

Sky Anarchy

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Premise

Anarchism is a rich tradition filled with nearly endless volumes on theories of how to create a better world. Millions of pages, in hundreds of languages, from virtually every country on earth have contributed to this library of work. So many futures, so many ways to organize humanity, many ways in which talents and affinities have contributed, limitless possibilities.

All of that said, very little has been said of one of humanity's greatest achievements; aviation.

There are many reasons for this I'm sure; aviation has an admittedly bloody history, it's most memorable accomplishments have been defined by war. Reasonable concerns about climate change have put airplanes in the crosshairs of environmentalists. In a world where carbon emissions are rising, airplanes have come to symbolize post-industrial excess, something contributing to a seemingly inevitable catastrophe.

I hope to address these concerns and open up a discussion in anarchist circles about aviation. This is not meant to be comprehensive, but ongoing. I hope this helps stimulate a wider project to incorporate aviation, air travel, aircraft, and air infrastructure into our visions of an anarchist future.

Does anarchism even have a history in aviation?

Like much of aviation, the anarchist connection to flying has its roots in war. In 1917, a revolution that overthrew the Czar and led to a civil war in Russia, saw the rise of one of the most successful anarchist movements in history; the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine, also known as, the "Black Army."

Very quickly this army seized large swaths of territory in Eastern Ukraine and very rapidly collectivized land for the peasants. The Russian Empire was in retreat and in its path a whole host of possibilities opened up, these would eventually lead to the formation of the Soviet Union. This small army made a lot of progress in large part to the collapsing institutions around them.

Like guns, trains, wagons, fortifications, and ships, the revolutionaries seized airplanes as well. The Red Army established the Workers' and Peasants' Red Air Fleet in May of 1918. The Russian Empire didn't have a large air force during the First World War, so much of this history is overshadowed by the battles on land and at sea. However, extensive air operations also took place with bombing and reconnaissance being carried out by all sides.

This included the anarchists; by 1920 even the Black Army had gotten its hands dozens of airplanes. Between 1918 and 1920, they had acquired several Nieuport 23s, Anatra DS Anasals, Farman HF.30s, DeHavilland D.H.5s, and Sopwith 2½ Strutters. The force consisted of over 20 aircraft at its height and was able to carry out effective reconnaissance for the Black Army.

While the anarchist movement in Ukraine was eventually defeated, it showed anarchists have an aviation tradition. One that should be remembered.

How do we create aviation safety without a central regulatory authority?

The fact is, safety regulations have made aviation today one of the safest industries in the world. Extensive maintenance, minimum standards of training, manufacturing requirements have made flying so safe we largely take it for granted when we board an airline.

While this is true, as anarchists we have to consider this is true of many things and yet we know we can do better. Currently there are multiple national and international regulatory bodies that govern aviation. Organizations such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), and multiple Civil Aviation Authorities (CAA) around the world. These organizations write the rules and create policies that establish minimum safety and competency standards for every aspect of aviation. All of them have an origin in the early 20th century when aviators and passengers demanded a more responsible aviation industry.

So what's wrong with how things are?

Like so many industries, things that may come from sincere intentions to make it better, safer, and more efficient often become bureaucratic bloat. The FAA in the United States is a massive organization with tens of thousands of employees. Unelected officials, only accountable to cabinet secretaries are who author and enforce aviation regulations. These regulations are often of very little relevance and do little to make aviation either safer or more efficient. The people creating them are usually not pilots, mechanics, or air traffic controllers and their only experience is in managerial work.

Another huge problem is the graft that comes with the profit motive. There have been frequent complaints of regulatory capture. Federal aviation regulations often favor large airlines. Fines and penalties that can be easily covered by the big carriers are burdensome and prohibitive to general aviation (GA) pilots and mechanics. This has overall driven down the level of safety, drive up costs, and lowered the overall confidence in the airline industry and in aviation as a whole.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of problems in aviation regulatory governance, but these are arguably the most important. In both cases we have unelected, unaccountable bureaucrats collaborating with unelected, unaccountable business executives, neither of which have any experience in aviation outside of managing the industry.

So what's the alternative?

The possibilities are many. Perhaps a good question to start with is, who better to regulate aviation than the people with the most “skin the game”? Pilots, aircrew, mechanics, air traffic controllers, and even passengers have as much stake in making aviation as safe, efficient, environmentally clean, and comfortable as possible.

In an anarchist society, aviation could be governed by affinity groups and spokes councils of people who are enthusiastic for aviation. Democratic accountability is a major concern that could be addressed through local, regional, and confederal councils of delegates recallable at any time that hash out rules and regulations. The various levels could create standards both on a universal basis and also that conform to local conditions.

