Modern Technology and Anarchism

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In their polemics with the Marxists the anarchists argued that the state subjects the economy to its own ends. An economic system once viewed as the prerequisite for the realization of socialism now serves to reinforce the domination of the ruling classes. The very technology that could now open new roads to freedom has also armed states with unimaginably frightful weapons for the extinction of all life on this planet.

Only the social revolution can overcome the obstacles to the introduction of the free society. Yet the movement for emancipation is threatened by the far more formidable political, economic and social power and brain-washing techniques of the ruling classes. To forge a revolutionary movement, inspired by anarchist ideas is the great task to which we must dedicate ourselves.

To make the revolution we must stimulate the revolutionary spirit and the confidence of the people that their revolution will at last reshape the world nearer our aspirations. Revolutions are stirred by the conviction that our ideals can and will be realized. A big step in this direction is to document the extent to which the liberating potential of modern technology constitutes a realistic, practical alternative to the monopoly and abuse of power. This is not meant to imply that anarchism will miraculously heal all the ills inflicting the body social. Anarchism is a twentieth century guide to action based on realistic conceptions of social reconstruction.

Anarchism is not a mere fantasy. Its fundamental constructive principle — mutual aid — is based on the indisputable fact that society is a vast interlocking network of cooperative labor whose very existence depends upon its internal cohesion. What is indispensable is emancipation from authoritarian institutions over society and authoritarianism within the people's associations — themselves and miniature states.

Peter Kropotkin, who formulated the sociology of anarchism, wrote that "Anarchism is not a utopia. The anarchists build their previsions of the future society upon the observation of life at the present time..." If we want to build the new society the materials are here.

Decentralization

When Kropotkin wrote in 1899, his classic *Fields, Factories and Workshops* to demonstrate the feasibility of decentralizing industry to achieve a greater balance and integration between rural and urban living, his ideas were dismissed by many as premature. However, it is no longer disputed that the problem of making the immense benefits of modern industry available to even the smallest communities has largely been solved by modern technology. Even bourgeois economists, sociologists and administrators like Peter Drucker, John Kenneth Galbraith, Gunnar Myrdal, Daniel Bell and others now favor a large measure of decentralization not because they have suddenly become anarchists, but primarily because technology has rendered anarchistic forms of organization "operational necessities" — a more efficient devise to enlist the cooperation of the masses in their own enslavement.

Peter Drucker writes, "Decentralization has become exceedingly popular with American business... decisions have to be made at the lowest possible rather than at the highest possible level... it is important to emphasize the concept of functional decentralization." With respect to the emergence of highly qualified trained scientific, technical, engineering, educators, etc. whom Drucker calls knowledge workers he remarks "We must let them manage their own plant community." (*The New Society*, page 256, 357)

John Kenneth Galbraith, for example, writes: "in giant industrial corporations autonomy is necessary for both small decisions and large questions of policy... the comparative advantages of atomic and molecular power for the generation of electricity are decided by a variety of scientists, technical, economic and planning judgments. Only a committee, or more precisely, a complex of committees can combine the knowledge and experience that must be brought to bear... The effect of denial of autonomy and the inability of the technostructure [corporate centralized industry, SD] to accommodate itself to changing tasks has been visibly deficient organizations. The larger and more complex organizations are, the more they must be decentralized..." (*The New Industrial State*, page 111)

The engineering expert Robert O'Brian (Life Publications, 1985) explains that "because electricity... can be piped almost anywhere... borne by high tension lines across mountains, deserts and all manner of natural obstacles.. factories no longer need be located near their sources of power. As a result, the factories have been able to relocate at will..."

The following quote from Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* reads like an extract from Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops*: "... electricity decentralizes... permits any place to be a center and does not require large aggregations... By electricity we everywhere resume personal relations on the smallest village scale... In the whole field of the electrical revolution this pattern of decentralization appears in various guises..."

The cities in what was once the industrial heartland of American now look like abandoned ghost towns. Steel, auto, agricultural machinery, mines, electronic plants, and other installations are rushing away. But the industrial corporations did not go out of business. They simply built new plants abroad or here in the U.S. in remote, non-industrial, non-union areas were wages and working conditions are poor. Automobiles, clothing, shoes, electronic equipment, machinery; almost everything formerly manufactured in the United States is now being made abroad even in "third world" countries like Mexico, Brazil, Nigeria, Korea — though many of these countries lack essential natural resources. For example, Japan with very few natural resources is nevertheless a first class industrial power exporting and competing with the United States and other industrialized nations in the production of steel, automobiles, electrical products and other goods. General Motors promised to build a new plant in Kansas City but will build it in Spain. The Bulova Watch Corporation makes watch movements in Switzerland, assembles them in Pogo Pogo and ships them to be sold in the Unites States. And so it goes.

Extirpating Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy is a form of organization in which decisions are made on the top, obeyed by the ranks below, and transmitted through a chain of command as in an army. A bureaucratic regime is not a true community, which implies an association of equals making decisions in common and carrying them out jointly.

A major obstacle to the establishment of a free society is the all-pervading bureaucratic machinery of the state and the industrial, commercial and financial corporations exercising de facto control over the operations of society. Bureaucracy is an unmitigated parasitical institution.

