

One for the Resistance?

Oppression, Anarchism & Alcohol

by Jonathan



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ZACF (Personal Capacity)

Aside from my personal aversion to alcohol and the abuse thereof, I strongly feel that alcohol consumption – and production – is a highly political issue, which anarchists should not ignore. In this article I will attempt to explain why I feel it is that anarchists should consider starting a dialogue regarding the alcohol industry, the role of alcohol – and alcoholism – in capitalist society, its current effects on the poor and working classes, and its place in a future anarchist society. This is an issue that has been considered by anarchists in the past, but unfortunately does not seem to warrant much attention these days, and I'm uncomfortable to say that I think that many anarchists – as with other issues facing us – may be reluctant to admit that it is a problem for, or within, our movement.

"After a time, Nestor left the foundry and worked as a sales assistant for a wine merchant. Nauseated by his job, he gave it up after three months. Perhaps it was in the wake of this experience that he was to retain an aversion for wine and

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alcohol; that aversion was very real, despite all the fairy tales peddled later about his alleged inebriated tendencies.”

(Skirda, 2004, *Nestor Makhno; Anarchy’s Cossack*, p. 20)

Nestor Makhno was not the only anarchist who recognised the negative effects alcohol could have on both the working class and the anarchist movement, but it seems that, despite Emma Goldman having given lectures and Errico Malatesta ¹ having written about the subject, it was still not considered to be an important issue. And, although the Friday 30th August evening session of the 1907 Amsterdam anarchist congress foresaw a discussion of a report on Anarchism and Alcoholism presented by Prof. Van Rees, discussion was postponed to the next day where a ten point motion, presented by Prof. Van Rees with two additional points proposed by Émile Chapelier, was not even put to motion ‘due to the opposition of almost every delegate’. Errico Malatesta went on to explain the reasons for this.

“A resolution against alcoholism had been proposed, but the Congress went on to discuss the next item on the Agenda. Certainly, no-one would have had any hesitation in approving a resolution against excess [in the use] of alcoholic beverages, despite perhaps being convinced of the pointlessness of such a motion; but the proposed motion condemned even moderate use, to the point of considering it even more dangerous than abuse. This seems excessive to us; in any event, we consider it to be a matter best discussed by doctors, if even they know anything about it.”

(Antonioli, 1978, *Dibattito sul sindacalismo. Atti del Congresso Internazionale anarchico di Amsterdam (1907)*)

1. I believe that Emma Goldman gave lectures on the effects of alcoholism on the working class and anarchist movement, and that Malatesta wrote on the subject, but I have not been able to find any of these writings or recorded lectures. If anyone knows where I could find them, in English, I would appreciate to be informed.

us, it could also provide an opportunity for anarchists to secure social insertions in poor and working class communities, by providing a positive example and often lacking role-model, to spread social awareness and to demonstrate anarchist mutual aid and solidarity to people who might otherwise not be interested in nor exposed to anarchist ideas and practice.

I think we could learn something from our Spanish comrades of a time gone by:

“For the greater part of the day, they were working men and women, obrera consciente, who abjured smoking and drinking, avoided brothels and the bloody bull ring, purged their talk of “foul” language, and by their probity, dignity, respect for knowledge, and militancy tried to set a moral example for their entire class.”

(See Bookchin, *An Overview of the Spanish Libertarian Movement*)

Or as even Bakunin, who was known to be a drinker, once put it:

“Let us then be good brothers and comrades, and let us organize ourselves. Do not think that we are at the end of the Revolution; we are at its beginning. The Revolution is henceforth the order of the day, for many decades to come. It will come to find us, sooner or later. Let us therefore prepare and purify ourselves and become more genuine, let us be less talkers, less criers, less phrasemongers, less drinkers and less rakes. Let us gird our loins and properly prepare ourselves for this struggle which will save all peoples and finally emancipate humanity.”

