together to express their common humanity in order to overcome their oppression. In doing so, they will reject the dominant culture that cast them as inhuman, and recreate their own culture. The very essence of that culture will be their enslavement, from which will grow the idea of a better world, free from slavery. The seeds of the new society develop within the old.

For anarchism, rebellion against repression is a major driving force of history. People come together in collective struggle against their oppression. This struggle may take different forms and vary in intensity, depending on numerous factors. But at some point, the struggle against oppression and the society upon which that oppression is based will reach the point where the means of maintaining the oppressed will no longer be able to restrain the struggle against oppression, and the older order will be overthrown by so-called revolutionary change. As such, revolutions are only a special stage in the evolutionary process. They happen when so much authority restricts social aspirations that the old shell of society is shattered by violent means.

A revolution does not automatically bring an end to repression in all its forms, nor does it mean the creation of a utopian society. No revolution has achieved either of these aims, nor is it likely to. For anarchism, revolutions are merely an inevitable part of a longer and wider struggle for humanity and freedom. The 'end' of human history could only come about when oppression in all its forms ends. That is a society based on total freedom. Since achieving freedom creates the desire for more freedom, history, in this sense, will never end.

The key aims of anarchism discussed so far can be summarised:

- Ever-greater mutual freedom as the key to ever-greater individual development:
- Equal access to the things created by and within society for individual development:
- An end to oppression, domination and authority.

A free society based on anarchism will be self-governing, where each person has equal say in the running of things, as well as equal access to the benefits which that society has to offer. Authority will not exist as an external force - instead, power will come from within each individual equally and, as such, will be accepted by all those participating within society. Meanwhile, faced with oppression, rebellion against external or imposed authority will always be the driving force, propelling humanity towards this 'perfect' society. In the words of one articulate anarcho-sindicalist:

“Anarchism is no patent solution for all human problems, no utopia of a perfect social order... since on principle it rejects all absolute schemes and concepts. It does not believe in any absolute truth or in some definite goal for human development, but in an unlimited perfectibility of social arrangements and living conditions, which are always straining for higher forms of expression, and to which for this reason one can assign no definite terminus nor set a fixed goal...Anarchism recognises only the relative significance of ideas, institutions and social forms. It is therefore, not a fixed, self-enclosed social system, but rather a definite trend in the human development of humankind, which strives for the unhindered unfolding of all individual and social forces in life. Even freedom is only relative, not an absolute concept, since it tends constantly to become broader and affect ever wider circles in more manifold ways. For anarchism, freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but the vital concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development all powers, capacities and talents which nature has endowed him/her and turn them into social account.”

States & social contracts

It is tempting to stand back at this point and pronounce how simple and logical anarchism is, and how it merely articulates humanity's long struggle for freedom. But, while the simplest ideas may be the most effective, they may be the most difficult to enact, articulate or practise. Furthermore, anarchism differs markedly from other social systems advocated by political groups and movements, in that they invariably argue for the need of some form of outside authority, like the state. Dictatorship, Marxism, Trotskyism, all forms of liberalism and social democracy, however 'representative', have a common desire –the strong arm of the state, within which they will hold ultimate power. Advocating the state tells us a lot about someone's view as to the nature of humanity.

To begin with, while anarchism would have it that society predates individuality, those who favour the state argue the other way around –that individuality pre-dates society. In other words, human beings evolved as individuals and then decided to come together to form society. Therefore, it is not the nature of society that is of prime importance but the nature of human beings as individuals. For the lovers of the state, individuality is all and society counts for nothing.

From the statist perspective, human beings are by nature anti-social. They come into being as free individuals, 'fully formed' and accountable to no-one but themselves. Isolated in their absolute, individual liberty, they follow one law - their own natural egotism. Relations with others are conducted and driven primarily by self-interest, and are dictated by relative strength and weakness, and ability to profit from each other. Society, for those who argue for the state, is nothing more than a collection of selfish individuals.

Far from coming together as equal human beings, taking pleasure in our common humanity, statist would rather see humans as opposing forces seeking to determine strength and weakness as the prerequisite to winning or losing the next battle in the endless war of ego survival. Adopting this perspective throws a very different light on the reason for society happening in the first place. Without it, humanity faced mutual destruction.

