CHAPTER SEVEN

VIOLATING NORMS, RE-SOCIALIZING SOCIETY

Introduction

Despite the best intentions and efforts of revolutionaries, revolution is difficult and atypical. Even “successful” revolutions seem to eventually relapse into hierarchy. This raises some important questions about the impediments to social revolution. What restrains most members of society from fomenting and joining revolutions, or even having an interest in such rare occurrences? What causes counter-revolutionary tendencies to rear their heads after revolutionary situations emerge?

The macro-level changes that accompanies revolution—economic, political, cultural—are important structural considerations. Revolutionaries attempt to change the conditions under which people work and produce, make decisions and cooperate, and reflect values and ways of living. While these are all important transformations, it is equally necessary to appreciate how major institutions are also “constructed” by people’s everyday actions. For example, worker self-management is not merely declared by radical unionists, but also enacted by worker’s actions on a day-to-day basis, negotiating tasks, hours, and protocols. Norms are the guidelines that help people execute their roles within organizations, interact with each other, and carry-on their lives. Without norms to suggest the most conducive behavior in a given situation, chaos would result. But, what sorts of norms exist and are followed: those that reinforce domination and order-following, or norms that facilitate anti-authoritarianism and mutual aid? We ought to appreciate the importance that these “taken-for-granted,” shared understandings have for society and for revolution. This chapter employs the radical anarchist ideas of social order to analyze the systemic barriers to revolutionary transformation. As such, we synthesize anarchist and sociological ideas regarding norms, socialization, and social change.

Norms would be as integral to a revolutionary society as they are to the perpetuation of hierarchical society. Although norms may be roughly understood as social “rules,” this should not be contradictory to anarchism. Rules are based on ideas and understandings, and are not necessarily
“bad” according to anarchists if such rules are collectively agreed upon. In all likelihood, anarchists would positively evaluate rules that were collectively and democratically agreed-upon; traffic signs are an example, since those rules are not designed to discriminate against anyone who must obey such signs (although one could make a case that such discrimination may still occur). Another example is speaking only during one’s turn in meetings and withholding one’s additional comments until after everyone else in attendance has the opportunity to contribute. Ultimately, people rely heavily upon such guidelines, even if very informal, or shared understandings that can enable behavior that is respectful towards others’ individuality. Anarchism—and other justice-oriented, liberatory movements—aim to help restructure society by changing norms. Therefore, for anarchists, it is less important and empowering, and shorter-lasting to merely protest and lobby for social change. As Catholic Worker founders and anarchists Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day were fond of saying: “we must make the kind of society in which it is easier for people to be good” (cited in Day 1954, 217).

This chapter grapples with some of the central issues related to norms, socialization, and revolutionary transformation, as seen through an anarchist-lens. We argue that social movements that struggle for revolutionary change will fall short unless the deep-seated issue of socialization to hierarchical norms is considered. To make this explicitly-anarchist case, we will use examples from Western societies, primarily (but not exclusively) the United States, although a comparable analysis could be formulated for many other culturally-distinct societies. First, we consider how norms play a role in reinforcing inequality and hierarchy, key anarchist concerns. Second, socialization in hierarchical societies tends to insure wide-spread adoption and adherence to norms by replicating norm-obedience. Third, many theoretical problems stem from practices that deviate from normative behavior, including the notion of rebellion and deviance. Fourth, we take into account some of the great challenges that impede the creation of less hierarchical norms. Finally, we summarize contemporary anarchist efforts to re-socialize people and present these current and potential activities as vital, revolutionary efforts.

Norms Reinforcing Inequality and Hierarchy

In *The Struggle to Be Human*, Tifft and Sullivan (1980) write: “In reality, the miseries of humankind cannot simply be laid at the statehouse doors of