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Anarchy 101

Bob Black

What is “anarchism”? What is “anarchy”? Who are “anarchists”?

Anarchism is an idea about the best way to live. Anarchy is a way of living.

Anarchism is the idea that government (the state) is unnecessary and harmful. Anarchy is society without government. Anarchists are people who believe in anarchism and desire to live in anarchy as all our ancestors once did. People who believe in government (such as liberals, conservatives, socialists and fascists) are known as “statists.”

It might sound like anarchism is purely negative — that it’s just *against* something. Actually, anarchists have many positive ideas about life in a stateless society. But, unlike Marxists, liberals and conservatives, they don’t offer a blueprint.

Aren’t anarchists bomb-throwers?

No — at least not compared to, say the United States Government, which drops more bombs every day on Iraq than anarchists have thrown in the almost 150 years they have been a political

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movement. Why do we never hear of “bomb-throwing Presidents”? Does it matter if bombs are delivered horizontally by anarchists rather than vertically by the U.S. Government?

Anarchists have been active for many years and in many countries, under autocratic as well as democratic governments. Sometimes, especially under conditions of severe repression, some anarchists have thrown bombs. But that has been the exception. The “bomb-throwing anarchist” stereotype was concocted by politicians and journalists in the late 19th century, and they still won’t let go of it, but even back then it was a gross exaggeration.

Has there ever been an anarchist society that worked?

Yes, many thousands of them. For their first million years or more, all humans lived as hunter-gatherers in small bands of equals, without hierarchy or authority. These are our ancestors. Anarchist societies must have been successful, otherwise none of us would be here. The state is only a few thousand years old, and it has taken that long for it to subdue the last anarchist societies, such as the San (Bushmen), the Pygmies and the Australian aborigines.

But we can’t go back to that way of life.

Nearly all anarchists would agree. But it’s still an eye-opener, even for anarchists, to study these societies, and perhaps to pick up some ideas on how a completely voluntary, highly individualistic, yet cooperative society might work. To take just one example, anarchist foragers and tribesmen often have highly effective methods of conflict resolution including mediation and nonbinding arbitration. Their methods work better than our legal system because family, friends and neighbors of the disputants encourage disputants to agree, helped by sympathetic and trustworthy go-betweens, to find some reasonable resolution of the problem. In the 1970s and 1980s, academic supposed experts tried to transplant some of these

methods into the American legal system. Naturally the transplants withered and died, because they only live in a free society.

Anarchists are naïve: they think human nature is essentially good.

Not so. It's true that anarchists reject ideas of innate depravity or Original Sin. Those are religious ideas which most people no longer believe in. But anarchists don't usually believe that human nature is essentially good either. They take people as they are. Human beings aren't "essentially" anything. We who live under capitalism and its ally, the state, are just people who have never had a chance to be everything we can be.

Although anarchists often make moral appeals to the best in people, just as often they appeal to enlightened self-interest. Anarchism is not a doctrine of self-sacrifice, although anarchists have fought and died for what they believe in. Anarchists believe that the carrying-out of their basic idea would mean a better life for almost everyone.

How can you trust people not to victimize each other without the state to control crime?

If you can't trust ordinary people not to victimize each other, how can you trust the state not to victimize us all? Are the people who get into power so unselfish, so dedicated, so superior to the ones they rule? The more you distrust your fellows, the more reason there is for you to become an anarchist. Under anarchy, power is reduced and spread around. Everybody has some, but nobody has very much. Under the state, power is concentrated, and most people have none, really. Which kind of power would you like to go up against?

But — let's get real — what would happen if there were no police?

As anarchist Allen Thornton observes, “Police aren’t in the protection business; they’re in the revenge business.” Forget about Batman driving around interrupting crimes in progress. Police patrol does not prevent crime or catch criminals. When police patrol was discontinued secretly and selectively in Kansas City neighborhoods, the crime rate stayed the same. Other research likewise finds that detective work, crime labs, etc. have no effect on the crime rate. But when neighbors get together to watch over each other and warn off would-be criminals, criminals try another neighborhood which is protected only by the police. The criminals know that they are in little danger there.

But the modern state is deeply involved in the regulation of everyday life. Almost every activity has some sort of state connection.

That’s true — but when you think about it, everyday life is almost entirely anarchist. Rarely does one encounter a policeman, unless he is writing you a traffic ticket for speeding. Voluntary arrangements and understandings prevail almost everywhere. As anarchist Rudolph Rocker wrote: “The fact is that even under the worst despotism most of man’s personal relations with his fellows are arranged by free agreement and solidaric cooperation, without which social life would not be possible at all.”

Family life, buying and selling, friendship, worship, sex, and leisure are anarchist. Even in the workplace, which many anarchists consider to be as coercive as the state, workers notoriously cooperate, independent of the boss, both to minimize work and to get it done. Some people say anarchy doesn’t work. But it’s almost the only thing that does! The state rests, uneasily, on a foundation of anarchy, and so does the economy.

Culture?