So, those who advocate the state believe that humanity is simply a form of social contract, under which each decides to surrender some of their freedom to ensure the rest. At its most basic, this contract runs along the lines of *'I surrender my freedom to kill you for immediate gain, if you surrender your right to kill me'*. At this point,

it is argued, the state was born, for this contract had to be policed. In such a selfish contract of brutal individuals, without trust or solidarity, an outside authority was needed. The state therefore grew out of the need to formulate the relation between human beings into laws and ensure that these laws are enforced - by brute force and violence if need be.

Importantly, the statist's social contract is not expected to change the essentially fixed nature of humanity, which is still driven by pure self-interest. It simply sets limits on how far the individual can go in pursuit of their self-interest. Without state authority, the assumption is that the contract would break down, and human beings would immediately revert to their 'natural' state of brutality, selfishness, competition and mutual destruction. Hence the view of society as merely a collection of individuals whose barbarity is controlled and limited by the state, ready to turn on each other as soon as this external policing force is removed.

From this perspective, the state is the only possible source of human freedom (sic) - the alternative being immediate, inevitable descent into 'barbarity'. The idea that it is the only bringer of freedom would be laughable if it were not so devastatingly far from reality. Historically, the state has proved to be an intense butcherer and enslaver of humanity, as the horror of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia demonstrates. As to its capability or willingness to deliver human freedom, look no further than your own state!

Clearly, the false notion of the state as liberator is nevertheless a powerful one, so before rejecting it out of hand, let us apply some further rational consideration to this idea that it is the only thing standing between us and barbarity. The question arises; if human beings by nature are 'evil, barbarous, and driven by self-interest' what prevents those in charge of running the state from using its powers in the pursuit of self-interest? After all, the state is made up of human beings just as society is. If human beings are naturally hell-bent on pursuing self-interest, what is to prevent those who run the show from using the power the arrangement presents them with to feather their own nests? According to statist theory, in fact, they could not help themselves from doing this - it is inevitable, since they have no policing mechanism governing them. Who watches the watchers, polices the police, punishes the punishers, regulates the regulators? Any suggestion that these rulers *can* act in society's interest would

immediately throw statist theory out of the window, since it would open up the possibility that all of us *could* act in society's interest - therefore we would not need the brutal father-figure state dishing out threats and punishment to keep us from killing each other.

In the past, absolute monarchy was ordained by God and was therefore 'above' humanity. In these more 'democratic' times, we are supposed to freely elect our leaders. The social democrat of today will argue that well-educated, self-aware, responsible citizens of the modern state will have the foresight to elect only the most intelligent, the public spirited, and the most selfless of leaders to run the state on their behalf. At best, this is an odd perspective; but anyway, let us pursue it some more. The idea is that these citizens, knowing that if they are left to their own devices, they will destroy each other, can be reliably trusted to choose someone to rule over them in order to maintain order. In choosing, they would seek to elect people of quality and worthiness. For this to work the people electing the politicians must therefore have a sense of justice, they must know the difference between acting in self-interest and in the public/social interest. To accurately select these people, they must know about 'human nature' and they must know that it is possible to act in the social interest and what this entails. In short, they must be capable of running society themselves.

At this point, we are no nearer to knowing why, in an inherently evil, selfish human race, a minority has apparently emerged that have overcome their barbarous nature and gained a sense of social awareness that allows them to be trusted with ensuring public order and running the state. If a minority can overcome their evil nature, why not the majority? Why not a self-governing society under which society is organised and run by the people themselves? There is no question among statisticians that some people cannot gain and exercise social justice. For dictatorships, it is one demagogue with a small clique, whereas for social democrats it is a slightly wider section of society. In most modern parliamentary 'democracies', people are elected in and out every few years. Presumably, the theory behind this is that, upon election, the leader assumes a special 'social awareness', which allows them to overcome their innate self-interest, to rule for the public good. When they lose office, presumably they immediately return to the position of barbarous human, needing a state to look over and regulate them again. Otherwise, these people

would not need the new leaders.

The reality could not be further from the truth - as is patently clear to all of us who have spent a lifetime being ruled, except, it would seem, adamant statisticians. People tend to be humble, social and public-spirited. Not everyone, and not all the time, since the state system teaches us that we are otherwise, so we sometimes tend to act otherwise.