(See Cutler, *The Basic Bakunin Writings 1869–1871*, p. 65)

Given that many anarchists early on recognised that alcoholism is a problem for the working class and anarchist movement, I find it strange then that, on a recent trip to Europe, probably every anarchist my partner and I spoke to about anarchism and alcoholism agreed that alcohol was a problem for the anarchist movement, that ‘alcohol is the biggest ally of capital’, yet few anarchists seem willing to actually confront it.

★ Class and Alcohol in South Africa

Alcoholism is a social disease of epidemic proportions in South Africa that affects primarily the poor and working classes, which are hardest hit by both the causes and effects of alcohol and alcohol abuse.

In South Africa, the majority of violent crimes are alcohol related as, in the majority of those reported, either or both the assailant and/or the victim are under the influence of alcohol when the crime takes place. This in a country where the biggest city, Johannesburg, has recently been recognised as the world’s most violent city. And, contrary to what mainstream media might have us believe, the majority of victims of violent crime are poor and working class. Not only the victims, but also their assailants are victims, indirectly, of violent crime; as more and more people – particularly poor youth – are going to prison for crimes they have committed under the influence of alcohol. Crimes that are often not premeditated, but committed under the influence of alcohol – on a whim – and which, had the perpetrator been sober, they might not have committed.

Yet another devastating effect of alcohol related violent crime is the spread of Aids as a result of alcohol related incidents of rape and, once again, the majority of rape victims are women from the working class. Aids is another disease of pandemic

proportions in South Africa, and the irresponsible sex practices of people under the influence – who do not think of using a condom, for example, or cannot negotiate its use while drunk – is contributing to its increase.

Working class and poor women are particularly hard hit by alcoholism, and many women in South Africa are left to raise their families alone because of absent fathers, who spend their time, and money, in shebeens and drinking taverns. Not only are these women left to bring up their children and care for the elderly alone, but they are also forced to try and make ends meet financially, and provide for their families when their husbands, if they are lucky enough to have found employment, spend all their money on booze. And, of course, even the unemployed somehow find money to drink while they and their families often go hungry. Of course it is not necessarily their own fault; that they are addicted to alcohol as a means of escaping the misery of poverty, but it does go to show the devastating affects alcohol has on the poor and working class, and therefore why it is an issue for anarchists.

There are numerous other examples of how alcohol devastates the lives of the poor and working poor. Probably everyday in South Africa pedestrians are killed by motor vehicles and, in a country where it is often said that drinking and driving is a national past-time, it is not uncommon for the drivers responsible for killing a pedestrian to be drunk when they do so. The majority of people who travel either by foot or bicycle, and therefore the ones that get run down by drunk drivers, are from the lower classes; whereas most people who own a motor car are from the middle and upper classes. Of course they, from the upper classes, do drive into and kill one another from time to time, but that is beside the point. Drinking and driving being so prevalent in South Africa, people are also often pulled over while driving under the influence. Those that can afford to are likely to get away with paying the officer a fine or bribe (“buying him lunch”), but those that cannot afford a fine or

of value to society because of the productive work that they do for it; all of which would enhance peoples feelings of self-worth and self-confidence, and thus reduce the necessity many people feel towards drinking alcohol in order to be able to socialise.

Other than the social implications of the abuse of alcohol in a revolutionary society, there are also economic factors to be considered. Hypothetically speaking, as a non-drinker I might resent it if some people spend their time working to produce something, alcohol, that is not a necessity, and that I might not use, while at the same time I am producing something, food for example – which is essential to the life of the revolution – that they will consume but did not work for. In a free society where alcoholism is less prevalent, and is not used as a means of keeping the producing class weak and complacent, I might once again enjoy to drink beer, but I hold that it is a luxury, not a necessity, the users of which should therefore work to produce it over and above their contribution to meeting the necessary requirements of society.

