

Anarchism and divisions in our class

Chekov Feeney

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Some suggest that anarchism (and the class analysis and historical materialism which have always been central planks of anarchist theory) somehow fail to address questions of racism, sexism, what the imperialist call 'tribalism' and the other forms of oppression of this world. Apparently some people believe that anarchist theory holds that class based oppression is the only form of oppression in the world. Therefore I think that it is useful to correct this wild misconception and lay out the basic anarchist understanding of these phenomenons and particularly describe them in their African context. I will finally take a closer look at some of the examples (Cote D'Ivoire, Nigeria, Rwanda) that were cited in an article (about President Wade of Senegal) forwarded to `anarchy_africa` and see how they fit in with anarchist understanding.

There are many irrational beliefs held by sections of our class which act against our objective interests, that is to say that they hinder us from uniting against our common enemy, the bosses, our exploiters and oppressors. Sexism, racism, religious sectarianism and what the imperialists call 'tribalism' are prejudices which are held by significant numbers of our class throughout the world. To state that they exist is to state an obvious fact, like stating $2+2=4$. Everybody knows they exist, save perhaps a tiny number of deranged individuals with a tenuous connection to reality. It is neither useful nor original to state their existance, what is useful is to ask why they exist.

The bosses and the imperialists, through the mouthpieces of their liberal apologists, represent these beliefs as simply a natural phenomenon, inexplicable, arising out of the foggy depths of the human psyche. To us anarchists who desire a world without division or oppression, they say "that is all very well, and certainly we agree with you, it would be nice if these backward beliefs did not exist, but you are idealists! The unfortunate fact is that the workers are racist, sexist and tribalist. Perhaps at some stage in the future these beliefs will vanish, but for now we must be realistic, they exist and therefore we need laws to keep these backward workers from harming each other, we need police and armies to keep these warring tribes apart, we need a rational state which can sit above the fray and control it all, at least until the workers have reached a stage of development beyond these beliefs, in some distant future."

We anarchist cry, no! These irrational beliefs exist precisely because of the class basis of society with its state, police and army. The ruling class is responsible for creating these prejudices and divisions to make it easier for them to exploit us. There are many workers in the world who are angry about their miserable situation yet they do not understand the functioning of this cruel capitalist system. The capitalists, who possess powerful machinery of ideological persuasion, take advantage of this anger and confusion to fool many workers into believing that the real enemy is this or that other group of workers; the immigrants who take their jobs and houses, the neighbouring tribe who monopolise development projects, etc...

CREATING DIVISIONS

Basically there are two conditions that need to be fulfilled for the bosses to effectively create prejudices which split our class. Firstly there must be some characteristic among a significant section of the workers which allows them to be clearly differentiated from the rest of the workers and equally clearly differentiated from the bosses. Secondly there must be a great dissatisfaction among the workers which causes them to desperately search for the culprits who are responsible for the unsatisfactory state of society.

The characteristics which these divisions are based upon can vary greatly in terms of scope and subject. The subject can encompass such different features as the skin colour, sex, religion, collective traditions, or country of origin of a section of the workers. The scope can be on a very large scale, such as the racist ideology created to justify slavery and very widely disseminated among white workers around the world. The scope can also be very localised in terms of time and place. Discrimination against certain groups of immigrants may last only for the brief period in which they arrive in large numbers and be localised to a particular city.

As well as creating the idea of a threat to the rest of workers from the discriminated group, the bosses also try to split the workers by creating an illusion of privilege among certain sections of the workers. Thus while they discriminate against certain groups in terms of basic rights and services such as employment, housing and education, they present this as a positive favouring of some workers, rather than what it really is, a negative discrimination against others. They say to these 'privileged' workers: "look what we give you, we must stick together, we must stay united or else you'll end up in the wretched state that you see those others. Of course we are on your side, we look after our own. If we give the others half a chance they'll turn the tides on us". Thus, for example, in Northern Ireland, the protestant ruling class, limited many jobs and much housing and education to protestant workers and effectively tied the loyalties of the majority of protestant workers to their bosses. However this discrimination actually has the effect of lowering conditions for all workers, even those apparently 'privileged', since their capacity for class unity is destroyed and the workers are too busy fighting each other to notice the bosses making off with all the loot. Thus, while in Great Britain the catholic workers in Northern Ireland may be the worst off group, they are closely followed by protestant workers in Northern Ireland! Similarly in the United States, in those areas where black workers are most discriminated against in terms of pay, white workers receive the least pay as well. Division is not the mother of privilege.

