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What anarchism really means

Anarchist Studies Network

18 November 2010

Protesters are never a homogenous group, but those who protested under the anti-cuts banner last week were united in the view that the marketisation of higher education should be opposed. Typically, however, property destruction magically transformed a sizeable subset into “anarchists”, and gave a green light to the general dismissal of their concerns.

It’s certainly true that anarchists were among the protesters.

What’s misleading is the media’s assumption that there’s a generalised relationship between anarchism and violence. Anarchism is a far richer tradition, and in the light of the media frenzy, it’s worth reflecting on what it stands for.

The Con-Dem alliance is looking to roll back the state. Anarchists want this too, but the government is looking to roll back the state and let business take up the slack, thereby bringing a fictitious “free market” into every last recess of our lives. That’s where the disagreement lies. Anarchists advocate practical alternatives to both this neoliberal slash-and-burn policy and the old Labour state-socialism.

Generating a market in education will benefit those who want to make money out of it. Principally, this will include profit-driven universities and businesses. Education for the

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purpose of developing a sense of our personal and social potential is out, while education for a fat pay cheque is in: the government takes training off its balance sheets and heaps the cost onto students. Students are in effect being asked to pay universities up to £40k for a job interview with a graduate recruiter. And if your “investment” in your future doesn’t pay off, the system will claim to be blameless: the responsibility is the student’s. To assume that the interests of business and society are the same is utopian.

But anarchists do not believe that state socialism is the only alternative to the undemocratic inequalities produced by neoliberalism. Socialising property does not have to mean nationalising it — that would simply be substituting one set of bosses for another. What about genuine collective worker ownership of industry and services; what about universities democratically run by academics, students and support staff, instead of largely unaccountable and overpaid managers and technocrats?

More widely, couldn’t we radicalise the co-operative model and have all companies democratically owned and run by managers and workers? Couldn’t we expand and federate worker co-ops, mutuals and collectives? The movement for fan-ownership of football clubs is a further indication that these kinds of alternatives work. The challenge is to think through their potential, and anarchism provides such a framework.

But how does all this differ from the “big society”, you might ask? In brief, the Tories are trying to mutualise the welfare state in preparation for privatising it. Individuals will be made responsible, but they will be given none of the power. Charities, voluntary associations and so on will be allowed to organise a village fete but the neoliberal structures of power will not be challenged. Wouldn’t it make more sense to start by mutualising the banks?

As it stands, politicians have managed to protect the banks while everyone else takes the pain. As the cuts pinch the poor

and the rich get no poorer, it will become clear whose interests are being served. As worker militancy grows and protests become more frequent, the demand for ever stronger, authoritative states will become louder, civil liberties will be curtailed (again), and those at the top of the tree will tell us that they have some special right.

Modern liberal democracies garner the opinion of some adults of voting age once every five years as a solution to predetermined elite bargaining. Who voted for the Con-Dem coalition? When the governments that are voted in then routinely ignore the will of the people, be that over wars, cuts, or the minutiae of policy, we see modern representative democracy for the sham that it is. Allowing protest only on condition that it will never present a challenge to government is part of that same sham.

Because this fake democracy doesn't work and the interests of anarchists could never be represented by a political party, direct action is the tactic of choice. And direct action is part of the process of creating direct democracy. It produces results by raising the profile of causes and often halting practices many object to.

As well as a tactic, direct action is also a means for self-empowerment. It is a component of the society we hope to create, where people take control of their lives into their own hands and confront the root causes of injustices directly, without representatives. This sometimes includes property damage, but anarchists take seriously the notions of liberty and equality: that people are capable of speaking and acting for themselves and become even more capable through practice rather than representation.

The threat to a liveable world comes not from anarchists, but from governments and capitalism. Before the current crisis is used as a front to take us even deeper into a neoliberal nightmare, let's reconsider alternatives.

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The Anarchist Studies Network is a specialist group of the UK Political Studies Association. This piece was collectively written but does not necessarily reflect a consensus.