★ Concluding and summing up

I do not endorse the banning of alcohol, nor do I expect that every anarchist should give it up and launch an anti-alcohol campaign; but I do think that, as a social disease which affects primarily the poor and working class, alcoholism is an issue for anarchists. Not only does it make oppressed people apathetic and complacent, but it can also serve to fracture and weaken their revolutionary potential, and make us vulnerable to the enemy. Alcohol abuse, if unchecked, can make us anarchists less effective and reduce our chances for successfully organising for and defending the revolution. As a seemingly unpolitical issue, if taken up by

reality, we want to change it. Addiction induced passivity and acceptance is an obstruction to this. We can create our own cultures; ones that are not enriching capitalists whilst destroying our lives and communities at the same time, and playing us into the hands of the enemy. Anarchists should try to show, by example; that we do not have to drink all the time to have fun, or to talk, or to have sex. In order for there to be any hope of revolution, we need to help to build a sense of working class self-confidence, and one of the ways for us to start doing that is by nurturing people's own sense of self-confidence and self-worth, which is often corroded by prolonged alcohol abuse.

To the extent that it is possible, under capitalism, I believe that anarchists should try to live as freely as they can, and in accordance with their ideals; but are we really free if we are slave to the drink? Overcoming alcohol addiction is one more way that working class and poor people can take back control of their lives from the ruling class as it is, after all, the capitalist class which prospers the most from the self-destructive addiction to alcohol so prevalent amongst the working class and poor.

In a free and equal society there would probably be less people on anti-depressants, so why not less alcoholics too? As a preventable and treatable social disease, alcoholism is something which could be greatly reduced, if not eliminated entirely, in an anarchist society. In a social system where everyone is working as a productive member of that society, contributing to meet the needs of the people and towards social wealth, and where people are free and have the opportunity to pursue their own special and creative interests at their leisure, I think there would be less likelihood of people having the urge to drink, either as a means of escape or to while away the time. Social relations between people would also be such that they would not feel alienated from one another as people often do now; self-confidence would be nurtured in education and upbringing, and people would feel themselves to be

bribe are likely to be taken in and, if they are granted bail and cannot afford that either, will end up in jail.

Workers are also discharged from their jobs for coming to work drunk, or for repeatedly arriving late because they were so drunk or hung-over that they couldn't get out of bed. Also, every year probably countless workers suffer work-related injuries, possibly resulting in loss of limb or even death, as a result of being under the influence while at work. Of course CEO's also go to work drunk, but the consequences of them arriving late and being drunk on the job are far less drastic.

Another example of how alcohol was (and sometimes still is) used to keep workers down in South Africa was the "dop system", whereby farm owners on the wine estates in the Cape, and probably elsewhere, paid their workers (or subsidise their wage) in alcohol. The devastating effects of this, on both the vineyard workers and their families are not hard to imagine.

On top of the directly negative impact of alcohol and alcoholism on the poor and working poor, its usage and the culture that surrounds it also contributes to upholding capitalist structures of domination. Probably everybody knows that there are always more bottle-stores and liquor outlets in poor and working class communities than there are in the suburbs, and of course alcohol is cheaper there. It is such because not only do the capitalists know that people in poverty are so desperate to escape their misery, even for a few hours, that they will spend what little of their earnings they can spare – and even if they can't – on alcohol, thus increasing profits, but alcohol is also a great way to keep people apathetic, passive and, consequently, subjugated.

"All government, without exception, conceal from the people everything that might further their emancipation, and encourage all that degrades and

demoralizes them [...] all manner of amusements of the senses [...] even physical means of stupefaction, such as tobacco and alcohol, the tax on which constitutes one of the chief revenues of the state."

(Tolstoy, 1990, *Government is Violence*, p. 95–96).