THE STANCE OF ANARCHISTS

Thus we anarchists see the basis for these divisions in our class as being the class nature of society and in particular the ruling class's need to divide us. We do not deny that racism, sexism, sectarianism, et al exist, but we understand that the ruling class is responsible for them, that when our class fights against the ruling class we simultaneously fight against these prejudices because active participation in the class war emphasises the unity of our interests as a class and brings us together in struggle. We anarchists also feel that only the elimination of capitalism and class society will prepare the conditions possible for the final elimination of oppression: economic, cultural, psychological and in all the other forms that it affects our class.

Therefore our role as anarchists is always to point out that these prejudices are not, as the liberals would have us believe, the fault of the incorrigibly ignorant workers, but are in fact caused by the ruling class. We know that there is an uneven consciousness among our class, caused by varying degrees of access to education, ideas and experience of struggle, we also know that this is equally the fault of those who control the resources of our society, who will do anything to cloud and cloak the truth from our class. We do not blame the oppressed for their oppression, we put the blame squarely where it belongs, with the ruling class. Compared to the ideological machinery wielded by the bosses, our voices are tiny and weak. However we are given courage

by the fact that our ideas are the best and as we grow, slowly over years and decades, we will win ever more workers over to our ideas, united in the fight for a free and equal society.

Our liberal enemies, including those who masquerade as anarchists, call this analysis simplistic (or for those who want to intimidate with jargon - "class reductionism"). They believe that the real comprehension of society is the domain of intellectuals, alone capable of deciphering the metaphysical maze of society. They fear an understanding among our class which will expose them for what they are. They attack our materialist analysis of society, which explains all these prejudices in terms of the current organisation of society, real social forces. What explanation do they offer instead for the presence of racism and all the other irrational prejudices? In truth I cannot say. Perhaps they think there is a racist gene, or perhaps they aren't interested in asking this question, they just think it natural that our class, which they hold in such contempt, would cling to these barbaric beliefs.

PREJUDICES AND AFRICA

The case of divisions and prejudices in Africa is in no way different from that in the rest of the world, much as the apologists of imperialism would have us believe otherwise. In Africa as elsewhere, the bosses are to blame. However there are a number of factors which amplify the effects of these divisions on the African continent and cause them to be particularly destructive.

Primarily there is the very high levels of desperation and suffering which mean that vast numbers of people are living on the edge of despair, ready to burst into violent storms of anger against anybody identified as a cause for their plight.

Secondly and crucially, most African economies depend on the export of a few primary products and much of the ruling class resides in the imperialist countries. Thus it is possible for the ruling class to whip up massive violent disturbances, crises of disorder and chaos without really affecting the important aspects of the economy (as the ruling class sees it). For example Nigeria in 2000 saw many large scale bouts of ethnic and sectarian violence, especially in Kaduna and other Northern cities. These types of disturbances would be very financially damaging to the ruling class of any Western country since they prevent factories and offices from opening, cause physical damage to workplaces and so on. But in Nigeria, they did nothing to affect the only part of the economy that the ruling class really cares about, the export of oil from the Niger Delta region. The flow of profits to the shareholders of Shell, Exxon and the small local ruling class continued unabated despite the chaos. In many African countries there are similar situations. The important export resources are insulated from the surrounding country, many are even secured by private mercenary forces. Huge civil disturbances can rage for long periods without effecting production. Thus the immediate holders of political power are free to make use of tremendous waves of violence and chaos in order to hang onto power, without troubling the ruling class, something that is definitely not the case in the Western countries.

A third factor which contributes to the destructiveness of working class divisions in Africa is the existence, within practically every modern African state, of numerous groups with very strong group identities based upon strong cohesive factors like common languages, traditions and religious beliefs, what the imperialists call 'tribalism'. This is a complicated matter and perhaps I'll look at it in greater depth in a later post, but here suffice to say that these strongly identified groups provide great scope for rulers to divide and rule by favouring one group in employment,

blaming another group for monopolising land, and scapegoating another group as unwanted newcomers, here to steal 'what is ours'. If you compare the situation in, say rural Ireland, with that in rural Burkina Faso, one can easily see the increased opportunities for unprincipled rulers (and there are hardly any other types of rulers). In Ireland there is almost total ethnic homogeneity among rural people, yet politicians who feel under pressure often attempt to whip up hatred against travellers (a tiny semi-nomadic ethnic minority in Ireland). I can scarcely imagine what they'd get up to as an elected representative in a rural district of Burkina Faso. They'd probably die with excitement with the myriad possibilities of scapegoating others. Today the Mossi for dominating political power, tomorrow the Dioulla for manipulating the NGO's, next the Lobi for taking the best land, then the Gan, those greedy newcomers, leaving droves of other groups for a rainy day!