However, upon election to office, the 'rush to the head' takes effect, and a systematic flaw in the state idea opens up. Anyone who is granted great power and is told they have the right (and even duty) to govern over others comes under great pressure to conform to the statist 'theory'. The same theory, which tells us we are all barbarians, and we will act in our own self-interest unless we have the state above us. They suddenly find themselves with no state above them - they are the governors and no-one else is there to keep them in check.

There is no suggestion here that, in reality, leaders go through a transformation on entering office, but there is no doubt that 'power corrupts' - any measure of the percentage of corrupt politicians to the incidence of corruption in the population would support this. The fact is that a set of ideas, however flawed, when spread throughout society, will tend to be taken on by the society. Statism is fundamentally flawed, and as such it is statism itself that corrupts us - and, particularly, our leaders. This begs the question; if the state is so corrupting and is the source of our social barbarity rather than our liberation, why did it appear in the first place? Surely, there must have been a 'problem' with pre-state humanity which led to the growth of the state as a potential solution, however flawed it may be?

The answer to the origins of the state is, alas, depressingly simple, almost depressing enough to prompt a 'how did we fall for *that?*!' Of course, it is not the nature of humanity, which ensures the need for the state, but the division within society. In order to maintain inequality in society, those who rule and benefit from inequality need a means of maintaining authority. They do this with the rather limited range of devices of the state, from external threats to threats from within society. This has always been the main function of the state and was the reason for its development.

The state is relatively recent phenomenon; it grew out of the need of a newly arisen possessing class for a political instrument of

power. This was found to be necessary to maintain their economic and social privilege over their own people and to impose their will from above/outside society. Thus, the state was originally, literally planned and conceived as an organ of political power of the privileged caste, for the forced subjugation and oppression of the non-possessing classes. It has remained with precisely the same function ever since, albeit with numerous frills, devices, adjustments and attachments at various points.

The entire rationale of the existence of the state is to maintain inequality. It could not exist unless it had antagonisms with other states. Equally, it could not exist unless there were antagonisms within states. These antagonisms are regularly contrived and created by statisticians in order to justify the state and their position within it. This is the core of the set of devices called state politics. The state is a means of control. But, far from being there to protect humanity against its inherent barbarity, its function is actually to control and destroy any threat to the interests of the ruling elite. By its inherent structure, the state can perform only two main functions, protecting old privileges and creating new ones.

Undoubtedly, the statist would also claim, with some due cause, that the state seeks to maintain order for everyone in society, that it educates, and ensures good health for, its citizens. However, all such devices are only part of achieving the primary interest - that of the ruling class. Health, education and housing were 'provided' to ensure an adequate workforce for capitalism, adequate supplies of cannon fodder to fight wars, etc.

There is only one situation where the state may appear to act in the interest of those it rules, and this is when the 'common people' pose such a threat to the state that it is forced to make concessions. However, even then it is still *acting primarily* in the ruling class interest - after all, it is sometimes better to give a little and maintain the basic advantage than to resist and risk losing everything. The social role of the state at any given time is therefore dependent upon what state politicians deem the ruling class must give away to maintain the status quo. Indeed, the expertise of state politicians is primarily about how good they are at judging the 'public mood' - in other words, what they think they can get away with.

To summarise, the state, far from being the liberator of humanity, is the main source of our enslavement. It is founded on

authority, through the idea that we are incapable of governing ourselves, so we constantly need to submit to a higher authority to protect ourselves from each other. It is predicated on the idea that we must give up our freedom in order to be sure we will not be killed by each other.

As long as the state exists, there will be a major division within society - between the ruling class and the rest. Even if those elected to administer the state start out with the best of intentions, e.g. to work towards an egalitarian society, the function of the state does not change - the maintenance of ruler and ruled. We still have a society in which one set of human beings has power over another. Furthermore, any new well-meaning political oligarchy, cut off from and put in power over society, can only become corrupted, leading to the emergence of a new elite. This might well continue to talk the language of egalitarianism, but it must increasingly use the power of the state to ensure its long-term survival, classic examples being every Marxist-inspired government to date. The state is a self-fulfilling false prophecy.

Hardly surprisingly, anarchism totally rejects the need for the state in all its forms. The only alternative is a self-organised society, democratically controlled from the bottom up. A free society based on equality and run by the people as a whole for the benefit of people as a whole is the only non-statist form of society. The only other option would be to advocate getting rid of society itself through some 'primitivist' means. Since it is held that humanity is a result of society, this advocates the denial/end of humanity, which means we would have to ditch any possibility of social development and individuality.