During the struggle days radical youth in South Africa frequently razed liquor taverns to the ground, because they resented the fact that not only were their fathers giving all their money to the enemy, while their families suffered, but they also recognised that alcohol was making them passive and unwilling to fight against apartheid. During this time it was common for black township women to make home-made sorghum beer (it still is), which was encouraged as a means both of supporting themselves and the communities they came from but also as a way of luring black men out of the white-owned taverns so that, if they were not going to struggle, at least they would spend their money within their communities, instead of enriching the white bosses. But despite the social atmosphere and meeting place provided by shebeens – that is informal and often illegal liquor outlets (because of the difficulty in government regulating and therefore profiting from the taxation of this trade) – selling alcohol to your community at low prices, and even on credit is, I believe, anti-social. Some people might say that it is empowering for a poor woman to be a shebeen queen, as she is able to provide for herself and her family. But this type of empowerment is comparable to that of a female CEO or director of a company; it is an individualistic type of empowerment, which empowers one to the detriment of others; the shebeen queen supports her family by destroying others. But this is understandable, and they are often aware of the consequences of their trade on their community but, as with someone forced to sell their bodies, it is something they are compelled to do in order to survive and support their families.

to the decomposition of the army of the proletariat now risked the firing squad. By contrast the Bolshevik militant Konyevets testifies that he had heard Makhno arrange with the head of the insurgent army's intelligence branch, Lev Zadonsky-Zinkovsky to have 30 barrels of alcohol (pure alcohol) supplied to Shkuro's Cossacks for the obvious reason of sapping their fighting spirit."

(Skirda, 2004, *Nestor Makhno; Anarchy's Cossack*, p. 157)

I do not advocate prohibition or the banning of alcohol (and of course not the execution of comrades who drink!), but I do think that thought needs to be given to its possible consequences both in terms of the defensive and productive sides of the revolution.

Granted that some people need alcohol to relax and put them at ease in a crowd, and to lubricate conversation, but that just goes to show how sick our society actually is, that we cannot even talk openly and honestly to one another without an aid. Anarchists try to show alternatives to the existing system, both in terms of the possible organisation of a future society, beyond capitalism; the ways in which we can organise ourselves now to reach that society and in terms of our interpersonal relations with one another. Couldn't that also be extended to mean that we should try and show alternatives to the way that the dominant ideology, capitalism, says that people should entertain themselves, and spend their leisure and their money? Alcohol use is constantly being promoted as the best, if not the only way, for people to have fun, to entertain themselves and their friends, and spend their free time and money. But there are plenty of fun alternatives to getting drunk. The Class War notion of "we use foul language because the working class does" (or something similar), when applied in this context is nonsense; the working class drinks because it wants to escape its reality but, as revolutionaries, we do not want to escape our

★ Alcohol and Revolution

Nestor Makhno recognised the effects that alcohol could have had on the insurgent army in the Ukraine and therefore the outcome of the revolution and, if we are going to be serious about defence of the revolution, it might be worthwhile contemplating his attitude towards it. Despite his having been said to be a drunk.

“It is in fact inconceivable that Makhno or his close companions could have indulged in drunken binges, given the constant tension in which they lived; the slightest bingeing could have cost all their lives in an instant, for engagements erupted at the most unlikely hours of the day or night so they had to be constantly on the alert. All servicemen know this much, and during his famous raids, for instance, the Don Cossack general Mamontov, who was extremely temperate himself and who also led his men from the front, came upon 1,000 barrels of alcohol in Frolov. He promptly ordered them smashed, in which the tearful Cossacks obliged him (we do not know whether their tears were due to the alcoholic vapours or to their regrets!). Mamontov was perfectly well aware that, had he not done so, then within the hour all his men would have become corpses. Makhno did the same thing with the alcohol of the Berdyansk distillery on one of the occasions when he seized the port; the barrels were emptied onto the snow, when they might have been used to banish the chill.”

(Skirda, 2004, *Nestor Makhno; Anarchy’s Cossack*, p. 299)

“Let us also note that at the Alexandrovsk congress a stringent resolution was passed on the question of drunkenness. Any who thus weakened or contributed

The point is not to close down shebeens and liquor outlets, but to fight for a world where people are no longer forced to supply their communities with potentially debilitating substances in order to survive.