Anarchism has always attracted generous and creative spirits who have enriched our culture. Anarchist poets include Percy

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Bysshe Shelley, William Blake, Arthur Rimbaud, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. American anarchist essayists include Henry David Thoreau and, in the 20th century, the Catholic anarchist Dorothy Day, Paul Goodman, and Alex Comfort (author of *The Joy of Sex*). Anarchist scholars include the linguist Noam Chomsky, the historian Howard Zinn, and the anthropologists A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Pierre Clastres. Anarchist literary figures are way too numerous to list but include Leo Tolstoy, Oscar Wilde, and Mary Shelley (author of *Frankenstein*). Anarchist painters include Gustav Courbet, Georges Seurat, Camille Pissarro, and Jackson Pollock. Other creative anarchists include such musicians as John Cage, John Lennon, the band CRASS, etc.

Supposing you're right, that anarchy is a better way to live than what we have now, how can we possibly overthrow the state if it's as powerful and oppressive as you say it is?

Anarchists have always thought about this question. They have no single, simple answer. In Spain, where there were one million anarchists in 1936 when the military attempted a coup, they fought the Fascists at the front at the same time that they supported workers in taking over the factories, and the peasants in forming collectives on the land. Anarchists did the same thing in the Ukraine in 1918–1920, where they had to fight both the Czarists and the Communists. But that's not how we will bring down the system in the world of the 21st century.

Consider the revolutions that overthrew Communism in Eastern Europe. There was some violence and death involved, more in some countries than in others. But what brought down the politicians, bureaucrats and generals — the same enemy we face — was most of the population just refusing to work or do anything else to keep a rotten system going. What were the commissars in Moscow or Warsaw to do, drop nuclear weapons on themselves? Exterminate the workers that they were living off?

Most anarchists have long believed that what they call a *general strike* could play a large part in crumbling the state. That is, a collective refusal to work.

If you're against all government, you must be against democracy.

If democracy means that people control their own lives, then all anarchists would be, as American anarchist Benjamin Tucker called them, “unterrified Jeffersonian democrats” — they would be the only true democrats. But that’s not what democracy really is. In real life, a part of the people (in America, almost always a minority of the people) elect a handful of politicians who control our lives by passing laws and using unelected bureaucrats and police to enforce them whether the majority want it or not.

As the French philosopher Rousseau (not an anarchist) once wrote, in a democracy, people are only free at the moment they vote, the rest of the time they are government slaves. The politicians in office and the bureaucrats are usually under the powerful influence of big business and often other special interest groups. Everyone knows this. But some people keep silent because they are getting benefits from the powerholders. Many others keep silent because they know that protesting does no good and they might be called “extremists” or even “anarchists” (!) if they tell it like it is. Some democracy!

Well, if you don't elect officials to make the decisions, who does make them? You can't tell me that everybody can do as he personally pleases without regard for others.

Anarchists have many ideas about how decisions would be made in a truly voluntary and cooperative society. Most anarchists believe that such a society must be based on local communities small enough for people know each other, or people at least would share

Most anarchists are not “exactly” sure. The world will be a very different place after government has been abolished.

Anarchists don’t usually offer blueprints, but they propose some guiding principles. They say that *mutual aid* — cooperation rather than competition — is the soundest basis for social life. They are *individualists* in the sense that they think society exists for the benefit of the individual, not the other way around. They favor *decentralization*, meaning that the foundations of society should be local, face-to-face communities. These communities then federate — in relations of mutual aid — but only to coordinate activities which can’t be carried on by local communities. Anarchist decentralization turns the existing hierarchy upside down. Right now, the higher the level of government, the more power it has. Under anarchy, higher levels of association aren’t governments at all. They have no coercive power, and the higher you go, the less responsibility is delegated to them from below. Still, anarchists are aware of the risk that these federations might become bureaucratic and statist. We are utopians but we are also realists. We will have to monitor those federations closely. As Thomas Jefferson put it, “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.”

Any last words?

Winston Churchill, a deceased alcoholic English politician and war criminal, once wrote that “democracy is the worst system of government, except for all the others.” Anarchy is the worst system of society — except for all the others. So far, all civilizations (state societies) have collapsed and have been succeeded by anarchist societies. State societies are inherently unstable. Sooner or later, ours will also collapse. It’s not too soon to start thinking about what to put in its place. Anarchists have been thinking about that for over 200 years. We have a head start. We invite you to explore our ideas — and to join us in trying to make the world a better place.

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Anarchists welcomed and in fact participated in the fall of European Communism. Some foreign anarchists had been assisting Eastern Bloc dissidents — as the U.S. Government had not — for many years. Anarchists are now active in all the former Communist countries.

The Communist collapse certainly did discredit much of the American left, but not the anarchists, many of whom do not consider themselves leftists anyway. Anarchists were around before Marxism and we are still around after it.

Don't anarchists advocate violence?

Anarchists aren't nearly as violent as Democrats, Republicans, liberals and conservatives. Those people only *seem* to be nonviolent because they use the state to do their dirty work — to be violent for them. But violence is violence. Wearing a uniform or waving a flag does not change that. The state is violent by definition. Without violence against our anarchist ancestors — hunter-gatherers and farmers — there would be no states today. *Some* anarchists advocate violence — but *all* states engage in violence *every day*.