Anarchism is far more than just another political doctrine. It is the only plausible movement of thought which advocates no state, and it is therefore the only set of ideas that has the potential to bring about a society free of the state. In the words of one anarchist:

"I am a fanatic lover of liberty, considering it as the unique condition under which intelligence, dignity and human happiness can develop and grow; not the purely formal liberty conceded, measured out and regulated by the state, an eternal lie which, in reality, represents nothing more than the privilege of some, founded on the slavery of the rest; not the individualistic, egoistic, shabby and fictitious liberty extolled (by the) schools of bourgeois liberals, which considers the

would-be rights of man, represented by the state, which limits the rights of each - an idea that leads inevitably to the reduction of the rights of each to zero. No, I mean the only kind of liberty that is worthy of the name, liberty that consists in the full development of all the material and moral powers that are latent in each person."

Anarcho-syndicalism

So far in this Unit we have been discussing anarchism. However, it is worth making some brief comments on the differences between the terms 'anarchism' and 'anarcho-syndicalism'.

The term 'anarchism' describes a historical trend that has placed emphasis on freedom and the need for a self-organised society. As such, anarchism is a part of the total struggle against oppression. Not surprisingly, anarchist ideas can be found at various points in history. However, it was only with the arrival of the ideas of socialism in the 19th Century (see Block 1) that a group of anarchists formed themselves into a clearly defined movement, by beginning to form ideas about tactics and strategy for bringing about a society based on anarchism. This set of ideas later became known as revolutionary syndicalism, and then anarcho-syndicalism.

Therefore, while anarchism grew out of opposition to the state and capitalism, anarcho-syndicalism has its origins in the libertarian socialist movement, which itself grew out of opposition to Marxism. Within the First International (see Unit 3), the advocates of this libertarian opposition referred to themselves variously as socialists and anarchists, though the former term was far more commonly used. This point is worth stressing for two reasons. First, it emphasises that while it is built on the opposition to the state and capitalism that anarchism brings, anarcho-syndicalism is a development of this basic trend in that it is also principally socialist. In other words, it recognises that the means of production must be run by the community for the benefit of the community before a free society can be established. Secondly, the fact that anarcho-syndicalism grew out of the division

between libertarian socialism and state socialism indicates how crucially important this distinction is to anarcho-syndicalists. At its core, anarcho-syndicalism is a retort to Marxism and other forms of state socialism. It was through this division of the First International that anarcho-syndicalism emerged as a clearly defined movement.

Since anarcho-syndicalism originated as an alternative, non-statist means for bringing about a libertarian socialist society, it was forced to develop rapidly, both theoretically and tactically. Its development can be seen within the debates that took place in the First International and in subsequent events. Consequently, anarcho-syndicalists quickly recognised that they needed both tactics and strategy in addition to the notions, aims and ideas they had inherited from anarchism and libertarian socialism. Equally, these tactics and strategy had to be flexible in that they must respond to changing circumstances and be prepared to experiment with new ways of advancing the libertarian society. On the other hand, they needed to adhere to principles as well as aims, in order to avoid falling into the trap of allowing statism to enter the movement and damage it, as Marxism had done in the First International. For anarcho-syndicalists the ends do not justify the means, the 'means' and the 'ends' have to be organically linked.

One of the key tactics which developed within the proto-anarcho-syndicalist movement was the general strike, which was conceived as a means of bringing capitalism to an end by attacking it economically, thus undermining the power generated by profit (see Units 4-6). This did not mean taking on 'economic' struggles and leaving out 'political' or 'social' struggles - anarcho-syndicalists have always stressed that to mirror these false divisions generated by the state and capitalism in our organisations would be a fundamental error. Anarcho-syndicalist organisations must be part of an integrated social, political and economic movement. As an illustration of this, we need look no further than Spain (see Units 15-18). Without workers, the Spanish movement would have got nowhere; without political ideas it would have got nowhere; without social struggles it would have got nowhere; and without the ideals gleaned from anarchism and socialism, it would have had no purpose.

