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Title:
Anarchism for a Post-modern Age

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Summary:
Politics, in all its forms, has failed. The notion that we can safely and
successfully hand over the management of our daily lives and the setting of
priorities to a political class or elite is thoroughly discredited.

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"The thin and precarious crust of decency is all that separates any
civilization, however impressive, from the hell of anarchy or systematic tyranny
which lie in wait beneath the surface."

Aldous Leonard Huxley (1894-1963), British writer

I. Overview of Theories of Anarchism

Politics, in all its forms, has failed. The notion that we can safely and
successfully hand over the management of our daily lives and the setting of
priorities to a political class or elite is thoroughly discredited. Politicians
cannot be trusted, regardless of the system in which they operate. No set of
constraints, checks, and balances, is proved to work and mitigate their
unconscionable acts and the pernicious effects these have on our welfare and
longevity.

Ideologies - from the benign to the malign and from the divine to the pedestrian
- have driven the gullible human race to the verge of annihilation and back.
Participatory democracies have degenerated everywhere into venal plutocracies.
Socialism and its poisoned fruits - Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism - have
wrought misery on a scale unprecedented even by medieval standards. Only Fascism
and Nazism compare with them unfavorably. The idea of the nation-state
culminated in the Yugoslav succession wars.

It is time to seriously consider a much-derided and decried alternative:

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anarchism.

Anarchism is often mistaken for left-wing thinking or the advocacy of anarchy. It is neither. If anything, the libertarian strain in anarchism makes it closer to the right. Anarchism is an umbrella term covering disparate social and political theories - among them classic or cooperative anarchism (postulated by William Godwin and, later, Pierre Joseph Proudhon), radical individualism (Max Stirner), religious anarchism (Leo Tolstoy), anarcho-communism (Kropotkin) and anarcho-syndicalism, educational anarchism (Paul Goodman), and communitarian anarchism (Daniel Guerin).

The narrow (and familiar) form of political anarchism springs from the belief that human communities can survive and thrive through voluntary cooperation, without a coercive central government. Politics corrupt and subvert Man's good and noble nature. Governments are instruments of self-enrichment and self-aggrandizement, and the reification and embodiment of said subversion.

The logical outcome is to call for the overthrow of all political systems, as Michael Bakunin suggested. Governments should therefore be opposed by any and all means, including violent action. What should replace the state? There is little agreement among anarchists: biblical authority (Tolstoy), self-regulating co-opertaives of craftsmen (Proudhon), a federation of voluntary associations (Bakunin), trade unions (anarcho-syndicalists), ideal communism (Kropotkin).

What is common to this smorgasbord is the affirmation of freedom as the most fundamental value. Justice, equality, and welfare cannot be sustained without it. The state and its oppressive mechanisms is incompatible with it. Figures of authority and the ruling classes are bound to abuse their remit and use the instruments of government to further and enforce their own interests. The state is conceived and laws are enacted for this explicit purpose of gross and unjust exploitation. The state perpetrates violence and is the cause rather than the cure of most social ills.

Anarchists believe that human beings are perfectly capable of rational self-government. In the Utopia of anarchism, individuals choose to belong to society (or to exclude themselves from it). Rules are adopted by agreement of all the members/citizens through direct participation in voting. Similar to participatory democracy, holders of offices can be recalled by constituents.

It is important to emphasize that:

" ... (A)narchism does not preclude social organization, social order or rules,

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the appropriate delegation of authority, or even of certain forms of government, as long as this is distinguished from the state and as long as it is administrative and not oppressive, coercive, or bureaucratic."

(Honderich, Ted, ed. - The Oxford Companion to Philosophy - Oxford University Press, New York, 1995 - p. 31)

Anarchists are not opposed to organization, law and order, or the existence of authority. They are against the usurpation of power by individuals or by classes (groups) of individuals for personal gain through the subjugation and exploitation (however subtle and disguised) of other, less fortunate people. Every social arrangement and institution should be put to the dual acid tests of personal autonomy and freedom and moral law. If it fails either of the two it should be promptly abolished.

