

ANARCHISM: WHAT IT IS & WHAT IT ISN'T

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There are many popular misconceptions about anarchism, and because of them a great many people dismiss anarchists and anarchism out of hand.

Misconceptions abound in the mass media, where the term “anarchy” is commonly used as a synonym for “chaos,” and where terrorists, no matter what their political beliefs or affiliations, are often referred to as “anarchists.” As well, when anarchism is mentioned, it’s invariably presented as merely a particularly mindless form of youthful rebellion. These misconceptions are, of course, also widespread in the general public, which by and large allows the mass media to do what passes for its thinking.

Worse, some who call themselves “anarchists” don’t even know the meaning of the term. These people fall, in general, into two classes. The first, as the great Italian anarchist Luigi Fabbri pointed out nearly a century ago in *Influencias burguesas sobre el anarquismo*, consists of those who are attracted to the lies in the mass media. By and large, these people are simply looking for a glamorous label for selfish, antisocial behavior. The good news is that most of them eventually mature and abandon what they consider “anarchism.” The bad news is that while they’re around they tend to give anarchism a very bad name. As Fabbri put it:

[These are] persons who are not repelled by the absurd, but who, on the contrary, engage in it. They are attracted to projects and ideas precisely because they are absurd; and so anarchism comes to be known precisely for the illogical character and ridiculousness which ignorance and bourgeois calumny have attributed to anarchist doctrines.¹

The second class consists of those who equate anarchism with some pet ideology having essentially nothing to do with anarchism. In modern times, the most prominent of these mislabeled beliefs have been primitivism and amoral egotism. Again, the identification of such beliefs with anarchism tends to give anarchism a bad name, because of, on the one hand, the absurdity of primitivism and, on the other, the obvious antisocial nature of amoral egotism. To put this another way, the identification of anarchism with chaos, mindless rebellion, absurdities (such as primitivism), and antisocial attitudes and behaviors (such as amoral egotism) has three primary undesirable effects:

- 1) it allows people to easily dismiss anarchism and anarchists;
- 2) it makes it much more difficult to explain anarchism to them, because they already think that they know what it is and have rejected it; and
- 3) it attracts a fair number of what Fabbri calls “empty headed and frivolous types,” and occasionally outright sociopaths, whose words and actions tend to further discredit anarchism.

So, if we're ever to get anywhere, we need to make plain what anarchism is and what it isn't. First, let's deal with the misconceptions.

What Anarchism Isn't

Anarchism is not terrorism. An overwhelming majority of anarchists have always rejected terrorism, because they've been intelligent enough to realize that means determine ends, that terrorism is inherently vanguardist, and that even when "successful" it almost always leads to bad results. The anonymous authors of *You Can't Blow Up a Social Relationship: The Anarchist Case Against Terrorism* put it like this:

You can't blow up a social relationship. The total collapse of this society would provide no guarantee about what replaced it. Unless a majority of people had the ideas and organization sufficient for the creation of an alternative society, we would see the old world reassert itself because it is what people would be used to, what they believed in, what existed unchallenged in their own personalities.

Proponents of terrorism and guerrillaism are to be opposed because their actions are vanguardist and authoritarian, because their ideas, to the extent that they are substantial, are wrong or unrelated to the results of their actions (especially when they call themselves libertarians or anarchists), because their killing cannot be justified, and finally because their actions produce either repression with nothing in return, or an authoritarian regime.²

Decades of government and corporate slander cannot alter this reality: the overwhelming majority of anarchists reject terrorism for both practical and ethical reasons. In the late 1990s, *Time* magazine called Ted Kaczynski "the king of the anarchists"; but that doesn't make it so. *Time's* words are just another typical, perhaps deliberately dishonest, attempt to tar all anarchists with the terrorist brush.

This is not to say that armed resistance is never appropriate. Clearly there are situations in which one has little choice, as when facing a dictatorship that suppresses civil liberties and prevents one from acting openly, which has happened repeatedly in many countries. Even then, armed resistance should be undertaken reluctantly and as a last resort, because violence is inherently undesirable due to the suffering it causes; because it provides repressive regimes excuses for further repression; because it provides them with the opportunity to commit atrocities against civilians and to blame those atrocities on their "terrorist" opponents; and because, as history has shown, the chances of success are very low.