Some anarchists, in the tradition of Tolstoy, are pacifist and non-violent on principle. A relatively small number of anarchists believe in going on the offensive against the state. Most anarchists believe in self-defense and would accept some level of violence in a revolutionary situation.

The issue is not really violence vs. nonviolence. The issue is *direct action*. Anarchists believe that people — all people — should take their fate into their own hands, individually or collectively, whether doing that is legal or illegal and whether it has to involve violence or it can be accomplished nonviolently.

What exactly is the social structure of an anarchist society?

ties of family, friendship, opinions or interests with almost everybody else. And because this is a local community, people also share common knowledge of their community and its environment. They know that they will have to live with the consequences of their decisions. Unlike politicians or bureaucrats, who decide for *other people*.

Anarchists believe that decisions should always be made at the smallest possible level. Every decision which individuals can make for themselves, without interfering with anybody else's decisions for themselves, they should make for themselves. Every decision made in small groups (such as the family, religious congregations, co-workers, etc.) is again theirs to make as far as it doesn't interfere with others. Decisions with significant wider impact, if anyone is concerned about them, would go to an occasional face-to-face community assembly.

The community assembly, however, is not a legislature. No one is elected. Anyone may attend. People speak for themselves. But as they speak about specific issues, they are very aware that for them, winning is not, as it was for football coach Vince Lombardi, "the only thing." They want everyone to win. They value fellowship with their neighbors. They try, first, to reduce misunderstanding and clarify the issue. Often that's enough to produce agreement. If that's not enough, they work for a compromise. Very often they accomplish it. If not, the assembly may put off the issue, if it's something that doesn't require an immediate decision, so the entire community can reflect on and discuss the matter prior to another meeting. If that fails, the community will explore whether there's a way the majority and minority can temporarily separate, each carrying out its preference.

If people still have irreconcilable differences about the issue, the minority has two choices. It can go along with the majority this time, because community harmony is more important than the issue. Maybe the majority can conciliate the minority with a decision about something else. If all else fails, and if the issue is so important

to the minority, it may separate to form a separate community, just as various American states (Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, Kentucky, Maine, Utah, West Virginia, etc.) have done. If their secession isn't an argument against statism, then it isn't an argument against anarchy. That's not a failure for anarchy, because the new community will recreate anarchy. Anarchy isn't a perfect system — it's just better than all the others.

We can't satisfy all our needs or wants at the local level.

Maybe not *all* of them, but there's evidence from archaeology of long-distance trade, over hundreds or even thousands of miles, in anarchist, prehistoric Europe. Anarchist primitive societies visited by anthropologists in the 20th century, such as the San (Bushmen) hunter-gatherers and the tribal Trobriand Islanders, conducted such trade between individual "trade-partners." Practical anarchy has never depended on total local self-sufficiency. But many modern anarchists have urged that communities, and regions, should be as self-sufficient as possible, so as not to depend on distant, impersonal outsiders for necessities. Even with modern technology, which was often designed specifically to enlarge commercial markets by breaking down self-sufficiency, much more local self-sufficiency is possible than governments and corporations want us to know.

One definition of "anarchy" is chaos. Isn't that what anarchy would be — chaos?

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the first person to call himself an anarchist, wrote that "liberty is the mother, not the daughter of order." Anarchist order is superior to state-enforced order because it is not a system of coercive laws, it is simply how communities of people who know each other decide how to live together. Anarchist order is based on common consent and common sense.

When was the philosophy of anarchism formulated?

Some anarchists think that anarchist ideas were expressed by Diogenes the Cynic in ancient Greece, by Lao Tse in ancient China, and by certain medieval mystics and also during the 17th century English Civil War. But modern anarchism began with William Godwin's *Political Justice* published in England in 1793. It was revived in France by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in the 1840s (*What Is Property?*). He inspired an anarchist movement among French workers. Max Stirner in *The Ego and His Own* (1844) defined the enlightened egoism which is a basic anarchist value. An American, Josiah Warren, independently arrived at similar ideas at the same time and influenced the large-scale movement at the time to found utopian communities. Anarchist ideas were developed further by the great Russian revolutionary Michael Bakunin and by the respected Russian scholar Peter Kropotkin. Anarchists hope that their ideas continue to develop in a changing world.

This revolutionary stuff sounds a lot like Communism, which nobody wants.

Anarchists and Marxists have been enemies since the 1860s. Although they have sometimes cooperated against common enemies like the Czarists during the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Fascists during the Spanish Civil War, the Communists have always betrayed the anarchists. From Karl Marx to Joseph Stalin, Marxists have denounced anarchism.

Some anarchists, followers of Kropotkin, call themselves "communists" — not Communists. But they contrast their free communism, arising from below — the voluntary pooling of land, facilities and labor in local communities where people know each other — to a Communism imposed by force by the state, nationalizing land and productive facilities, denying all local autonomy, and reducing workers to state employees. How could the two systems be more different?