A fourth and final factor is the intervention of powerful external forces which try to stir up divisions to destabilise a society or overthrow a regime. This is often caused by imperial powers competing with each other for influence or an imperial power wanting to replace a wayward ruler. However it can also be brought about by rivalry between neighbouring states although these are often merely acting as a proxy for one or other of the imperial powers. This is certainly not to put all the blame down to the imperialists, far from it, the actual instigators of the ethnic (or other) divide are almost always an ambitious local leader, but the harmfulness of this division is magnified many times over by the involvement of imperial forces which can add a destructive capacity to a conflict far in excess of that which could organically come about. To name but a few examples of this: in Angola the 26 year old conflict of UNITA under Jonal Savimbi, based on support among a particular ethnic group, would have been impossible without the generous support of US and South African imperialism; The long rebellion of the animist South in Sudan under John Garang's SPLA has been made possible by US support through their Ugandan proxy. In return the LRA, a fanatical fundamentalist christian group, has been assisted by the Khartoum regime in its brutal ethnic/sectarian war in Uganda.

SOME EXAMPLES IN GREATER DEPTH

1) COTE D'IVOIRE

The recent history of Cote D'Ivoire has been dominated by the issue of nationalism and immigrants. The deposed leader, Henri Konan-Bedie, created the concept of "Ivorite" or Ivorianess - intending to describe the quality of belonging to this artificial nation. This concept was universally understood to be a paper-thin subterfuge to be used as a weapon against his chief political opponent, Alasane Dramane Ouattara, the former Prime Minister whose mother was born in Burkina Faso and who accepted an appointment to a position in the World Bank after being nominated by Burkina Faso. Bedie's definition of Ivorite required two provably Ivorian parents - obviously aimed at Ouattara - and was palpably ridiculous in a country where many have no birth records, immigration has been commonplace since the early days of French colonial rule and the people of the North probably feel closer to their fellow Dioulla in Burkina than they do to the dominant Bouale of Cote D'Ivoire. The introduction of Ivorite was accompanied by an increasing repression and scapegoating of immigrants who became the principal source of salary for the security services as Bedie's coffers ran dry.

Robert Guei's christmas eve coup in 1999 was initially presented as a reaction to the mad xenophobia of Bedie, which was "tearing the country apart". Shortly after the coup, he addressed a large crowd of ecstatic supporters with a speech which paid tribute to the many foreigners who had helped build the country. He was popularly acclaimed a hero by ordinary people all across West Africa. This genuine popular reaction clearly exhibited that the Ivorian xenophobia was not a phenomenon arising from the masses, but had been whipped up by the powerful and its demise was greeted with great joy. However Guei, in his turn, fell victim to the logic of dividing to rule and shortly after the coup, his soldiers were again receiving their salaries by extorting fines from powerless immigrants. As Guei tried to cling onto power, under pressure from Ouattara, he resurrected the issue of nationality in order to frustrate his opponent, this time in the guise of eliminating fake identity papers which Bedie had distributed to foreigners in return for their votes. Gbagbo who ousted Guei, again succumbed to this grim logic to secure his hold on power, by upholding the ban on Ouattara, and the country continues to be torn apart. Incidentally the fact that Cote D'Ivoire is at the centre of a struggle for imperial influence in West Africa between the USA and France has hardly helped cool tempers!

2) RWANDA

After the conquest of the Hutu people by the Tutsis, a couple of hundred years ago, Rwandan society was essentially a feudal system where class was determined by membership of an ethnic group. The Belgian colonial conquerers and the French power which was behind them, essentially left this ethnic division intact, even strengthening it, and used it to enforce their own rule. The ethnic division was assiduously kept intact but the feudal system was replaced by the vastly more efficient and brutally exploitative capitalist mode of production. Serfs became wage slaves (although sometimes without the wage) and lost all their rights. Lords became bosses and rulers and lost all their obligations save for the obligation to exploit the masses to the fullest capacity conceivable. Thus the original ethnic division which was based in the feudal class society formed the basis for the current divisions. However this division was constantly reinforced and moved towards hitherto unthought of extremes of oppression under imperialist capitalism.