Even though armed resistance may sometimes be called for in repressive situations, it's a far different matter to succumb to the romance of the gun and to engage in urban guerrilla warfare in relatively open societies in which civil liberties are largely intact and in which one does not have mass popular support at the start of one's violent campaign. Violence in such situations does little but drive the public into the "protective" arms of the government; narrow political dialogue (tending to polarize the populace into pro- and anti-guerrilla factions); turn politics into a spectator sport for the vast majority of people³; provide the government with the excuse to suppress civil liberties; and induce the onset of repressive regimes "better" able to handle the "terrorist" problem than their more tolerant predecessors. It's also worth mentioning that the chances of success of such violent, vanguardist campaigns are microscopic. They are simply arrogant, ill-thought-out roads to disaster.⁴

Anarchism is not primitivism. In recent decades, groups of quasi-religious mystics have begun equating the primitivism they advocate (rejection of science, rationality, and technology—often lumped together under the blanket term, "technology") with anarchism.⁵ In reality, the two have nothing to do with each other, as we'll see when we consider what anarchism actually is—a set of philosophical/ethical precepts and organizational principles designed to maximize human freedom. For now, suffice it to say that the elimination of technology advocated by primitivist groups would inevitably entail the deaths of literally billions of human beings in a world utterly dependent upon interlocking technologies for everything from food production/delivery to communications to medical treatment. This fervently desired outcome, the elimination of technology, could only come about through means which are the absolute antithesis of anarchism:

the use of coercion and violence on a mass scale, as it's inconceivable that a majority of human beings would voluntarily give up such things as running water, sewer systems, modern medicine, electric lights, and warm houses in the winter.⁶

Anarchism is not chaos; Anarchism is not rejection of organization. This is another popular misconception, repeated ad nauseam by the mass media and by anarchism's political foes, especially marxists (who sometimes know better). Even a brief look at the works of anarchism's leading theoreticians and writers confirms that this belief is in error. Over and over in the writings of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Rocker, Ward, Bookchin, et al., one finds not a rejection of organization, but rather a preoccupation with it—a preoccupation with how society should be organized in accord with the anarchist principles of individual freedom and social justice. For a century and a half now, anarchists have been arguing that coercive, hierarchical organization (as embodied in government and corporations) is not equivalent to organization per se (which they regard as necessary), and that

7. Indeed, there have been a fairly large number of admirable religious anarchists, individuals such as Leo Tolstoy and Dorothy Day (and the members of her Catholic Worker groups, such as Ammon Hennacy), though to most anarchists the advocacy of freedom on Earth while bowing to a heavenly tyrant (no matter how imaginary) seems an insupportable contradiction. To the best of my knowledge there have been no such shining examples of anarcho-capitalists.

8. To be fair, marxists also tend to emphasize positive freedom, but for the most part they're also curiously insensitive, and often downright hostile, to "negative" freedom—the freedom from restraint (especially when they have the guns and goons to do the restraining).

9. Of course, this discussion of anarchism is necessarily schematic, given that this pamphlet is intended as an introductory 10-minute read. For elaboration upon these themes, see *Anarchism and Anarcho-syndicalism*, by Rudolf Rocker; *What Is Communist Anarchism?*, by Alexander Berkman (a portion of which is now published by Freedom Press as the *ABC of Anarchism*); *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, by Peter Kropotkin; and *Anarchy in Action*, by Colin Ward.

The anarchists were still in virtual control of Catalonia and the revolution was in full swing. . . . the aspect of Barcelona was something startling and overwhelming. It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flag of the anarchists; . . . Every shop and café had an inscription saying it had been collectivized; even the bootblacks had been collectivized and their boxes painted red and black. Waiters and shop-workers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal. Servile and even ceremonial forms of speech had temporarily disappeared. . . . The revolutionary posters were everywhere, flaming from the walls in clean reds and blues that made the few remaining advertisements look like daubs of mud. . . . All this was queer and moving. There was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for.

