

Anarchism and Sabotage

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Anarchists have tended to view the tactic of sabotage more favorably than orthodox Marxists. This category of political behavior is usually associated, as the sociologist Pierre Dubois (1979: 21) describes, with three types of industrial action: the deliberate destruction of the machinery of production; the disruption of the labor process; or the cessation of productive labor. It consequently takes many forms, from arson and vandalism, through to go-slows and working without enthusiasm, to strikes and occupations. For the former radical syndicalist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (1993), it is any action in which the worker deliberately attempts to reduce the economic efficiency of their labor.

Flynn's more libertarian definition of sabotage is wider than that associated with Friedrich Engels. It is Engels' more critical appraisal of sabotage that has influenced orthodox Marxism, and forms the basis of the division between them and anarchists on this issue. Engels, in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, associates sabotage primarily with just one part – machine breaking – and this is more commonly associated with the Luddites (Thompson 1991: 604). The Luddites were largely artisans opposed to the destruction of their livelihoods and communities as a result of the introduction of mechanical manufacture of textiles. For Engels, sabotage is at the lower end of a hierarchy of proletarian action, just above criminal activity and well short of disciplined revolutionary political organization. The historian E. P. Thompson rejects the characterization of the Luddites and their tactics as merely a disorganized attempt by a few malcontents engaged in a futile attempt to roll back progress. Thompson instead suggests that the Luddites' actions were highly creative, well-organized, and targeted assaults at pivotal sites of capitalist development, which also fed into other forms of social protest (1991: 605–7, 629–30).

The division between orthodox Marxists on the one side and revolutionary syndicalists, libertarian socialists, and anarchists on the other, has continued to shape attitudes to sabotage. The latter have regarded sabotage as an often legitimate and creative set of tactics for workers to meet their desires at the expense of hierarchical power (see Convington et al. 2006: 189), while the former consider such methods to be infantile and destructive to longer-term interests of the class (Challinor 1977: 96). Such a difference in part reflects the distinct views on agency. Orthodox Marxism privileges the proletariat acting in unison under the guiding hand of the revolutionary party, while anarchists tend to support wider sets of unmediated responses by a larger set of oppressed subjects, which includes Thompson's artisans.

The distinction in responses to sabotage is also indicative of the division between orthodox Marxists and anarchists on their post-revolutionary vision. For Leninists, the upcoming revolution involved the proletariat seizing control of the means of production and managing it so that production would meet collective needs rather than individual profit; consequently, there was fear that sabotage would destroy the means of production that would provide the post-revolutionary infrastructure. For anarchists, sabotage meant fundamentally altering the means of production such that all productive activity was fulfilling, not merely waiting for a new type of "socialist" management.

SEE ALSO: Anarchism ; Anarchosyndicalism ; Engels, Friedrich (1820–1895) ; Flynn, Elizabeth Gurley (1890–1964) ; Leninist Philosophy ; Luddism and Machine Breaking ; Marxism ; Thompson, Edward Palmer (E. P.) (1924–1993)

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