

Anarchism, heterosexism and secular religions



A critical response to a letter about "gay issues" in the anarcho-syndicalist union CNT's newspaper.

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An article by Nicolas Chozas entitled "*La CNT y los homosexuales*" appeared in the 1st October 1996 edition of CeNiT, newspaper of the Spanish CNT exiles in France. He refers to a letter from a gay man in a CNT newspaper "asking us to deal more with gay issues" which made him decide to "...clarify some points not only to this friend, but also to other CNT members who, although they are not gay, they are a bit confused about these issues". Generous of him.

First of all, despite accepting the "challenge of fighting Capitalism, the State and everything surrounding it" (my italics) he presents a narrow viewpoint that anarcho-syndicalism has no interest in "the vindications of particular groups, like gay groups, which are alien to the workers' problems",

and that these are "personal matters, which only affect people who feel this kind of sexual orientations".

Now, I'm one of these comrades who is "confused" because I am a worker, an anarcho-syndicalist militant, and some of my problems as a worker are to do with my "sexual orientation". Chozas apparently believes that because the CNT "is not a marginal union, or a union of alienated people" we should shut up about it. So much for fighting "everything surrounding" capitalism and the state.

Gay and bi men (my apologies to lesbians and bi women, but we are who Chozas means) are seen as somehow supposed to be separate from the working class. This is only true if to identify as gay is to be marginalised because of prejudice among working class people. Chozas implicitly accepts the capitalist definition of people as workers - labour-producing units - not as three-dimensional human beings. Society also defines some of us as gay in the same way.

The aim of anarchism is to restore our humanity, something I appreciated more when I was coming out, because realising how I was culturally excluded as a bisexual man gave me an insight into how I was dehumanised as a worker. "Human rights" which do not involve the liberation of the working class reduce those "rights" to class privileges, and restoring the humanity of the working class is the business of anarcho-syndicalism.

Sexual identities and class

However, I'd like to point out that there is a lot of confusion about who "gay men" are. Because the gay subculture is a reflection of the values of the Anglo-American, white, middle class men who are its most visible, economically powerful and vocal component, it is assumed that all lesbian, gay and bisexual people are like this - and that anyone who is not is heterosexual.

Gay identity politics is the project of those for whom their homosexuality is their only deviation from the "norm". For a lot of us class, race and gender are more pressing concerns, and we can't separate our sexual identity from these. Because we can't buy individual privileges, we have to live in our working class milieu - what we need is greater acceptance of sexual diversity, not better ghettos.

Personally, I am happy being "gay" because for me it describes a way I can be a working class bloke without apeing the stereotypes promoted by middle class macho journalists at The Sun, Loaded, and the like. It's about not letting my relationships with other people be defined by gender, rather than a lifestyle choice. I'm not going to abandon my working class culture, but I'm not going to let it control me.

For a lot of working class blokes straight[1] machismo is synonymous with their class identity, and any insecurity about this leads them to work harder at it, in the same way as all those middle class lefties do. Homophobia and extreme misogyny - and their accompanying violence - are products of this insecurity about gender - proving your masculinity to yourself, because your feelings or behaviour are considered inappropriate.

Gay is a term now associated with a fixed identity, rather than just feelings or behaviour. To be gay is to be assumed to be exclusively homosexual, and to pursue a particular lifestyle. The reality of widespread bisexual behaviour, among lesbian, gay, bisexual and "straight" identified people is erased by the gay subculture as well as by heterosexist society. Confounding the tacit equation of

behaviour with identity, research by Project SIGMA[2] into male bisexual behaviour in Britain found that only a minority of their respondents identified as bi.

Sex between men is everywhere, whether it's through contact ads in the straight press, or through cruising, which is not confined to your local park after the pubs shut or "cottages". You don't have to go anywhere near the gay scene to get laid, and straight identities needn't be compromised. Many straight men do not consider themselves gay because they only have sex with other straight men.

The closet is maintained by alienation from recognised gay identities as well as by fear and denial. Historically working class gay relationships have often been of the butch-femme/man-wife variety, because gender identities are a very strong part of working class culture, a way of asserting your humanity against your definition as a worker, and are easier to relate to than the affluent gay man. The butch/man in these relationships has no identity questions, only the femme/wife does.

Queens and masculinity

As well as the white, Anglo, middle class connotations of "gay", the most established working class gay identity is that of the Queen. Since this is basically a feminine male identity, it gets the low status of all things feminine in this society. If you're neither middle class nor a Queen and you identify with your mates then you're like them - straight. A Queen is most definitely not a Man[3].

Queens, drag or otherwise, have long been the most visible and bravest section of what is now called the "gay community", establishing social spaces for gay men by their presence. Their visibility and their femininity have also made them the most despised by both the middle class gay men and machos, straight or gay. The masculinisation of the gay subculture, exemplified by the Clone and its successors, has reinforced this and led to gay men neglecting gender issues.

Gender is at the root of the problem, nevertheless. An additional complication for men in Hispanic cultures is the question of sexual identity and role. In these cultures it is only the "passive" partner who plays the "woman's role" who is a Maricon, the guy whose dick gets serviced remains a Man. This kind of (bi)sexuality is widespread, but it is a bisexuality dependent on equal contempt for women and Maricones.

In reality, the vast majority of men who have sex with other men are working class, but those who are most visible and committed to a gay identity are not, except for the Queens, who have been marginalised by the assimilationist politics and masculinisation promoted by conservative middle class gay men. In Black and Hispanic countries and communities, Queens are often sex workers, so same sex love among the industrial proletariat is not a widely recognised phenomenon.

Anarchist bigotry

Unsurprisingly, "workers" and "gays" are seen as separate. But before any gay anarcho-syndicalists think they can put Chozas straight (excuse the pun) just by coming out, he has more pearls of wisdom for us. "Anarchism ...is based on certain values ...constituted by the NATURAL LAWS." "Unnatural sexual acts, that is, all those sexual acts outside the heterosexual couple, (so, no threesomes, either) are contrary to the essence of anarchism and rationalism."

Pope Nicolas then goes on to compare us to alcoholics and smokers, wheels out the clichés that homosexuality causes AIDS (although, this being anarchist bigotry, the Wrath of God doesn't get a

look in - it's caused by us abusing our bodies in unnatural acts) and paedophilia, and throws in a little gratuitous drug addiction for good measure.

Now, it's easy to dismiss this as the rantings of an ancient bigot, but he has a point about anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism. "Everything that surrounds" capitalism and the state to Chozas probably means religion, education, and the apparatus of ideological control. His interpretation of anarchism is as 19th century as the translator of the piece tells me his Spanish is, but no less accurate on his own terms.

Nowadays we would include gender, race, sexuality, etc. Ignorance about our own history, sanitised by liberals like George Woodcock, leads us to project contemporary attitudes back into the past. Because anarchism is largely ignored by academics I used to complacently think that, unlike the left, we didn't subscribe to the "aristocratic decadence/capitalist perversion" theory of this culture's obsession with explaining away same sex desire - I was wrong.

Spanish anarchism and sexuality

Richard Cleminson's essay "Male inverts and homosexuals: Sex discourse in the Anarchist Revista Blanca"[4] introduces the treatment of the subject in the most influential Spanish anarchist journal of pre-revolutionary Spain. I don't propose to go into great detail, but I think it's worth citing an example to illustrate Chozas' consistency with the ideas of the time.

In 1935 the editorial response to the question "What is there to be said about those comrades who themselves are anarchists and who associate with inverts?"[5] read as follows: "They cannot be viewed as men if that 'associate' means anything apart from speaking to or saluting sexual degenerates. If you are an anarchist, that means that you are more morally upright and physically strong than the average man. And he who likes inverts is no real man, and is therefore no real anarchist."

While by this time views were diversifying to take into account more progressive thinking about sex and sexuality in the 1930's, the quotation above is fairly typical of those cited by Cleminson. Unsurprisingly, it is only in the post-Stonewall[6] era, when lesbians and gay men have become more visible and confident about speaking out that they themselves have articulated a more libertarian view of sexuality.

What this clearly illustrates is that we need to take into account the knowledge of human sexual behaviour which has been built up since the modern Gay Liberation movement began in the late 1960's. Anarchism is about complete human liberation, not merely economics. We need to absorb the insights of the black, women's and gay liberation movements, and reject the heritage of 19th century pseudo-science.

Secular religions

Cleminson notes that in pre-revolutionary Spain, "The power of the Catholic Church as ideological factory of the ruling class and patriarchal society was still uncurbed. The power and influence of such ideas were all-pervasive, and it is not coincidental that much Catholic morality reemerged in the Spanish anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movements as moral puritanism, sexual abstinence, and other manifestations of frugality."

For anarchists the mechanics of religious ideology, as well as establishing the oppressive principle of a higher authority than oneself, are about displacing the value of humanity from the self to the ownership of the non-existent God. Our atheist humanism is seen by the religious as rejecting the value of humanity, because they can not accept that a human being can be complete without a God.

Ascribing certain ideas to a God places them beyond the realm of rational argument and outlaws dissent as heresy. Certain secular ideologies have a similar mechanism. Science and Nature are as much unanswerable ideologies as God, and are supposed to similarly render any counter argument invalid. In theory anarchists have long understood this - Bakunin argued that the worst tyranny would be that of Science, or claiming to be Scientific (as Marxism does), as it would accept the validity of no dissent.

Chozas' Natural Laws are clearly beyond argument as far as he is concerned, and therefore anarchism must accept them, in spite of their obvious theocratic origins. As an anarchist approaching the 21st century I see clearly that he has accepted the principle of theocracy, but his God is Nature instead of Jehovah. Nature is constructed in the image of Chozas' heterosexist prejudices as surely as Jehovah is in the image of His believers'.

Universalism

The secular religions of the 19th century - Science, Nature, Nationalism, Liberalism, etc - share a common mindset, a belief in linear progress and in their own Universal relevance. This Universalism (a word with a meaning not dissimilar to catholic, incidentally) is based on assumptions about the nature of humanity. Crudely, we are talking about white, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied men as "normal" and everyone else as "abnormal".

Race, class, sexuality, (dis)ability and gender are all ideologies which have been elevated to the status of "norms". Furthermore, there is a binary relationship between each of these "norms" and its opposite(s). This relationship is hierarchical, and the "abnormal" can only, by definition, be subordinate. For an anarchist the acceptance of Universalism and its norms should be impossible because of these binary hierarchies.

Anarchism is about reclaiming our full humanity, from God, from Science, from Nature, from Capitalism and the State. Our social revolution is about creating a society in which we can live as humans, not as workers, or blacks, or women, or any other socially-defined category. The fundamental basis of such a society is Federalism, from Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin to the anarcho-syndicalist traditions of our movement.

"Revolutionary unionism is opposed to ...the centralism of the state and church. ...In the centralised organisation, the needs of society are subordinated to the interests of a few, variety is replaced by uniformity and personal responsibility is replaced by unquestioning obedience." [7] To me this applies equally to Universalism, which is too little questioned. Accepting social and cultural (and sexual) diversity is a prerequisite of the human liberation which is anarchism's objective.

Diversity

Diversity has become a buzzword with the popularisation of ideas loosely labelled as "post-modernism" - the end of a Universal worldview. While the federalist basis of anarchism should embrace this, it is important that we do not just accept authoritarian ideas in the name of diversity.

In arguing that anarchists must absorb the insights of the black, women's, gay and now transgender and disability liberation movements, I would warn against an uncritical approach to this.

These movements were originally inspired by libertarian socialism, being unashamed of being black or a woman or gay in order to challenge the definition of yourself as such and not fully human ("normal"), and to seek the destruction of the social and ideological apparatus of oppression - in the same way as revolutionary socialism sought to destroy the class system which defines us as workers, not as human beings.

In accepting the definition imposed on us by society - the ruling classes - we run the risk of degenerating into identity politics. Radical Black Power has since become Black Nationalism, supporting the black petite bourgeoisie and their ambitions, for example. All identity politics are based on a nationalist model, whether they are assimilationist or separatist. Loyalty to the "nation" is demanded, and policed.

Because of this mentality mixed-race and bisexual people are often regarded as untrustworthy among black and lesbian and gay communities, respectively, or required to modify their behaviour to fit a new "norm". Transgendered women occupy a similar position in some Feminist circles. In embracing diversity, as we must, anarchists must be careful to develop an integrated politics of liberation, not of identity.

Nevertheless, we now know so much more about human life than we did in the 19th century, and to ignore new insights into human liberation is to consign anarchism to irrelevance. The left have often limited their response to those of us who do not fit the "norms" they accept to afterthoughts, designed to "correct" these "anomalies" and to leave their political programmes intact, untouched by the history which challenges the self-appointed leadership of their sects. We must not make the same mistake.

Peter Principle

Notes:

[1] I use "straight" in this article as an identification only, it implies nothing about actual sexual behaviour.

[2] Commissioned by the Health Education Authority - yup, AIDS risk assessment again - research into more than 20,000 men who had had sex with men and women in the previous five years found that only 43.9% identified in any way as bisexual, often reluctantly, 0.9% as gay, and 13.2% as straight. Source: Bi Community News, Issue 8, June 1996.

[3] This is not intended to be perjorative, I'd love to be a wise old Queen, but the football, hooligan music and beer tend to rule this out - and I'd look crap in drag.

[4] Published in Gert Hekma et al. Eds. - "Gay men and the sexual history of the political left" by Harrington Park Press 1995, ISBN 1 56023 067 3.

[5] An invert was an "positive" 19th century term for homosexual, which was a medical term. The idea was that a female soul had been trapped in a male body, resulting in an attraction to men, and vice versa. Perverts, by contrast, were debauched. This is more like a definition of a contemporary Transgenderist.

[6] The Stonewall Inn riots of June 1969, a reaction to a police raid on a mafia-run New York gay bar, are the mythical beginning of modern gay liberation. Although equality movements dated back

much further, the Gay Liberation Front was founded by activists inspired by this event, as well as by their experience of the anti-Vietnam War and Civil Rights protest movements. The rioters were mostly apolitical black drag queens, hustlers and bar dykes.

[7] Quotation from The Principles of Revolutionary Unionism, common to the Solidarity Federation and the International Workers' Association - the anarcho-syndicalist international founded in 1922. The CNT is its Spanish section.