Why Marxism failed

The split within the socialist movement in the latter part of the 19th Century had a major impact on the course of revolutionary history. It exposed the unbridgeable chasm that exists between those who advocate libertarian revolt based on self-management and mutual aid, and those who favour capturing state power. The latter camp was dominated by Marxists, who claimed to have discovered the laws that determine history through scientific study, and sought to gain state power to apply these laws to society as a means of bringing about socialism. Marxism, then, was not so much a movement of struggle against oppression, as a scientific theory through which socialism could allegedly be achieved, hence the term 'scientific socialism'.

For Marxists, the key to historical development was the economy, and more specifically, the mode of production. The economy was seen as *the* determinant of the nature of society. Thus, as the economy changed, so would the society upon which it was based. With the economy at the centre of Marx's view of the human world, natural science, philosophy, ethics, culture, democratic institutions, etc. were all seen as peripheral. These paraphernalia were mere reflections of the economy, and simply provided the ideological superstructure of the economy. In basic terms, then, Marx's thesis was that you only had to engineer a change in the mode of production, and change in the whole of society would follow.

The first crucial error of judgement was that it didn't seem to matter to Marx or his followers *how* change was to be brought about – process was secondary to outcome. Marx argued simply that socialism could come about by workers taking control of the state. Once in charge, they could bring an end to capitalist relations and bring about a society based on economic equality, where human beings could not exploit each other for economic gain. In line with Marxist historical theory, once capitalist relations ended, a new society built on the new economic order would emerge, based on social, political and economic equality, that is, after the small matter of a 'transitional period'.

The Marxists' chosen vehicle for gaining state power was the political party. Immediately on gaining power, the leaders of the party, which would be those most versed in the understanding of scientific socialism, would form a socialist government. It would be this body that would take over the running of society and end capitalism. With

economic equality achieved, and social and political equality having automatically followed, the socialist leadership would then leave the stage of history, their historic task being completed. Thereafter, the state would 'wither away' and the self-governing communist utopia would be born, heralding, presumably, the end of human struggle and development.

The libertarian socialist wing of the First International was not slow to point out the major flaws within the Marxists position. In politer moments, they pointed out that the state and society are not merely reflections of economic relations. Leaders form a class of themselves. Just because the modern state had emerged based on economic relations to promote the interests of capitalism, this did not mean that a future state authority existing above society, based on the principle of ruler and ruled, would act any differently from those in the past. In more bitter moments, they lashed out at the idea of using the state to gain revolutionary power, arguing that even if 'economic equality' could be achieved by this means, the presence of the state automatically means the presence of oppression. They predicted with accuracy and foresight that the socialist party leaders would form a new elite, existing above society and, far from freeing it, they would further enslave it. The only way, they argued, was to attack both state power and capitalism, and build a movement that would help bring about a new form of society based on self-management. Well over 100 years later, it is unnecessary to labour the point - history, not least that of the Soviet Union and China, speaks for itself.

The division between Marxism and anarchism provides two totally different perspectives on how movements emerge. To the scientific socialist Marxists, theory was all-important, and this was deemed enough to create movements and form the basis of a revolution. However, libertarian socialists, and now anarcho-syndicalists, argued that social movements do not spring from theory, but from life. Movements develop in opposition to oppression, driven by the desire for freedom. As these movements develop, the idea of a better world develops. It is only then that relevant and useful development of theory about how to bring about the required change to end oppression emerges. Ideas and theories spring from practical reality. They emerge from within the struggle, giving it purpose and conscious direction.

History, once again, speaks in the anarcho-syndicalists' favour.

The labour movement did not appear as the result of the theories of socialism, but because of the conditions created by capitalism and, more specifically, it emerged in opposition to capitalism's oppression. As people came together in struggle, the idea of socialism took shape, as a form of society, which could replace capitalism, based on equality and freedom. 'Socialism' was and is therefore an integral part of the labour movement. Theory cannot be separated off from it, or studied and developed in isolation from experience. Importantly, neither can practice continue to be successful without theory and tactics being developed out of experience. Both are essential and both are interactive – their development involves an ongoing process of struggle - experience – ideas - tactics - theory - revision of struggle - new experience – new ideas - new tactics - re-examination of theory - more struggle and experience, and so on.

Theory forms a living part of a movement, based on the practice of life. Both develop as part of the same movement involving the same people, constantly evolving as they develop. Marxism, at the outset, effectively separated theory from practice. As a result, 'correctness' of theory became of prime importance. The subsequent elevation of Marx to the status of a communist guru only served to strengthen the unquestioning 'rightness' and primacy of Marx's words. Fundamental errors within his theory were therefore acted out as if they were not there - all that mattered was 'going by the book'.

