

Questions we Have to Ask

Planning Living Spaces for a Revolutionary Future

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Over the past year, on the streets of Santiago, I witnessed a movement that has transformed my perspective on anarchism coming to Chile shortly after its revolt began.

Officially a response to a minor hike in the metro fare, the popular wave of rebellion was, in reality, the result of fifteen years of revolutionary ferment.

First exploding in 2006 with the secondary student led Penguin Revolution, an anti-authoritarian, anti-state, and anti-capitalist movement, pro-anarchist and anti-party, has taken root in this country.

In 2019, and the beginning of 2020, it seemed as though this movement might overthrow the Chilean government. Had it not been for coronavirus and the associated repression, restriction, fear, and caution, it might well have. It might well still.

The circumstances in Chile are totally distinct from the usual anarchist experience in the English-speaking world. Anglo-American anarchism is, if no longer as sub-cultural as it once was, remains safe in its minoritarianism.

It often sidesteps many of the great questions of politics, preferring a moralistic condemnation of the unjust or a practical experimentation in alternatives to broad arguments about the future. This is not to suggest that individual anarchists and their collectives have not discussed such questions. They, of course, have. Rather, structurally, anarchism as a movement and entity has avoided providing these issues with a coherent, broad-based discussion.

This avoidance, grounded in two arguments—it is wrong to predict what a revolution will look like, and, a revolution will never come in my lifetime. Both become insufficient when faced with an actual uprising.

This is in no way unique to anglophone countries. In fact, something similar helped hold back the Chilean revolution from fruition. It is, however, particularly pronounced in places like the United States and Britain. In order to mobilize, to some degree we must know, collectively, what we demand.

It is in this spirit that this article introduces a few questions on housing. The goal is not to prescribe, or even offer, a solution. It is to try and generate thinking about critical issues. What should be done tomorrow if the state and the capitalists were smashed? How would housing be organized?

Anarchists have developed a habit of thinking of revolution in basically syndicalist terms, especially its immediate aftermath. Housing impacts two primary groups: tenants and building trade workers.

Thus, most anti-authoritarians would be in agreement with the first steps: buildings should be turned over to their tenants, landlordism immediately abolished, and mortgages forgiven. Capitalist control of construction and repair should be overturned. Workers should form cooperatives and self-manage their activities.

This is the easy part. In imaginary day two, a number of problems, solvable, but nonetheless real and controversial, arise.

First, what to do about the gross inequalities present in already existing housing? It is self-evident that no one should have to live in substandard, overcrowded, or dangerous housing after the revolution. However, in cities such as London, for instance, years of capitalist neglect has produced an acute shortage of suitable homes.

What this means in practice is that there are two possibilities in the short-term: 1) to allow these inequalities to fester while the process of constructing or converting buildings takes place, or 2) take away some people's current homes, or parts of their homes and give them to others.

Anarchists have long made a distinction between personal and private property. The goal is not the creation of a free-for-all where someone can walk in and take your beloved pet cat because property is theft. However, the distinction is not always nearly so neat, especially when it comes to housing.

Houses, excluding second houses, holiday homes, and the like, are in one way clearly an example of personal property. However, they are also a fundamental manifestation of inequality deeply related to wealth and power. Most radicals would agree that Papa John Shnatter, of pizza-franchise fame, should have his 18,000 square-foot mansion re-purposed. But where is the cut off? Who gets the redistributed homes? And, how do we decide?

The second pressing set of questions relate to construction: What gets built? Who builds it? Who gets it once it is built?

This seems simpler to answer at first. Humane housing is built. The process is collectively organized in the same way all necessary aspects of laboring will be. However, at the core of house-building, assuming house-building will occur at all, lays one of the greatest tensions within anarchism: democracy versus autonomy. An example illustrates where the conflict arises:

Let's say there is a collective that wants to start an eco-village. They are planning to construct a self-sustaining, carbon-free community in the south of England. They pick the location as it is in the same region where they all currently live and they want to remain near family and friends and lovers.

For the same reason, and because cars will obviously not be used, they want to be within a few miles of a rail line. However, effectively everywhere in the south of England within a few miles of a rail line has been developed. Much of the land has been spoiled—industrialized, polluted, or urbanized—and therefore is not suitable for a low-tech eco-village. The only exception to this rule is protected woodlands and parks.

The problem is clear. No matter how hard you try, no matter how green you are, settled human presence disturbs natural habitats. Given this, let's say it is likely most people will prioritize preserving the existing nature.

What wins? Autonomy or democracy? Is a collective free to establish an eco-village where they feel fit? If not, under what authority will they be prevented from doing so? It is not even clear if the eco-village itself is right or wrong.

On one hand, it allows the group to live more sustainably. This helps nature. On the other, it damages the immediate nature the eco-village is in.

The issue is further complicated because it is not clear who the stakeholders are, who the democracy includes. If someone wants to build an extension on their house that blocks their neighbors' views, it is understood how the usual consensus finding procedure works. Everyone gets together. They talk it out. They come to a mutual solution.

However, who has the right to take part in this process over a woodland? Is it the local community who lives near it? Is it the Londoners who go there for a breath of fresh air? Is it the world as a whole? After all, everyone existentially depends on a thriving ecosystem.

Anarchism is the most practical, fair, and sane way to organize the world. In this sense, it is not in the least utopian. However, if it is over-simplified, if one pretends an anarchist world will not include difficult dilemmas with no easy answers, then it begins to take the appearance of a fairy tale. That is why asking these sort of questions is essential to the project.

Thinking about tomorrow makes actions taken today all the more powerful.

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