II. Contradictions in Anarchism

Anarchism is not prescriptive. Anarchists believe that the voluntary members of each and every society should decide the details of the order and functioning of their own community. Consequently, anarchism provides no coherent recipe on how to construct the ideal community. This, of course, is its Achilles' heel.

Consider crime. Anarchists of all stripes agree that people have the right to exercise self-defense by organizing voluntarily to suppress malfeasance and put away criminals. Yet, is this not the very quiddity of the oppressive state, its laws, police, prisons, and army? Are the origins of the coercive state and its justification not firmly rooted in the need to confront evil?

Some anarchists believe in changing society through violence. Are these anarcho-terrorists criminals or freedom fighters? If they are opposed by voluntary grassroots (vigilante) organizations in the best of anarchist tradition - should they fight back and thus frustrate the authentic will of the people whose welfare they claim to be seeking?

Anarchism is a chicken and egg proposition. It is predicated on people's well-developed sense of responsibility and grounded in their "natural morality". Yet, all anarchists admit that these endowments are decimated by millennia of statal repression. Life in anarchism is, therefore, aimed at restoring the very preconditions to life in anarchism. Anarchism seeks to restore its constituents' ethical constitution - without which there can be no anarchism in the first place. This self-defeating bootstrapping leads to convoluted and half-baked transitory phases between the nation-state and pure anarchism (hence anarcho-syndicalism and some forms of proto-Communism).

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Primitivist and green anarchists reject technology, globalization, and capitalism as well as the state. Yet, globalization, technology, (and capitalism) are as much in opposition to the classical, hermetic nation-state as is philosophical anarchism. They are manifestly less coercive and more voluntary, too. This blanket defiance of everything modern introduces insoluble contradictions into the theory and practice of late twentieth century anarchism.

Indeed, the term anarchism has been trivialized and debauched. Animal rights activists, environmentalists, feminists, peasant revolutionaries, and techno-punk performers all claim to be anarchists with equal conviction and equal falsity.

III. Reclaiming Anarchism

Errico Malatesta and Voltairine de Cleyre distilled the essence of anarchism to encompass all the philosophies that oppose the state and abhor capitalism ("anarchism without adjectives"). At a deeper level, anarchism wishes to identify and rectify social asymmetries. The state, men, and the rich - are, respectively, more powerful than the individuals, women, and the poor. These are three inequalities out of many. It is the task of anarchism to fight against them.

This can be done in either of two ways:

1. By violently dismantling existing structures and institutions and replacing them with voluntary, self-regulating organizations of free individuals. The Zapatistas movement in Mexico is an attempt to do just that.

2. Or, by creating voluntary, self-regulating organizations of free individuals whose functions parallel those of established hierarchies and institutions ("dual power"). Gradually, the former will replace the latter. The evolution of certain non-government organizations follows this path.

Whichever strategy is adopted, it is essential to first identify those asymmetries that underlie all others ("primary asymmetries" vs. "secondary asymmetries"). Most anarchists point at the state and at the ownership of property as the primary asymmetries. The state is an asymmetrical transfer of power from the individual to a coercive and unjust social hyperstructure. Property represents the disproportionate accumulation of wealth by certain individuals. Crime is merely the natural reaction to these glaring injustices.

But the state and property are secondary asymmetries, not primary ones. There

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have been periods in human history and there have been cultures devoid of either or both. The primary asymmetry seems to be natural: some people are born more clever and stronger than others. The game is skewed in their favor not because of some sinister conspiracy but because they merit it (meritocracy is the foundation stone of capitalism), or because they can force themselves, their wishes, and their priorities and preferences on others, or because their adherents and followers believe that rewarding their leaders will maximize their own welfare (aggression and self-interest are the cornerstone of all social organizations).

It is this primary asymmetry that anarchism must address.