It is not surprising, given the Marxists' approach, that the vehicle chosen to bring the theory to fruition was not the workers' organisations, immersed in everyday struggle and experience, but the political party. The political party could operate with a small leadership, offering unquestioning adherence to theory, and was unsullied by the complications of learning from experience. Though Marx did argue for the building of a mass workers' party rather than a small elitist Leninist vanguard party, the theoretical mistake he made was choosing the party at all. This party was to win power through the ballot box where possible and seize power where necessary. However, with his economic-dominated mind Marx failed to predict that, once in power, the elitism inherent in Marxism would emerge, for it was only the leadership of the party who were capable of taking control of society.

The whole point of Marx's 'transitional period' was that the state, led by the most 'advanced' workers, would take control until the

workers were 'capable' of running society themselves. This illustrates another fundamental weakness - at its heart, Marxism lacked faith in the working class. Stating that, in the aftermath of a revolution, the mass of the population would be unable to run a new society was not only patronising and wrong, it betrays all too clearly where Marx saw himself and his party leaders - and it was not as part of the ignorant masses. Marxist theory and the Marxist state would be needed because the workers were incapable of running their own affairs.

The question arises as to why, with such insulting undertones, Marxism was to eventually find such strong resonance within the working class, as it undoubtedly did. One of the key attractions of Marxism was that it offered an apparently different and better 'end' to history, but in the here and now, it mimicked many of the capitalist class' attitudes and institutions. As with any oppressed group, a major source of the 19th Century working class' oppression lay in a failing of confidence. No oppressor can maintain their position of power through pure physical force alone. Every society exists on the basis of co-operation in daily relations between human beings, despite what market theory may predict and, if it did not, society would collapse. The ruling elite cannot stand behind each and every individual and compel them to co-operate. Such is the social nature of human beings that even in the most oppressive of societies, human beings on a daily basis will co-operate and interact with each other.

Societies based on inequality must have a belief system that reflects the brute force of the state. In many capitalist societies, this takes the form of religious values, which argue that God preordains the nature of society, in other words, that humanity must comply with a higher authority (or else). At their heart, such belief systems rest on a lack of confidence - you need someone to tell you what to do. If you are told this enough times and if you live in a society, which constantly reinforces such beliefs, you do tend to end up lacking confidence. In other words, one of the keys to running an oppressive society is engendering and maintaining a total lack of confidence by the oppressed in themselves. The working class have always been taught from birth that they are inferior, less intelligent, incapable of running their own affairs and, without some outside authority, society would degenerate into barbarity. Working class deference to a higher authority, based on this lack of self-worth was, and remains, a barrier

to effective struggle. However, it is easy to see how the Marxist idea of a new authority taking over, this time a socialist one with the workers' interests at heart, appealed to those in the deferential and downtrodden working class who had the least confidence in themselves.

In one major tactic, Marxism undermined the entire section of the socialist movement that it attracted. It swept away a central plank of the emerging libertarian socialist movement - that the act of freeing the workers must be the task of the workers themselves. In place of self-reliance and self-organisation, Marxism had the workers' state, a new power outside society and separate from the workers' own organisations, imposing its authority, apparently in the interest of those very same workers, on whose behalf it ruled. The working class could therefore sit back and let the Marxist party do the intellectual work of planning and taking over the state machinery from the capitalists. All they had to do was to put their cross on a piece of paper and the task of building a new world would begin. The fact that workers' organisations would immediately become passive or inactive was not foreseen – neither was the resultant injection of reformism into the socialist movement. The unions, which the libertarian socialists saw as being critical to building a new socialist culture, were, under Marxist theory, reduced to concentrating on making immediate gains. They were purely economic in nature, and subservient to the political parties, who had the real task - to transform society. The unions were emptied of their political content, and the workers became passive bystanders in the struggle for the new society.

Under the influence of Marxism, the early unions became transformed, eventually becoming the sad, subservient and hopelessly reformist shells we know today. This undermining process was no Marxist mistake. The unions were not part of Marx's strategy - in fact, they often contradicted his theory, which was not allowed. Marxists generally viewed unions as lacking revolutionary potential and even as a distraction to the main struggle of gaining political power. In times when the unions appeared to contradict this, and their activities not fit with Marxist theory, the Marxist party leadership felt undermined by the power of these confident workers' organisations. Later, when they had the chance, they turned the power of the state on them with brutal consequences (see Units 11

and 12).