This is anarchism. And Orwell was right—it is worth fighting for.⁹

Footnotes

1. *Bourgeois Influences on Anarchism*, by Luigi Fabbri. Tucson, AZ: See Sharp Press, 2001, p. 16.

2. *You Can't Blow Up a Social Relationship*. Tucson, AZ: See Sharp Press, 1998, p. 20.

3. It may be that now due to apathy, but in violent/repressive situations other options are cut off for almost everyone not directly involved in armed resistance.

4. For further discussion of this matter, see *You Can't Blow Up a Social Relationship: The Anarchist Case Against Terrorism and Bourgeois Influences on Anarchism*.

5. Ted Kaczynski is in some ways quite typical of this breed of romantic. He differs from most of them in that he acted on his beliefs (albeit in a cowardly, violent manner) and that he actually lived a relatively primitive existence in the backwoods of Montana—unlike most of his co-religionists, who live comfortably in urban areas and employ the technologies they profess to loathe.

6. For further discussion of this topic, see *Anarchism vs. Primitivism*, by Brian Oliver Sheppard. Tucson, AZ: See Sharp Press, 2003. See also the “Primitive Thought” appendix to *Listen Anarchist!*, by Chaz Bufe. Tucson, AZ: See Sharp Press, 1998.

coercive organization should be replaced by decentralized, nonhierarchical organization based on voluntary cooperation and mutual aid. This is hardly a rejection of organization.

Anarchism is not amoral egotism. As does any avant garde social movement, anarchism attracts more than its share of flakes, parasites, and outright sociopaths, persons simply looking for a glamorous label to cover their often-pathological selfishness, their disregard for the rights and dignity of others, and their pathetic desire to be the center of attention. These individuals tend to give anarchism a bad name, because even though they have very little in common with actual anarchists—that is, persons concerned with ethical behavior, social justice, and the rights of both themselves and others—they're often quite exhibitionistic, and their disreputable actions sometimes come into the public eye. To make matters worse, these exhibitionists sometimes publish their self-glorifying views and deliberately misidentify those views as “anarchist.” To cite an example, the publisher of a pretentiously (sub)titled American “anarchist” journal recently published a book by a fellow egotist consisting primarily of ad hominem attacks on actual anarchists, knowing full well that the “anarchist” author of the book is a notorious police narcotics informant who has on a number of occasions rattled out those he's had disputes with to government agencies. This police informer's actions—which, revealingly, he's attempted to hide—are completely in line with his ideology of amoral egotism (“post-left anarchism”), but they have nothing to do with actual anarchism. Such amoral egotists may (mis)use the label, but they're no more anarchists than the now-defunct German Democratic Republic (East Germany) was democratic or a republic.

The full absurdity of identifying amoral egotism—essentially “I'll do what I damn well please and fuck everybody else”—with anarchism will become apparent in short order when we'll consider what anarchism actually is. Anarchism is not “Libertarianism.” Until relatively recently, the very useful term “libertarian” was used worldwide as a synonym for “anarchist.” Indeed, it was used exclusively in this sense until the 1970s when, in the United States, it was appropriated by the grossly misnamed Libertarian Party. This party has almost nothing to do with anarchist concepts of liberty, especially the concepts of equal freedom and positive freedom—that is, access to the resources necessary to the freedom to act. (Equal freedom and positive freedom are discussed in the following section of this pamphlet.) Instead, this “Libertarian” party concerns itself exclusively with the negative freedoms, pretending that liberty exists only in the negative sense, while it simultaneously revels in the denial of equal positive freedom to the vast majority of the world's people.

These “Libertarians” not only glorify capitalism, the mechanism that denies both equal freedom and positive freedom to the vast majority, but they also wish to retain the coercive apparatus of the state while eliminating its social welfare functions—hence widening the rift between rich and poor, and increasing the freedom of the rich by diminishing that of the poor (while

keeping the boot of the state firmly on their necks). Thus, in the United States, the once exceedingly useful term “libertarian” has been hijacked by egotists who are in fact enemies of liberty in the full sense of the word, and who have very little in common with anarchists.

This is what anarchism isn't.

