

Anarchism And Other Impediments To Anarchy

Bob Black

There is no need at present to produce new definitions of anarchism — it would be hard to improve on those long since devised by various eminent dead foreigners. Nor need we linger over the familiar hyphenated anarchisms, communist- and individualist- and so forth; the textbooks cover all that. More to the point is why we are no closer to anarchy today than were Godwin and Proudhon and Kropotkin and Goldman in their times. There are lots of reasons, but the ones that most need to be thought about are the ones that the anarchists engender themselves, since it is these obstacles — if any — it should be possible to remove. Possible, but not probable.

My considered judgment, after years of scrutiny of, and sometimes harrowing activity in the anarchist milieu, is that anarchists are a main reason — I suspect, a sufficient reason — why anarchy remains an epithet without a prayer of a chance to be realized. Most anarchists are, frankly, incapable of living in an autonomous cooperative manner. A lot of them aren't very bright. They tend to peruse their own classics and insider literature to the exclusion of broader knowledge of the world we live in. Essentially timid, they associate with others like themselves with the tacit understanding that nobody will measure anybody else's opinions and actions against any standard of practical critical intelligence; that no one by his or her individual achievements will rise too far above the prevalent level; and, above all, that nobody challenges the shibboleths of anarchist ideology.

Anarchism as a milieu is not so much a challenge to the existing order as it is one highly specialized form of accommodation to it. It is a way of life, or an adjunct of one, with its own particular mix of rewards and sacrifices. Poverty is obligatory, but for that very reason forecloses the question whether this or that anarchist could have been anything but a failure regardless of ideology. The history of anarchism is a history of unparalleled defeat and martyrdom, yet anarchists venerate their victimized forebears with a morbid devotion which occasions suspicion that the anarchists, like everybody else, think that the only good anarchist is a dead one. Revolution — defeated revolution — is glorious, but it belongs in books and pamphlets. In this century — Spain in 1936 and France in 1968 are especially clear cases — the revolutionary upsurge caught the official, organized anarchists flat-footed and initially non-supportive or worse. The reason is not far to seek. It's not that all these ideologues were hypocrites (some were). Rather, they had worked out a daily routine of anarchist militancy, one they unconsciously counted on to endure indefinitely since revolution isn't really imaginable in the here-and-now, and they reacted with fear and defensiveness when events outdistanced their rhetoric.

In other words, given a choice between anarchism and anarchy, most anarchists would go for the anarchism ideology and subculture rather than take a dangerous leap into the unknown, into a world of stateless liberty. But since anarchists are almost the only avowed critics of the state as such, these freedom-fearing folk would inevitably assume prominent or at least publicized places in any insurgency which was genuinely anti-statist. Themselves follower-types, they would find themselves the leaders of a revolution which threatened their settled status no less than that of the politicians and proprietors. The anarchists would sabotage the revolution, consciously or otherwise, which without them might have dispensed with the state without even pausing to replay the ancient Marx/Bakunin tussle.

In truth the anarchists who assume the name have done nothing to challenge the state, not with windy unread jargon-filled writings, but with the contagious example of another way to relate to other people. Anarchists as they conduct the anarchism business are the best refutation of anarchist pretensions. True, in North America at least the top-heavy “federations” of workerist organizers have collapsed in ennui and acrimony, and a good thing too, but the informal social structure of anarchism is still hierarchic through and through. The anarchists placidly submit to what Bakunin called an “invisible government” which in their case consists of the editors (in fact if not in name) of a handful of the larger and longer-lasting anarchist publications.

These publications, despite seemingly profound ideological differences, have similar “father-knows-best” stances vis-a-vis their readers as well as a gentlemen’s agreement not to permit attacks upon each other which would expose inconsistencies and otherwise undermine their common class interest in hegemony over the anarchist rank-and-file. Oddly enough, you can more readily criticize the *Fifth Estate* or *Kick It Over* in their own pages than you can there criticize, say, *Processed World*. Every organization has more in common with every other organization than it does with any of the unorganized. The anarchist critique of the state, if only the anarchists understood it, is but a special case of the critique of organization. And, at some level, even anarchist organizations sense this.

Anti-anarchists may well conclude that if there is to be hierarchy and coercion, let it be out in the open, clearly labeled as such. Unlike these pundits (the right-wing “libertarians”, the minarchists, for instance) I stubbornly persist in my opposition to the state. But not because, as anarchists so often thoughtlessly declaim, the state is not “necessary”. Ordinary people dismiss this anarchist assertion as ludicrous, and so they should. Obviously, in an industrialized class society like ours, the state is necessary. The point is that the state has created the conditions in which it is indeed necessary, by stripping individuals and face-to-face voluntary associations of their powers. More fundamentally, the state’s underpinnings (work, moralism, industrial technology, hierarchic organizations) are not necessary but rather antithetical to the satisfactions of real needs and desires. Unfortunately, most brands of anarchism endorse all these premises yet balk at their logical conclusion: the state.

If there were no anarchists, the state would have had to invent them. We know that on several occasions it has done just that. We need anarchists unencumbered by anarchism. Then, and only then, we can begin to get serious about fomenting anarchy.

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