The Marxists evidently totally misunderstood the nature of the radical union movements that were forming in opposition to capitalism around the turn of the century (see Units 4-6). This is not surprising – they were in small, clique-ridden political parties, concerned with theory, and rarely involved in any of these organisations or their struggles. The reality was that capitalism had reduced working conditions to the unbearable - numerous contemporary writers described the horrendous conditions that workers had to live and work in. To retain any semblance of humanity, they had to do something. Forming unions was their response, and they became the means by which they were able to begin to regain their lost humanity. As one anarchist wrote, the unions;

“...gave a footing once more to the uprooted masses which the pressure of economic conditions had driven into the great industrial centres. It revived their social sense. The class struggle against the exploiters awakened the solidarity of the workers and gave a new meaning to their lives.”

Aims, means, principles

The early unions went far beyond being merely the means of improving workers' conditions that the Marxists viewed them as. They arose from the situation people found themselves in, and they demonstrated that people are capable of organising themselves despite their oppression and the apparent odds stacked against them. Most importantly, the people involved knew from their experience that these unions could and should not be based upon the economic struggle alone. Many of the early unions therefore developed as a part of daily life for the working class as a whole - in much the same basic way in which anarcho-syndicalists of today would see as a useful way to organise. They had the political and social breadth required to allow a new culture to develop, based on human solidarity, which would in turn form the basis of the new society.

The idea that the working class, living and working in desperate conditions, would set up unions to achieve immediate gains only is a mockery. They sought a complete social transformation. Rapidly, as the vision for the change they wanted took shape, it became known as socialism. From the depths of their own experience and the organisations that sprang from it, the ideas that were to form the basis of the new world were formulated.

For proof of the nature and intention of the early unions, we need look no further than the First International (see Unit 3). Having originally set out to ensure practical solidarity amongst workers throughout the world, by 1869, it had turned its attention to aims and principles. A report was presented to that year's congress, stating clearly that the unions were to be regarded as the social cells of a coming "socialist order" and it was therefore the task of the International to assist them in this role. The report formed the basis of a motion calling for the setting up of local community-based workers' associations as part of the plan to replace the wage system with "federations of free producers". During the debate, the mover of the motion argued that the "councils of the trade and industrial organisations will take the place of the present government, and this representation of labour will do away, once and for ever, with the governments of the past". This was an important developmental stage in what was later to emerge as the anarcho-syndicalist movement, and it clearly came directly from the workers and their organisations. Far from being merely methods of gaining better pay and conditions, these early unions were seen as the means by which

the working class could develop the structures, skills and confidence that were to form the basis of the new socialist society. As Bakunin, a prominent anarchist of the era, wrote at the time:

"All this practical and vital study of the social science by the workers themselves in their trade union and their chambers will, and already has, engendered in them the unanimous, well considered, theoretically and practically demonstrable conviction that the serious, final, complete liberation of the workers is possible only upon one condition, that all the appropriation of capital, that is raw material and all the tools of labour, including land, is made by the whole body of the workers themselves. The organisation of the trade sections, their federations in the international, and their representation by chambers of labour not only create a great academy, in which the workers of the international, combining theory and practice, can and must study economic science, they also bear in themselves the living germs of the new order, which is to replace the bourgeois world. They are creating not only the idea but also the facts of the future society."

In short, the unions were creating not just the idea of a future society, but the new society itself, within the shell of the old. In the early meetings of the International, there is little tolerance of the state and, in fact, very little mention of state socialism. The workers, in their local communities, were developing the ideas and relationships that would become those of the new society. Not surprisingly, the state, which had done so much to oppress them, did not feature in these plans, except as an obstacle to be got rid of. Nor is there much talk of merely seeking economic liberation. The need was not just for things, but also for freedom. This naturally meant not just an end to economic exploitation, but also an end to the rule of one human being over another.

Postscript

In this Unit we have examined the early stages of development of the movement for a society without capitalism and the state. The main motivation for this movement was oppression, and the main direction of it was towards mutual freedom. For the 19th Century anarchists and libertarian socialists, the development of theory came out of experience in struggle, and it was continually driven by the desire to end oppression, authority, and domination.