The 1994 genocide stems directly from these ethnic hatreds, lovingly nurtured by the imperial rulers over many years. However the unprecedented level of destruction also owes much to the fact that Rwanda was itself the theatre of competition between France and the USA, the two great imperial forces of modern Africa. The French provided unfailing military and diplomatic support to the Hutu regime in the years leading up to the genocide, despite the fact that it was known well in advance, through numerous NGO reports, that the regime was building up an extremely dangerous level of ethnic tension which was likely to lead to disaster. Why were the French so happy to support this disasterous build up of hatred? Because just across the border in Uganda lurked the RPF, a Tutsi Rwandan exile army, well trained and equipped, the spearhead of US imperialist ambitions in the region. In 1994 the RPF invaded and rapidly occupied much of Northern Rwanda. A ceasefire was called and a peace deal was agreed allowing some measure of power sharing and a de-escalation of the boiling ethnic tensions.

However the plane carrying the Rwandan president (among others) back from the peace deal was shot down. It has always been thought that this was the work of militant Hutu's from the interahamwe ethnic militia, who were trying to spark a full scale ethnic massacre. However recent evidence has tended to suggest that it was in fact carried out by the RPF with the knowledge of

their US backers. In any case this proved the spark that set off the general conflagration. The interahamwe started the systematic genocide and the RPF restarted the war pushing ever further into Rwandan territory.

The role of the imperial powers in all this is not one that they like to publicise. Having armed and equipped the two sides they went on to ever greater excesses of cynicism. The French military intervened to save the remnants of the genocidal regime by setting up what they called, in an extreme case of Orwellian doublespeak, "a zone of humanitarian security", in the South of the country. The US and Britain, for their part, valiantly blocked any UN intervention to stop the genocide and resolutely opposed the use of the term genocide by the UN security council to describe the situation, even after 2 weeks of systematic killing. Why? Basically they knew that their boys, the RPF, were going to win the war and any mention of the term genocide would have forced the UN to act. A UN intervention would have probably led to some sort of power-sharing deal allowing the French to hold onto some influence. As it was they were set to get everything, what be it if a million or so natives should get massacred? They simply weren't interested.

Today it is interesting to note the particular loathing felt for Paul Kagame (president of Rwanda and leader of RPF), the one that got away, whatsmore he doesn't even speak French. It is also interesting to note that today, more that 6 years after the genocide Rwanda is an extremely racist police state, there is no prospect of anything resembling democracy (as the tutsi minority couldn't possibly win) and the regime is the number one golden boy of the US in africa, subsequently receiving vastly disproportionate funding from NGO's, IFI's etc..

3) NIGERIA

As a final brief example of the class basises which the ethnic chaos of Africa rests upon, I'll mention Nigeria. The huge, destructive riots which erupted in Kaduna and other Northern cities after the introduction of sharia, or islamic law, were represented in the media as being irrational eruptions of religious and tribal hatred (muslim Hausa against Igbo/Yoruba/other christians). However our Nigerian comrades of the Awareness League identified these disturbances as having a political cause, in the rivalries between various factions of the local ruling class. The 'Kaduna clique' of senior military figures from the Abacha dictatorship were behind the sharia issue and the ethnic militias which violently enforced the new regulations and provoked the massive destruction. They were attempting to destabilise the young civilian administration of Obasanjo and so they could subsequently step in to save the country from chaos. They took advantage of the popular desperation and the sentimental memories of the days before capitalism to promote this sharia solution, which they presented as a way of turning the clock back.

CONCLUSION

The various types of oppression and discrimination of this world certainly exist and are powerful forces among large sections of the working class, but these are symptoms of a class based system, they are not causes. The ruling class creates and nurtures these divisions to divide our class, in Africa as in the rest of the world. We anarchists must recognise that the best way to fight against these forms of oppression is to fight against the capitalist system which is at their roots. This is not to say that we should ignore all struggles which focus on these particular forms of oppression, of course we oppose them wherever we can, however we realise that the real battle

is against the class system which creates them and without destroying it we'll never destroy the others.

Chekov Feeney

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