Also, drinking culture, at least in South Africa, is often a macho and sexist culture, supporting and even strengthening patriarchal structures within capitalist society. While it is sometimes seen as cool for men to drink as much as they can – and then go (drive) home to rape and/or beat their wives and children – women are discouraged from drinking in excess, as it is ‘unbecoming’ and ‘unladylike’. That is unless of course the woman is physically attractive, in which case men may try to get her drunk in order to take advantage of her, quite possibly without a condom, bring us back to the issue of the Aids pandemic, and of course single motherhood, teenage pregnancy and women leaving their unwanted babies to die in rubbish bins etc.

★ Consequences for the Anarchist Movement

These are just some of the ways that alcohol is devastating the working class and poor, and reducing people to violent crime or passive acceptance of an unjust world system. But alcohol can also have a negative impact on the anarchist movement.

There are comrades who have been arrested for carrying out brash and unthought-out acts of resistance – such as spray painting a police car – which offer little more than a fleeting sense of revenge or relief, while they were drunk. What a waste of time, energy and resources for a revolutionary to have to go through a court appearance, paying bail and possibly for a lawyer for such a trivial act, which probably has no impact whatsoever – save maybe for a miniscule propagandistic value – on the target. Resources which could much better have been put to use in a collectively deliberated strategy against the class enemy just because, when under

the influence, someone did not properly contemplate the consequences of their actions. This illustrates how collective responsibility can also be compromised or undermined when some members of a group might drink too much; when an individual carries out an act without the knowledge or consent of the rest of their group, possibly putting its members in jeopardy, or compromising its aims.

Also, if a certain member of a group has a heavy drinking problem, they might falter on carrying out some of their mandates, shifting more responsibility onto other members and, there too, undermining collective responsibility. I am not saying that this is often the case – and certainly not that every anarchist who drinks a lot is likely to do this – but I think that it is something which needs to be looked out for. As comrades in the struggle we owe it to ourselves and to one another both to keep each other in check, and to tell someone when we think they are drinking too much and might be developing a problem; as well as to monitor our own behaviour, be honest with ourselves, and seek help rather than jeopardize our comrades because we are too proud, stubborn, or macho to admit it when we have a problem. Such attitudes could cost lives; in Swaziland, pro-democratic cadres are discouraged from drinking alcohol as people tend to drop their guard when under the influence and, in such a tense political climate, where there are spies, informers and undercover agents everywhere trying to uncover unwanted elements plotting against the monarchy, a slip of the tongue in the wrong company could prove fatal.

★ What Anarchists Could Do

Within the devastation caused by alcoholism there is also an opportunity for anarchists; we could offer an alternative to AA meetings (as if holding hands and praying is really going to help one overcome a disease), which could be a way for

anarchists to find a social insertion in poor and working class communities where there would otherwise not have been an opening for our ideas. Often times people do not want to hear about politics, but by anarchists initiating a positive step against a debilitating social sickness such as alcoholism, by starting a support group for people affected by alcoholism for example, we could find an opportunity to relate to people how alcoholism is often a sign of their own misery at the hands of an unjust system, which robs them of their humanity and their dignity, and spread class consciousness by showing how it is usually the bosses who benefit at the expense of the poor, when alcohol is abused in a community on a large scale. Anarchist support and educational groups – not just for alcoholics but also for the victims of alcoholism, such as victims of alcohol related domestic violence – could be a way for anarchists to help to turn the anger and discontent of exploited and oppressed people away from being directed at themselves and one another, and focus it at the cause of their misery; class and hierarchical oppression. This could also give the opportunity to spread an anarchist analysis of class society and racist/ sexist oppression beyond typically politicised and class-conscious circles.

It may not seem a worthwhile exercise for many anarchists, and I am not saying that every anarchist should quit drinking and launch a campaign against alcohol or in favour of temperance, but the effect of alcohol, both on the working class and poor and, quite possibly, on the anarchist movement is something to be considered. As I keep saying, I believe alcoholism is a debilitating disease which needs to be addressed so that, when the time comes to defend the revolution from reaction, we – or those who come after us – are not too drunk to fight.