

Theses on Anarchism After Post-Modernism

Bob Black

1. Anarchism, n. 1. The doctrine that a stateless society is possible and desirable. Obsolete. 2. Rule by anarchists.
2. Anarchism, properly understood, has nothing to do with standards and values in a moral sense. Morality is to the mind what the state is to society: an alien and alienating limitation on liberty, and an inversion of ends and means. For anarchists, standards and values are best understood — that is, they are most useful — as approximations, shortcuts, conveniences. They may summarize a certain practical wisdom won by social experience. Then again, they may be the self-serving dictates of authority, or once-useful formulations which, in changed circumstances, no longer serve any anarchist purpose, or any good purpose.
3. To speak of anarchist standards and values, then, is not necessarily nonsensical — but it does involve risks, often avoidable risks. In a society still saturated with Christianity and its secular surrogates, the risk is that the traditionally absolutist use of these moralistic words will carry over to the way the anarchists use them. Do you have standards and values or do they have you? It is usually better (but, of course, not necessarily or absolutely better) for anarchists to avoid the treacherous vocabulary of moralism and just say directly what they want, why they want it, and why they want everybody to want it. In other words, to put our cards on the table.
4. Like standards and values, the anarchist “isms,” old and new, are best regarded as resources, not restraints. They exist for us, not us for them. It doesn’t matter if I, for instance, may have gotten more out of situationism than syndicalism, whereas another anarchist has gotten more out of feminism or Marxism or Islam. Where we have visited and even where we come from are less important than where we are and where, if anywhere, we’re going — or if we are going to the same place.
5. Let “Type 1” refer to anarcho-leftism. Let “Type 2” refer to anarcho-capitalism. Let “Type 3” refer to the meta-typical (“names name me not”). The Type 3 anarchist categorically rejects categorization. His “existence precedes his essence” (Sartre). For her, nothing is necessarily necessary, and everything is possibly possible. He thinks immediatism takes too long. “She flies on strange wings” (Shocking Blue). Winston Churchill’s wife once complained about his drinking. Churchill replied that he had taken more out of alcohol than alcohol had taken

out of him. The Type 3 anarchist takes more out of anarchism than anarchism takes out of her. And he tries to get more out of life than life gets out of him. A loving, thoughtful, self-affirming, predatory orientation has as many practical applications as the ingenuity and imagination of the Type 3 suggests to her.

6. In principle, the rejection of principles of universal application has universal application. In practice, every individual has his limitations, and the force of circumstances varies. There's no formula for success, not even the recognition that there's no formula for success. But reason and experience identify certain areas of foreseeable futility. It is easy and advisable, for instance, for anarchists to abstain from electoral politics. It is preferable but often not possible to abstain from work, although it is usually possible to engage in some workplace resistance without undue risk. Crime, the black market, and tax evasion are sometimes realistic alternatives or adjuncts to involvement in the state-sanctioned system. Everyone has to evaluate his own circumstances with an open mind. Do the best you can and try not to get caught. Anarchists have enough martyrs already.
7. Anarchism is in transition, and many anarchists are experiencing anxiety. It is very easy to advocate changing the world. Talk is cheap. It is not easy to change your own small corner of it. The differences among the traditional anarchist tendencies are irrelevant because the traditional anarchist tendencies are themselves irrelevant. (For present purposes let's disregard the Type 2, free-market anarchists who seem to have no noticeable presence except in the United States, and even there they have little dialog with, and less influence over the rest of us.) The worldwide, irreversible, and long-overdue decline of the left precipitated the current crisis among anarchists.
8. Anarchists are having an identity crisis. Are they still, or are they only, the left wing of the left wing? Or are they something more or even something else? Anarchists have always done much more for the rest of the left than the rest of the left has ever done for them. Any anarchist debt to the left has long since been paid in full, and then some. Now, finally, the anarchists are free to be themselves. But freedom is a frightening, uncertain prospect, whereas the old ways, the leftist cliches and rituals, are as comfortable as a pair of old shoes (including wooden shoes). What's more, since the left is no longer any kind of threat, anarcho-leftists are in no danger of state repression when they remember and reenact their ancient, mythic glories. That's about as revolutionary as smoking hash, and the state tolerates both for the same reason.
9. Just how "anarchistic" is the world anyway? In one way, very anarchistic; in another, not at all. It is very anarchistic in the sense that, as Kropotkin argued, human society, human life itself, always depends far more on voluntary cooperative action than on anything the state orders. Under severely statist regimes — the former Soviet Union or present-day New York City — the regime itself depends on widespread violations of its laws to stay in power and keep life going. In another way, the world is not anarchist at all, because no human population exists anywhere any more which is not subject to some degree of control by some state.

War is too important to be left to the generals, and anarchy is too important to be left to the anarchists. Every tactic is worth trying by anyone inclined to try it, although proven

mistakes — such as voting, banning books (especially mine), random violence, and allying with the authoritarian left — are best avoided. If anarchists haven't learned how to revolutionize the world, hopefully they have learned a few ways how not to. That's not enough, but it is something.

10. To speak of priorities is an improvement on speaking of standards and values, as the word is less burdened with moralistic overtones. But again, do you have priorities, or do priorities have you?
11. Self-sacrifice is counter-revolutionary. Anyone capable of sacrificing himself for a cause is capable of sacrificing someone else for it too. Therefore, solidarity among the self-sacrificial is impossible. You just can't trust an altruist. You never know when he might commit some disastrous act of benevolence.
12. "The struggle against oppression" — what a fine phrase! A circus-tent commodious enough to cover every leftist cause, however clownish, and the less relevant it is to the revolution of everyday life, the better. Free Mumia! Independence for East Timor! Medicines for Cuba! Ban land mines! Ban dirty books! Viva Chiapas! Legalize pot! Save the whales! Free Nelson Mandela! — no wait, they already did that, now he is a head of state, and will any anarchist's life ever be the same? Everybody is welcome under the big top, on one condition: that he refrain from any and all critique of any and all of the others. You sign my petition and I'll sign yours...

By maintaining the public image of a common struggle against oppression, leftists conceal, not only their actual fragmentation, incoherence and weakness, but — paradoxically — what they really do share: acquiescence in the essential elements of state/class society. Those who are content with the illusion of community are reluctant to risk losing its modest satisfactions, and maybe more, by going for the real thing. All the advanced industrialized democracies tolerate a leftist loyal opposition, which is only fair, since it tolerates them.

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