What Anarchism Is

In its narrowest sense, anarchism is simply the rejection of the state, the rejection of coercive government. Under this extremely narrow definition, even such apparent absurdities as “anarcho-capitalism” and religious anarchism are possible.⁷

But most anarchists use the term “anarchism” in a much broader sense, defining it as the rejection of coercion and domination in all forms. So, most anarchists reject not only coercive government, but also religion and capitalism, which they see as other forms of the twin evils, domination and coercion. They reject religion because they see it as the ultimate form of domination, in which a supposedly all-powerful god hands down “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” to its “flock.” They likewise reject capitalism because it's designed to produce rich and poor and because it's designed to produce a system of domination in which some give orders and others have little choice but to take them. For similar reasons, on a personal level almost all anarchists reject sexism, racism, and homophobia—all of which produce artificial inequality, and thus domination.

To put this another way, anarchists believe in freedom in both its negative and positive senses. In this country, freedom is routinely presented only in its negative sense, that of being free from restraint. Hence most people equate freedom only with such things as freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of (or from) religion. But there's also a positive aspect of freedom, an aspect which anarchists almost alone insist on.⁸

That positive aspect is what Emma Goldman called “the freedom to.” And that freedom, the freedom of action, the freedom to enjoy or use, is highly dependent upon access to the world's resources. Because of this the rich are in a very real sense free to a much greater degree than the rest of us. To cite an example in the area of free speech, Donald Trump could easily buy dozens of daily newspapers or television stations to propagate his views and influence public opinion. How many working people could do the same? How many working people could afford to buy a single daily newspaper or a single television station? The answer is obvious. Working people cannot do such things; instead, we're reduced to producing 'zines with a readership of a few hundred persons or putting up pages on the Internet in our relatively few hours of free time.

Examples of the greater freedom of the rich abound in daily life. To put this in general terms, because they do not have to work, the rich not only have far more money (that is, access to resources) but also far more time

to pursue their interests, pleasures, and desires than do the rest of us. To cite a concrete example, the rich are free to send their children to the best colleges employing the best instructors, which the rest of us simply can't afford to do; if we can afford college at all, we make do with community and state colleges employing slave-labor “adjunct faculty” and overworked, underpaid graduate students. Once in college, the children of the rich are entirely free to pursue their studies, while most other students must work at least part time to support themselves, which deprives them of many hours which could be devoted to study. If you think about it, you can easily find additional examples of the greater freedom of the rich in the areas of medical care, housing, nutrition, travel, etc., etc.—in fact, in virtually every area of life.

This greater freedom of action for the rich comes at the expense of everyone else, through the diminishment of everyone else's freedom of action. There is no way around this, given that freedom of action is to a great extent determined by access to finite resources. Anatole France well illustrated the differences between the restrictions placed upon the rich and the poor when he wrote, “The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.”

Because the primary goal of anarchism is the greatest possible amount of freedom for all, anarchists insist on equal freedom in both its negative and positive aspects—that, in the negative sense, individuals be free to do whatever they wish as long as they do not harm or directly intrude upon others; and, in the positive sense, that all individuals have equal freedom to act, that they have equal access to the world's resources.

Anarchists recognize that absolute freedom is an impossibility, that amoral egotism ignoring the rights of others would quickly devolve into a war of all against all. What we argue for is that everyone have equal freedom from restraint (limited only by respect for the rights of others) and that everyone have as nearly as possible equal access to resources, thus ensuring equal (or near-equal) freedom to act. This is anarchism in its theoretical sense.

In Spain, Cuba, and a few other countries there have been serious attempts to make this theory reality through the movement known as anarcho-sindicalism. The primary purpose of anarcho-sindicalism is the replacement of coercive government by voluntary cooperation in the form of worker-controlled unions coordinating the entire economy. This would not only eliminate the primary restraint on the negative freedoms (government), but would also be a huge step toward achieving positive freedom. The nearest this vision came to fruition was in the Spanish Revolution, 1936–1939, when huge areas of Spain, including its most heavily industrialized region, came under the control of the anarcho-sindicalist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo. George Orwell describes this achievement in *Homage to Catalonia*: