

Working Class Subjugation and Left-Wing Politics in the Works of Alan Sillitoe

Abstract

Reading the works of Alan Sillitoe through the lens of a class analysis seems a straightforward task, but how do working class characters who reject the role of the state in their lives fit within a Marxist interpretation of Sillitoe's works? Is equating socialism with Marxism reductive, and does the subversive and rebellious nature of Sillitoe's characters better align itself with anarchism? Examining the novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) and the short story 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner' (1959), this article will explore the ways in which Sillitoe's portrayals of working class resistance are linked to left-wing political thought, focusing on the contrast between statist and libertarian ideologies. Furthermore, it aims to demonstrate the way in which Sillitoe's working class characters are united, even if not under a direct political banner, through a shared politics brought about in reaction to their common oppression, and to establish where this ideology exists in relation to wider political thought.

"Voting can never make any difference to their plight"¹ wrote Alan Sillitoe in *Anarchy*, a self-described journal of anarchist ideas. Written in an article titled 'Poor People' which focused on the experience of working class oppression, Sillitoe outlined in the clearest sense a core aspect of an anarchist ideology: that the working class cannot utilise the present state in their struggle for liberation. With such a statement inarguably rejecting statism, why is it that so much analysis of the representation of the working class in Sillitoe's works reads them as Marxist? This article aims to make the case that Sillitoe's writing clearly displays a far more libertarian socialist ideology than that outlined by Marxist thinkers, and that he presents through this a unifying working class identity that is not defined by partisan politics or democratic engagement. Rather, it will argue that Sillitoe presents a working class united in part by their collective opposition to the role of the state in their lives, and with it a rejection of state participation in favour of united resistance, which I propose is far more closely aligned with social anarchism than Marxist socialism.

In exploring the politics of Sillitoe's characters, it is first necessary to explore the politics of Sillitoe himself. A writer firmly on the left of the political spectrum, Sillitoe's proposed connections to Marxism are understandable. An effective end to capitalist imperialism, he wrote, "means no less than a complete revolution, and that can't be done unless the whole of the working class get into action [...] a wave of strikes or even a general strike".² It is easy to see why such a quote would be used as evidence of his alleged Marxism with its links to organised class action; but Marxists did not have a monopoly on advocating strikes, and anarchist thinkers proposed similar action. Anarchist Mikhail Bakunin for instance said that strikes were

¹ Alan Sillitoe, 'Poor People', *Anarchy*, 4.4 (1964), 124-128 (p. 125).

² Alan Sillitoe, quoted by John Newsinger, 'Long Distance Running: Alan Sillitoe (1928-2010)', *Socialist Review* <<http://socialistreview.org.uk/348/long-distance-running-alan-sillitoe-1928-2010>> [accessed 28 November 2017].

“bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world”.³ This idea of breaking down the state’s power is one that runs throughout Sillitoe’s writing, and specifically the way he elucidates a sense of working class identity that exists only in reaction to bourgeois authoritarian tyranny.

This brand of political identity is a key aspect in the novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, with protagonist Arthur Seaton remarking of the atmosphere of the factory that “though no strong cause for open belligerence existed as in the bad days talked about, it persisted for more subtle reasons that could hardly be understood but were nevertheless felt”.⁴ Arthur expresses this discontent the working class share without being able to directly attribute a political cause to it in a way that is characteristic of Sillitoe’s characters: instinctively reacting against the system even without any understanding of the political theory behind leftist movements. Indeed, this falls in line with a concept elucidated by Bakunin in his writings on the inherent anarchist tendencies of the proletariat, possessing of what he called the “holy instinct of revolt”,⁵ which he contrasted with the “scientific socialism” of Marxism, as rather an instinctive form of socialism not requiring political education. This same idea is built upon when Arthur does explicitly discuss politics - he says of aspiring socialist politicians with otherwise agreeable ideas that “when they say that when they get in government everybody's got to share and share alike, that's another thing. I ain't a communist”.⁶ Arthur’s rejection of this typifies the core belief of Sillitoe’s brand of socialism - that it must be focused above all else on individual liberty. Arthur cannot abide by the state’s imposition in his life, even if it claims to be working in his own best interests, and thus this authoritarian communism is immediately rejected by him.

This principle draws parallels to what Bakunin wrote on the liberty of man, that being that true liberty requires that a man “obeys the laws of nature because he has himself recognized them as such, and not because they have been imposed upon him externally by any foreign will whatsoever”.⁷ Arthur’s characterisation is demonstrative of this “impulse to liberty”,⁸ but also of the rejection of the very idea that any government can work in the best interest of the working class. The fact that Sillitoe crafts a working-class identity that exists in opposition to the political ruling class requires the understanding that workers elected to government lose their working-class identity by working alongside the very people they used to oppose. This belief draws perhaps the clearest distinction between the Marxist and anarchist ideologies that could be applied to Sillitoe’s works. Vladimir Lenin wrote that Marxists “demand that the proletariat be prepared for revolution by utilising the present state”, whereas “anarchists even deny that the revolutionary proletariat should utilise its state power”,⁹ and indeed Sillitoe does not seem to in any way support the proletariat electing representatives into government. Returning to the opening quotation of the article, there is an obvious connection drawn between

³ Robert J Alexander, *The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War: Volume 1* (Janus Publishing Company: London, 1999) p.25.

⁴ Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 67.

⁵ Mikhail Bakunin, *On Anarchy* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. xiv.

⁶ Sillitoe, *Saturday Night*, p. 38.

⁷ Bakunin, *On Anarchy*, p. 277.

⁸ Bakunin, *On Anarchy*, p. xiv.

⁹ Vladimir Lenin, *The Essential Works of Lenin* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2012), p. 358.

Sillitoe's views on voting and that of a variety of anarchist thinkers, as Rudolf Rocker wrote of reformist Marxism that "participation in the politics of the bourgeois States has not brought the labour movement a hair's-breadth nearer to Socialism"¹⁰, in much the same way that it "can never make any difference to their plight", as Sillitoe put it.

The two key assumptions behind Sillitoe's social anarchism are that elected officials can never represent their constituents, and that the class boundaries between working class and middle or upper class people aren't nearly as permeable as they are often made out to be. Sillitoe's argument for the first of these assumptions is highlighted by a quote by Bakunin: "worker deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment [...] will cease being workers and statesmen and become converted into bourgeois".¹¹ Bakunin posits that even if the working class decide to elect members from their own ranks to parliament, the result will be that these now ex-workers will find themselves "living and soaking up all the bourgeois ideas and acquiring their habits",¹² and thus become concerned with the interests of their new class rather than those of the one they were elected to represent. It is this idea that can be seen to fuel much of the conflict of Sillitoe's short story 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner', as protagonist Smith rejects the borstal governor's suggestions that he aspire to become a professional athlete, as doing so would require playing by the governor's rules, and abandoning his history of resisting the state's authority, and with it his class identity. In the same sense that Bakunin talks about "social war of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie",¹³ Smith declares of his relationship with the governor that "this is war".¹⁴

In a greater sense, however, the relationship between Smith and the governor exists to illustrate Sillitoe's belief in the impermeability of class boundaries, with Smith rejecting this as a fantasy. He spurns the governor's offer of "the cushiest six months still left"¹⁵ in return for his cooperation, and the accompanying suggestion that he could resultantly become a professional runner when he gets out, possessing none of the aspirations to becoming middle class that the governor expects him to hold. Further in his article in *Anarchy*, Sillitoe expands on this idea when he writes that for the poor, media representations of "people who, one way or another, got on through personal striving, are enjoyed for the story, but believed only as a fairy tale is", as "poor people live in the moment"¹⁶ and do not hold stock in promises that their present suffering is just to earn them future success. This is certainly how he characterises Smith, who, true to his working-class identity, says of his choice to lose the race to spite the governor that "I'll hit him where it hurts a lot, and [...] I'll enjoy it because I'm hitting first".¹⁷ That Smith chooses to take this short-term victory is as such arguably a statement by Sillitoe on the need for the working class, already united in their resistance, to resolutely abandon all middle class aspirations in favour of class action.

¹⁰ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, (London: Pluto Press, 1989) p. 83.

¹¹ Bakunin, *On Anarchy*, p. 172.

¹² Bakunin, *On Anarchy*, p. 172.

¹³ Bakunin, *On Anarchy*, p. 304.

¹⁴ Alan Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), p. 46.

¹⁵ Sillitoe, *Loneliness*, p. 45.

¹⁶ Sillitoe, 'Poor People', *Anarchy*, p. 125.

¹⁷ Sillitoe, *Loneliness*, p. 45.

Sillitoe observes in 'Poor People' that "The poor not only know their place [...] but they will go on knowing it until they can get out of it on their own terms",¹⁸ and perhaps it is this that best represents what working class identity is in Sillitoe's works: an understanding of their subjugation by the bourgeois ruling class, and a unity brought about by the shared desire to resist their oppressors, reject their state systems, and scoff at the narratives that say that one can rise up the class hierarchy through striving alone. With this unity, Sillitoe seems to suggest, comes the possibility for real change outside of the present state, revolutionary action that truly benefits the working class. As Smith says "in the end the governor is going to be doomed while blokes like me take the pickings of his roasted bones."¹⁹

¹⁸ Sillitoe, 'Poor People', *Anarchy*, p.125.

¹⁹ Sillitoe, *Loneliness*, p. 46.

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