Highly qualified scientific-technological experts, economists and other academics, who accepted bureaucracy as an unpleasant, but indispensable necessity, now agree that the byzantine bureaucratic apparatus can now be dismantled by modern computerized technology. Their views (to be sure, unconsciously) illustrate the practical relevance of anarchistic alternatives to authoritarian forms of organization.

In his important work *Future Shock* Alvin Toffler concludes that: "In bureaucracies the great mass of men performing routine tasks and operations — precisely these tasks and operations that the computer and automation do better than men — can be performed by self-regulating machines... thus doing away with bureaucratic organization... far from fastening the grip of automation on civilization... automation... leads to the overthrow [of the] power laden bureaucracies through which authority flowed [and] wielded the whip by which the individual was held in line..."

Professor William H. Read of McGill University believes that "the one effective measure of... coping with the problem of coordination in a changing society will be found in new arrangements of power which sharply break with bureaucratic tradition..." William A. Faunce (School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Michigan State University) predicts that "the integration of information processing made possible by computers would eliminate the need for complex organizations characteristic of bureaucracies." Faunce sees conflict between professional workers and bureaucratic administrators. The workers do not need 'hierarchical superiors.' They are perfectly able to operate industry themselves. He advocates workers self-management, not because he is a radical, but primarily because self-management is more efficient that the outworn system of bureaucracy.

Industry Best Organized Anarchistically

The libertarian principle of self-management will not be invalidated by the changing composition of the work force or by the nature of work itself. With or without automation the economic structure of the free society must be based on the people directly involved in economic functions. under automation millions of highly trained technicians, engineers, scientists, educators, etc. who are now already organized into

local, regional, national and international federations will freely circulate information, constantly improving both the quality and availability of goods and services and developing new products for new needs. Every year sixty million pages of scientific-technical information are freely circulated all over the world! And these voluntary associations are non-hierarchical.

Many scientific and technical workers are unhappy. Quite a few whom I interviewed complain that nothing is so maddening as to stand helplessly by while ignoramuses who do not even understand the language of science dictate the direction of research and development. They are particularly outraged that their training and creativity are exploited to design and improve increasingly-destructive war weapons and other anti-social purposes. They are often compelled, on pain of dismissal, to perform monotonous tasks and are not free to exercise their knowledge. These frustrated professional workers already outnumber relatively unskilled and skilled "blue collar" manual workers rapidly displaced by modern technology. Many of them will be receptive to our ideas if intelligently and realistically presented. We must go all out to reach them. Even bourgeois academics like Joseph A. Raffaele (Professor of Economics, Drexel Institute of Technology) are unintentionally and unconsciously writing like anarchists! Raffaele writes: "we are moving toward a society of technical co-equals in which the line of demarcation between the leader and the led become fuzzy." Management consultant Bernard Muller-Thym emphasizes that: "within our grasp is a kind or production capability that is alive with intelligence, with information, so that is will be completely flexible in a world-wide basis."

The progress of the new society will depend greatly upon the extent to which its self-governing units will be able to speed up communication — to understand each other's problems and thus better coordinate their activities. Thanks to modern communications technology, computer laundromats, personal computers, closed television and telephone circuits, communication satellites, and a plethora of other devices making direct communication available to everyone; even visual and radio contact with the moon! A stranded motorist can contact Ford dealers for help in an emergency by communicating with the Ford Motor Company satellite. Marshall McLuhan concludes that advances in printing technology have reached a point where "every man can be his own publisher." All this adds up to a workable preview of a free society based on direct democracy and free association. The self-governing units that make up the new society would not be miniature states. In a parliamentary democracy the actual rulers are the professional politicians organized into political parties. In theory they are supposed to represent the people. In fact they rule over them — free to decide the destinies of the millions. The anarchist thinker Proudhon well over a century ago defined a parliamentary democracy as "a king with six hundred heads." The democratic system is in fact a dictatorship periodically renewed at election time.

The organization of the new society will not, as in authoritarian governments or authoritarian associations, emanate from the 'bottom up' or from the 'top down' for the simple reason that there will be no top. In this kind of free, flexible organization,

power will naturally flow like the circulation of the blood throughout the social body constantly renewing its cells.

The optimism kindled by the libertarian potential of modern technology should not mislead us to underestimate the formidable forces blocking the road to freedom. A growing class of state, local, provincial and national bureaucracies; scientists, engineers, technicians and other professions — all of them enjoying a much better standard of living than the average worker. A class whose privileged status depends upon accepting and supporting the reactionary social system, immeasurably reinforces the 'democratic', 'welfare' and state 'socialist' varieties of capitalism.

They extol the miraculous labor-saving benefits of the technological revolution. But they prefer to ignore the fact that this same technology now enables the State to establish what is, in effect, a nationalized poorhouse where the millions of technologically unemployed — forgotten, faceless outcasts — on public 'welfare' will be given enough to keep them quiet. They prefer to ignore the extent to which computers immeasurably increase the power of the State to regiment every individual and obliterate truly human values.

All of them echo the slogans of self-management and free association, but they dare not raise an accusing finger again the holy arc of the state. They do not show the slightest sign of grasping the obvious fact that elimination of the abyss separating the order givers from the order takers — not only in the state but at every level — is the indispensable condition of the realization of self-management and free association: the very heart and soul of the free society.

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