Under the current regime, regulations are often passed with very little oversight or input from industry experts. They often ossify into fixed rules, even when technology and experience has evolved beyond them. They are done frequently from an attitude of trying to avoid liability than to keep people safe. With horizontally organized, worker and affinity managed, and democratically accountable institutions, we can achieve so much more.

How do we reconcile aviation with climate change?

It shouldn't be controversial to state that aviation isn't carbon neutral. Airplanes, helicopters, and even balloons burn fossil fuels just as cars, ships, and trains do. They contribute to climate change like any of the above.

As aviators we need to be mindful of this and recognize the crisis we're facing. This does not mean engaging in individual moralizing or playing the blame game. We, like everyone else, have a stake in the future of our planet and we should contribute to the solutions.

Can we do better than fossil fuels?

The goal is a future beyond fossil fuels. Aviation is part of that future. It's been 240 years since humanity first took flight in a balloon and 120 years since we flew our first airplane. We've made so much progress since then, as far as fuel efficiency and efforts to grow beyond fossil fuels. This is not something to hang our laurels on; we have much work left to do.

As previously stated with regulations, this is better done democratically than hierarchically. It's no mystery one of the biggest roadblocks keeping us tied to fossil fuels is that the capitalist mode of production keeps us tied to it. The profit generated, the rejection of alternatives due to cost, and the disregard for life on earth are reasons why, despite many alternatives already existing, there has been pitifully little investment in alternatives to fossil fuel.

This is by design and by extension it means that liberating ourselves from fossil capital is the abolition of capitalism itself. Anarchists are largely aware that is the ultimate and lasting solution to the prison of fossil capital (and capital in general). That means air anarchy will need to work with wider revolutionary movements as a whole and not just imagine its future in a vacuum. Social revolution is necessary to the survival of our species.

What are the alternatives to fossil fuels?

The aviation sector as a whole has made statements and commitments to using alternatives to fossil fuel. The shackles of fossil capital have made it difficult to follow through on this, and has slowed progress, but there are solutions both hypothetical and existing.

Getting into the details isn't the goal of this, but there are several existing alternatives. Electric power has been the subject of much research and development, especially for short haul and urban air mobility. The rise of biofuels and hydrogen have also been promising in the realm of breaking us free of fossil fuel dependence.

Sailplanes and motor gliders can operate with very little powered flight. Blimps have been explored as an option for passenger travel. There's growing work as mentioned above electric aircraft, particularly electric vertical take off and landing (evtol). Ekranoplan (Russian for "screenglider"), is a form of flight that utilizes ground effect, a form of high efficiency lift that happens close to the ground. These are especially useful on seas and ocean along coastlines and between islands. This concept has been tested in Singapore as a possibly viable means of intercoastal travel.

All of these are existing technologies, all of them are technologies trapped behind the demands of capital. The capitalist aviation industry cannot pursue these alternatives due to the economic risk to investment. That means we need to.

What does anarchist aviation look like?

Let's dream about the possibilities for a moment. The short history of aviation has brought us all kinds of forms. Only a few have become mainstream in the capitalist mode of production. As we've also seen, anarchists have an a rich aviation history as a tool of liberation.

There have been hypothetical proposals in the solarpunk artistic scene, of an anarchist future where air travel is done by blimps. Imagining a slower paced society, where travel is easy to access and delays are no trouble. Possible futures where electric aircraft are used regularly in short distance travel. Solar powered planes, gravity planes, and hoverbikes criss-crossing the sky. Of exploring a borderless, stateless, classless world by air.

There are also things we can do right now to incorporate anarchism into aviation. We can organize anarchist flying clubs, pilot's associations, and unions. There are non-anarchist organizations that can act as a template, like the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) and many flying clubs around the world. In addition to creating our own organizations we can join these existing formations to promote anarchism within them as well. Another avenue is to join radicalize the airline unions. In addition to existing airline unions we can help organize other unions within aviation, such as charter pilots, corporate pilots, air medical, and others. Labor organizing has long been a path of agitation within anarchism there's no reason aviation should be an exception.

These organizations in addition to focusing on aviation education, training, and safety, can also use their collective power for agitation and mutual aid. It would be a way of attracting anarchists to aviation and aviators to anarchism. Most importantly it would get more people in aviation invested in contributing to the social revolution we need to fight climate change and liberate ourselves from fossil capital.

Conclusion

Aviation is not incompatible with anarchism. Flying is part of anarchist history and of humanity's pursuit for ultimate freedom. Anarchists should embrace aviation as both a tool of revolution and as revolutionary itself.

This is only the beginning of what is hopefully a larger project. The hope is to get the input of other anarchist aviators and aviation enthusiasts. Like every other institution we can do better and the answer is always solidarity!

The Ted K Archive

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