In contrast, the Marxists and other reformist state socialists had little experience of direct struggle and so had little understanding as to the nature of the emerging radical unions. The French Blanquists, a major state socialist group, saw the trade unions as merely a reform movement. Instead, they advocated a socialist dictatorship. Meanwhile, Marx and his allies within Germany strove in vain to gain real influence within a First International composed of anarchists and unions who were learning by application and practice of direct action.

Marx's theoretical, economics-centred approach is fundamentally flawed, not least in its lack of faith in the working class, which necessitated the retention of a party, leadership and state - the very things which were the cause of so much of the oppression and misery. Although some of the biggest holes in Marxist theory were apparent to contemporaries, the clique around Marx and the primacy of his theory ensured that such 'details' were ignored by many of those involved. Tragically, the fundamental lack of confidence within the working class meant Marxism gained ground, culminating in events like the Russian Revolution of 1917. In Unit 23, we will continue tracing the development of modern anarcho-syndicalism, culminating, in Unit 24, with a summary of anarcho-syndicalism today.

Key points

- The key idea of anarchism is freedom.
- The driving force behind human development is seen as the desire to be free.
- A major driving force of history is rebellion against repression.
- The state, in whatever form, is the antithesis of freedom.
- Anarcho-syndicalism developed the ideas of anarchism and the socialism that grew from the workers' movements of the 19th Century.
- Anarcho-syndicalism maintains that the aims and the means should be organically linked.
- Anarcho-syndicalism stands in opposition to the authoritarian socialism of Marxism.

Checklist

1. What is the main aim of anarchism?
2. Do anarchists want everyone to be the same?
3. Why are anarchists anti-statists as well as anti-capitalist?
4. How did anarcho-syndicalism originate?
5. What is the major reason for the failure of Marxism?
6. How are the ends and means linked for anarcho-syndicalists?

Answer suggestions

1. What is the main aim of anarchism?

The main aim of anarchism is to achieve a free and equal society where every individual can pursue self-fulfilment and happiness by developing their talents, capacities, knowledge and awareness to the fullest.

2. Do anarchists want everyone to be the same?

Anarchism does not seek a society that is equal by virtue of everybody being the same. Instead it seeks a society of rich diversity and slavery to no-one, where everyone can pursue their talents in the way that they think will best enhance their quality of life, without damaging or removing the same rights of others. Anarchism does not seek to measure or regulate talent or endeavour. Individuals are diverse and anarchism seeks to celebrate that diversity, arguing that all human endeavour aimed at expanding and developing talent is of equal value to society as a whole. Diversity will then be inevitable and assured - society will be as diverse as people wanted it to be - it will reflect the diversity of their own free activity.

3. Why are anarchists anti-statists as well as anti-capitalist?

Anarchists oppose capitalism as it is based on exploitation and inequality. At the same time anarchists have always opposed the state, in whatever form it takes, as it is seen as the main source of enslavement.

4. How did anarcho-syndicalism originate?

Anarcho-syndicalism took the basic notion of freedom from anarchism and integrated it with the ideas of socialism that grew from the workers' movements in the 19th century.

5. What is the major reason for the failure of Marxism?

Marxist theory is based on the primacy of economic oppression and fails to have any coherent critique of power itself. It sees itself as scientific theory that has discovered the laws that determine historical change. It argues that economic exploitation needs to be ended first before other forms of oppression can cease. To do this a political party would need to seize state power in the name of the working class.

Suggested discussion points

6. *How are the ends and means linked for anarcho-syndicalists?*

For anarcho-syndicalists the creation of a free and equal society means acting and organising along the same lines as those envisaged in the future society. The ends and the means need to be linked. The new society needs to be created in the shell of the old by creating organic structures that will carry through the transformation.

- Is it modern technology or the control of technology that causes inequality and oppression?
- Is there such a thing as a servile state?

Further Reading

This Unit draws on ideas introduced in Units 1-21, so these are a starting point for tracing the origins of anarcho-syndicalism. To find out more, you can always contact us at SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW (da@directa.force9.co.uk). Alternatively, try the Internet; the Direct Action website is one starting point for links to SF and other organisations and their ideas (www.directa.force9.co.uk), or libraries and second-hand bookshops. To mail order further reading, try the AK catalogue, from AK Distribution, PO Box 12766, Edinburgh, EH8 9YE (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd).