

Consent or Coercion

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An anarchist case for social transformation and answers to questions about anarchism

“The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.”

Gustav Landauer

Anarchism is the belief that people can voluntarily cooperate to meet everyone’s needs, without bosses or rulers, and without sacrificing individual liberties. A common misunderstanding is that anarchism is the total absence of order; that it is chaos, or nihilism. There are even people who call themselves “anarchists” who have this misperception. Anarchists are opposed to order arbitrarily imposed and maintained through armed force or other forms of coercion. They struggle for the order that results from the consensual interaction of individuals, from voluntary association. If there is a need, anarchists believe that people are capable of organizing themselves to see that it is met.

J. A. Andrews used the example of a group of friends going on a camping trip. They plan their trip, and each person brings useful skills and tools to share. They work together to set up tents, fish, cook, clean up, with no one in a position of authority over anyone else. The group organizes itself, chores are done, and everyone passes the time as they please, alone or in groups with others. People discuss their concerns and possible solutions are proposed. No one is bound to go along with the group, but choosing to spend time together implies a willingness to at least try to work out constructive solutions to the problems and frictions that will inevitably arise. If no resolution is possible, the dissenting individuals can form another grouping or leave without fear of persecution by the rest of the group.

Compare this to the way most organizations function. A few individuals make the important decisions, with or without the approval or input of the rest of the group. Rules and bylaws are passed in the hope of preventing undesirable activities on the part of members. The leadership starts out by addressing legitimate concerns, but is soon corrupted by power. It begins doing what it thinks is best, for itself and the organization, even if it involves concealing its activities from the other members or using deception. The elite attempts to entrench itself by making it difficult for the members to oust it, and constantly works to increase its power. The elite may ban criticism of its leadership and policies, or it may attribute superhuman qualities to itself, far surpassing those of “mere” members. Eventually the elite is no longer under the control of the members, and cannot be challenged. It can run amok with all of the power and resources of the organization, punishing those who dare to defy it. Membership is no longer voluntary, but is imposed on whoever falls within whatever the organization decides is its jurisdiction. Laws and authority which were originally aimed at preventing harm are turned into tools for inflicting harm on whoever is targeted by the elite.

Another problem with laws and rules is that if you do not have voluntary compliance, the unlawful behavior will still take place, whether or not there is a law against it. The outlawed activity will be driven underground or will be protected by the imprecise wording of the laws. Having failed to win people’s voluntary cooperation, through education or persuasion, the government passes volumes and volumes of laws, in a hopeless attempt to address and control every possible situation. Sometimes the law is observed as if it were carved in stone, even when the results are clearly ridiculous. An example is the case of the female motorist who was stopped for speeding, and lectured by a police officer at length as she sat there suffering labor pains. The

officer thought she was faking the pain of childbirth to escape a traffic ticket! Sometimes the police fabricate charges against people they wish to punish, or they simply beat people as an “attitude adjustment” (if you are not sufficiently terrorized by the police, they consider it an attitude problem). It is also not uncommon for the laws to be overly vague, or to be misapplied. In my town, in obvious violation of their own laws, the police set up roadblocks to stop all motorists, check their sobriety, and search their vehicles for contraband if there is suspicion of any illegal activity after questioning them. This is done under the guise of checking for valid driver’s licenses, which is clearly a ruse since there is no indication of any wrongdoing when the people are stopped. But if anyone would refuse to submit to such a search, they would likely be charged with interfering with the duties of a police officer, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest, plus whatever other charges the district attorney could dream up. If you were to challenge the roadblocks in court, the judge would probably say that the Constitution, the supreme law of the land, does not really mean what it obviously says when it forbids unreasonable searches and seizures, but that it has been interpreted to mean something entirely different. It now means that the government has the power to decide what is or is not reasonable, entirely voiding the purpose of the law. The law means whatever those in power say it means. The courts have ruled, for example, that conscription is not involuntary servitude, and that the government can force you to choose between a military uniform and a prison uniform. And the laws gradually become more and more restrictive, so that people gradually become accustomed to having less and less freedom. Children are assigned identification numbers at birth. Photos on driver’s licenses are stored electronically in computers, where they can be accessed at will by law enforcement personnel. Employees must present specified forms of identification to be eligible for employment. Residents of public housing can have their apartments searched without a search warrant. What seems outrageously intrusive today is tomorrow’s legislation.

Anarchists do not wish to see traffic fatalities, rapes, or murders. Quite the contrary. They feel the current combination of tyranny and social chaos are responsible for much of the suffering in the world. What anarchists fear is the corrupting influence of power and the inevitable abuse of power. An individual can only do so much damage, but the same person in a position of authority, or worse yet, an organized, systematic application of corrupted power, can wreak horrible damage. Governments have sent millions upon millions of people to their deaths, through wars and persecutions, and have taken away the freedoms of billions of others. And note that the police only prevent crimes in rare situations, such as when a police officer just happens to be at the scene of a crime in progress. The police almost always show up after the crime has been committed. Most crimes go unsolved. Attempting to punish offenders after they have committed their crimes is not a very effective way to protect people. This false “cure” is just an attack on the symptoms without treating the underlying problem — a society that is losing its social consciousness. In other words, the individuals who make up the society have stopped thinking of themselves as being members of a society. If your neighbors are all strangers, and you feel powerless to improve anything, you are not likely to feel that you have a relationship with those around you. The police are not very effective against criminals, but they are extremely effective at controlling the general public. A lone individual has little hope of resisting the depredations of these heavily armed paramilitary organizations. Even if a benign and uncorrupted government was possible, many of us would prefer our freedom, with all of its responsibilities, to being forced to live according to volumes of well intentioned dictates written by others. Care to wear a crash

helmet when you drive your car? How about banning bare feet on beaches so no one steps on a sharp rock? And absolutely no walking in remote areas or doing work outside of your profession.

Fred Woodworth has pointed out that the claims of legitimacy made by governments, the justifications used by those in power as to why they have the right to order us about, would be laughable if the results were not so tragic. Any claims to power made by a monarchy, constitutional democracy, theocracy, nationalist fatherland or people's republic are totally bogus since they govern without the consent of the governed. Any constitution, contract or agreement that claims to bind everyone living in the same geographic area, unborn generations, or anyone other than the actual parties to it, are despicable falsehoods. Some governments rule through fear and brute force, while others, as a result of intense pressure from their subjects, have become dependent on winning the support of large sectors of the public in elections in order to stay in power. Bourgeois democracy, democracy controlled by the elite, is preferable to dictatorship, but these republics also rely on coercion to achieve their goals. The political party which wins, with the help of big money, restrictive ballot access, and winner-take-all election laws, does not have the right to inflict its will on those who do not support it. The state machinery uses coercion to compel obedience from its subjects, regardless of which party is at the controls. Democracy is often equated with tolerance, but Hitler was a product of democracy, and slavery and apartheid existed in the U.S. under democracy. Even in an ideal democracy, unwarped by elite control, the majority may actually support the persecution of people with unorthodox ideas.

The public is constantly bombarded with propaganda justifying the existence of the government and explaining the necessity of the current social system, in the schools, the media, and in its own propaganda. But less than half of the eligible voters participate in elections in the U.S. The government loudly proclaims its mandate anyway.

Most of the objections people have to anarchism as a social system are based on the assumption that people are unreasonable and irresponsible. If this were the case, no amount of police, judges and jails could conjure order out of chaos. People would be routinely killing and robbing one another, and taking advantage of any perceived weakness on the part of others. We would all be certain we were much too clever to be caught. But truly anti-social behavior on the part of individuals is the exception, rather than the rule. Most of us are very well behaved. Much of the destructive behavior we suffer from is committed by individuals who have been raised in the most dire conditions, and who face very limited personal choices due to the material and cultural poverty they were raised in. This occurs across all ethnic groups and in all countries, but some societies are wise enough to attack the conditions that foster destructive behavior instead of merely punishing offenders after the acts have been committed. This is a social problem which needs to be dealt with, not a given fact of human nature. Human beings, and even animals, which are raised in an environment of love, respect and security tend to be good natured and well adjusted. But any creature raised in an environment of fear, cruelty or deprivation will tend to exhibit anti-social behavior. Each society spawns its own predatory individuals. In general, the more atomized and alienated individuals are from their society, the more likely they are to engage in destructive behavior, against others and against themselves. And people cannot be blamed for not identifying with an unsympathetic, and even predatory, society. Some anarchists argue that it is precisely because people have become so maladjusted that no one can be trusted with power over others.

A distinction must be made between socially destructive behavior and behavior which is not coercive, but which is banned by the government for other reasons. Besides the obvious examples

of tax and draft evasion, governments, by passing laws, create entire classes of criminals by outlawing certain victimless or vice crimes. Certain activities may be distasteful to some of us, but if they are not predatory or coercive in nature then they are only crimes because the government says they are. But once an activity is outlawed, professional criminals become involved because these activities become highly profitable. This is why criminals were active in the alcohol and gambling trades when they were outlawed, and why they are still active in drugs, prostitution and immigration today. If guns are outlawed, organized crime will have another lucrative trade to pursue. The taxation of alcohol, cigarettes and gasoline has spawned entire bootleg industries.

The for-profit nature of capitalism encourages other forms of anti-social behavior, such as taking advantage of the disorganization of workers by hiring them for as little as possible, working them as hard as possible (sometimes until they break, physically or mentally), and making them pay as much as possible for what they consume. Another example is “externalization of costs”, which means getting society to pay the costs while private businesses get the profits, such as the education of workers at public expense; mining, fishing, grazing and lumbering on public land for token payments; government bailouts; strike breaking; and toxic waste clean up. This officially protected form of destructive behavior, known as corporate capitalism, creates a competitive, dog-eat-dog mentality that is extremely disruptive to human solidarity. Some anarchists believe capitalism is malignant by its very nature. Others argue that it is government interference which has made capitalism malignant, by favoring larger, established businesses and creating barriers for small businesses and self-employed people.

Anarchists believe that people should be free to organize themselves as they see fit, but are divided as to which methods are the most just or desirable. Some anarchists claim that everyone has a right to an equal share of the wealth, since it has been produced primarily by generations of wage slaves living under the threat of dire poverty. They see the functioning of society as a team effort. How could a small fraction of the population have honestly gained such disproportionate control of the existing assets while the majority has become so totally dependent? They simply couldn't have. As the saying goes, “it takes money to make money,” and most of our families did not start us off with large sums of money. What business owners had was money to invest, and/or a willingness to go deeply into debt, while most of us make our living selling our labor power. Employees are treated like just another input into the production process: their labor is “bought” when needed, at the market price, and no longer “purchased” when the need has passed. But since employees need to provide for themselves and their families, regardless of the condition of the labor market or the treatment they receive at the hands of their employers, they live in constant insecurity. This insecurity is why employees form labor unions, or turn to laws and government for protection. So most socialist anarchists argue that the most just way to organize an economy is to treat it like one huge cooperative, shared and operated by all, in the interests of all. Anarchists favor a confederal form of organization, so that each locality or industry would be autonomous, but would be closely coordinated with the other units which make up a society. They believe that each unit will act responsibly in relation to the other units, because cooperation and good faith are in everyone's interest.

The other general category includes anarchists who feel that people should be able to be independent of any organization if they so choose, including economic organizations. They fear socialization of the economy for the same reason they fear the government, because it puts the individual at the mercy of others. They also feel that some individuals are willing to work harder to achieve a higher standard of living than others might be willing to work, and that the more

industrious should not be dragged down to the same level as those who choose to work less intensively and live at a more basic standard of living. They feel that the use to which one puts one's earnings is not the business of the rest of society, as long as it does not cause obvious harm to others, and that they should be free to pass their wealth on to others if they so choose. Individuals should be free to be self-employed, or to employ or be employed by others, as long as the arrangement is voluntarily. These anarcho-capitalists argue that the best way to organize the economy is through voluntary economic transactions of whatever type that people choose to make, with everyone taking responsibility for their own well-being. They claim that in a truly free market system, consumers would be able to control the socially destructive activities of business owners by boycotting their products and by buying from more socially conscious competitors.

As different as these views are, it is possible to have an economy that includes both options, plus others not mentioned or even thought of, and to leave people free to choose whichever type of organization they prefer. The economy would function through the voluntary interaction of a multitude of differently organized groupings, each working out for itself the best methods of organization. The socialistically inclined groups could produce goods for their own consumption, and avoid market relationships to whatever extent they feel necessary. Gustav Landauer wrote, "We can establish a great number of crafts and industries to produce goods for our own consumption. We can go much further in this than the cooperatives have gone until now, for they still cannot get rid of the idea of competing with capitalist managed enterprise."¹ What is important is that people have a choice, which most of us currently do not have. The various groupings could interact whenever they chose to do so. One serious barrier to cooperation among anarchists is the issue of property rights. At one extreme are those with an almost feudalistic attachment to private, for-profit ownership of the necessities of life, while at the other extreme even the ownership of personal property is seen to be anti-social and elitist. There is quite a bit of room to maneuver between these two extremes, but the question of expropriation of the workplace is the major issue dividing the movement. A communitarian approach would sidestep this issue entirely. These intentional, self-organized communities could not replace the existing system overnight, but eventually they could greatly reduce our dependence on it. Many of the goods currently produced are either unnecessary or are produced in excessive quantities. The use of automobiles, for example, could be greatly reduced through the use of mass transit, bike paths and better urban planning (and this would be a partial solution to the problem of traffic fatalities). And what would anarcho-socialists do with an expropriated cash register factory or mink ranch anyway? If we can't get people to choose to meet their needs cooperatively, buy buying or using cooperatively produced goods, they are probably not sufficiently interested in radical social change.

What about those who argue "abolish work"? Like a perpetual motion machine, or cold fusion, there is no scheme currently known that can provide everyone with what they need which does not require anyone to perform tasks which they find unpleasant. If everyone does only what they enjoy, we would have a huge oversupply of performing artists and athletes, and a serious shortage of dental hygienists and plumbers. Through job sharing and the elimination of unproductive activities, the amount of unpleasant work can be fairly shared and reduced to a minimum. Those who wish to abstain from the consumption of work enhanced products could not reasonably be

¹ "For Socialism" by Gustav Landauer, p. 140, Telos Press, St. Louis, 1978 (English translation). Originally published in 1911.

expected to work. But it seems just as reasonable for those who do a share of the work to deny access to those who voluntarily choose not to work, in the absence of barriers to productive activity such as unemployment, or harsh or dangerous working conditions.

At the present time, since there is not widespread agreement that anarchism is the best form of social organization, it is up to us to spread these ideas and to implement them as best we can among ourselves. It would be impossible to compel people to participate in an anarchist project, since anarchism relies on voluntary cooperation and self discipline to make it work. Once large numbers of people agree that this is the way things should be organized, not even a tyrant can stop them from reorganizing themselves. As Elisee Reclus wrote, "When the miserable and disinherited of the earth shall unite in their own interest, trade with trade, nation with nation, race with race; when they shall fully awake to their sufferings and their purpose... powerful as may be the Master of those days, he will be weak before the starving masses leagued against him."²

Answers to frequently asked questions:

Q: How will people deal with crime, resolve disputes, reach agreements and set standards if the government and laws are abolished?

A: The main purpose of governments and laws are to keep most of us under control so that we can be efficiently milked, like a herd of cows. With the exception of a small proportion of anti-social people, most of us are able to avoid harming others and resolve our disputes without resorting to the authorities. The legal system we have now puts the full force of the state behind the party that manages to win its favor. Many disputes are already resolved through arbitration and mediation, outside of the courts and the legal system. The laws are written and enforced in such a way that the poor are always held accountable for petty crimes such as writing bad checks to pay for groceries, while the authorities can literally get away with murder.

If allowed to, people will always act to protect themselves from violent criminals. This is an involuntary reflex, like raising your hand to deflect a blow. People may decide to form special, recallable groups who are firmly under community control to perform that task as the need arises, or they may choose to do it on a neighborhood by neighborhood basis. But the police, courts and government we currently have are only accountable to the people in the most roundabout way, and they have clearly become a threat to our freedom. They are literally out of control. Self-perpetuating elites have appointed themselves to perform our civic duties in our behalf. The amount of crime should drop sharply as soon as productive activity becomes less difficult and oppressive, and people begin to have a sense of belonging to a social unit. To protect the rights of unpopular individuals who are guilty of no real crime, it would be necessary for the community to agree that only acts that cause actual harm to others are subject to the justice of the community. Each community can debate the issue of "actual harm" for itself, and people can relocate according to their

² "Evolution and Revolution" by Elisee Reclus, p. 16, Kropotkin's Lighthouse Publications reprint of the 7th edition published by William Reeves. No dates of publication or reprint given.

preference. People would need to work out a fair and open procedure for resolving disputes and for treating predatory individuals. There is the danger of a community oppressing its members, who would lack recourse to existing laws designed to protect them. We would hope that communities would incorporate respect for the rights of individuals into their processes; we do not expect this important value to mysteriously vanish from social consciousness. On the contrary, personal freedom should actually be respected even more than it presently is if we are successful in spreading our ideas more widely. It is hard to imagine an autonomous community expending the same level of resources on coercion that current governments do. There is an unavoidable tension between the good of the community and individual rights, but anarchists do not feel that one must be sacrificed to increase the other.

If written contracts prevented fraud, we would not have “fine print” or a legal profession. In a free society it is of the utmost importance that people show real compassion and fairness in their dealings with others, or else it won’t last very long. Living together in peaceful cooperation is a powerful form of protest against government and police.

Concerning technical standards, these are best agreed upon by the people who do the work and who use the products involved, instead of being decided by corporate officers or government bureaucrats. Many standards are already set by professional associations. If you’ve ever tried to repair an automobile or link computers you understand how necessary, and how lacking, industry-wide standards are. If a product lacks a trusted “seal of approval” from consumer organizations, consumers can avoid it. Educated consumers can influence what is produced and how it is produced if they act together in large numbers.

Q: How will we defend ourselves from invasion by foreign governments without a government?

A: We could have a truly volunteer and community controlled military, concerned strictly with defending our liberty and not with imposing our will on people in foreign countries. If volunteers want to participate in foreign wars, that would be up to them. We would soon find the world a less dangerous place when other societies no longer fear being attacked by our government and when we stop exporting arms for profit. The absence of government does not mean the absence of organization. It means the absence of coercion.

Q: The situations in places like Lebanon, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia have often been referred to as “anarchy”. Is this accurate?

A: No, these are examples of competing elites struggling against one another for power. The result is chaos. Anarchy is the absence of a controlling elite. A government is the strongest gang of aggressors in a particular area at a particular time. Civil war is what happens when the dominant group is challenged. Anarchy has been a rare occurrence in recent history, since there is usually an elite willing to impose itself whenever it sees the opportunity. Emiliano Zapata, one of the major figures in the Mexican Revolution of 1911–1918, was influenced by anarchist ideas, especially those of the brothers Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magon. He temporarily liberated

large parts of Mexico with his army of indian peasants. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, a mostly peasant, anarchist army led by Nestor Makhno temporarily liberated various parts of what is now Ukraine in battles against several different armies; White, Red, Nationalist and foreign. Korean anarchists established an autonomous zone in Shimin province in northern Manchuria between 1929 and 1931, but were crushed by the Japanese army and Chinese/Russian Communists. During the Spanish Civil War and Revolution of 1936, anarchists liberated areas of Aragon, Catalonia and other parts of Spain. They entered into an uneasy, anti-Nationalist alliance with the Republican government, but were pressured and then forced to abandon their gains. They were then persecuted by both Republicans and Nationalists.

Q: Are people really so good that they can live without government?

A: Are people really so good that they can be trusted to direct a government? Governments have killed far more people than all the criminals, bandit gangs and mass murderers in history, who look like hobbyists in comparison. Anarchists consider governments to be a very powerful form of organized crime. Some governments are worse than others, of course, but they all have the potential for committing atrocities.

Q: Don't anarchists advocate the violent overthrow of the existing authorities?

A: Some anarchists do advocate this, in the hope that people will spontaneously organize themselves once the power of the elite has been broken. However, the contradiction between revolutionary social change and the anarchist ideal of voluntary social relations has always been troubling to some anarchists. In the absence of unanimous opposition to the elite, revolutions always involve coercion against the supporters and sympathizers of the elite, which may be a large proportion of a society. The most coercion is required when a minority attempts to implement radical social change on an unconvinced public. Not only does the old regime need to be defeated without the support of the population, but the new elite must also impose its program on society. The least coercion is required when a revolution is the result of demands made by large sectors of the general public. If the old elite resists, after a brief skirmish it can be pushed aside. Even the government's own troops cannot be relied upon to suppress a popular revolution, since the soldiers themselves come from the same public. Revolutionary violence occurs when demands for change are ignored or suppressed. But many elites are crafty enough to make concessions which split the public and weaken people's resolve. Demands for change within the structure of the existing system lead to compromise and ultimately to broader political support for the system. Demands that the state reform itself in a fundamental way are hopeless, because the very nature of the state is to forever expand its power and its autonomy from its subjects.

Revolutionary anarchists argue that violence against tyranny is a duty and that coercion in the name of a better world is justified. They argue that it is very unlikely that many people, if given the choice, would choose to remain slaves. But after the emancipation of the slaves in the U.S. and of the peasants in Russia, many did just that, and instead of fleeing their masters, remained employed on the same estates.

This is why some anarchists prefer a strategy of working to transform society gradually, through education and self organization, so that people will be less and less dependent on employers and the government, and more and more able to organize themselves in non-coercive ways. This point of view sees the current social system continuing mainly due to the absence of practical alternatives and to the comfort of inertia. Most of us are compelled to sell our labor to capitalist employers since workers' and consumers' cooperatives aren't widely established. Likewise, if people hear someone breaking into a neighbor's house, they call the police, since there are no neighborhood based organizations to deal with crime. With an evolutionary strategy, "the new society is built within the shell of the old," which makes for a slow, but smooth, transition. The revolutionary strategy, which promises quicker results, would leave a dangerous vacuum during the period immediately following the revolution, when most revolutions are defeated or else lapse back into a modified version of the old system. Unless a large majority of the population actively supports anarchism, coercion will likely be necessary to abolish the old social order, since people would not yet be convinced that this is desirable. The political struggle, convincing people of the need for change in an anarchist direction, must be won before the old order can be successfully abolished.

Revolutionaries will argue that any significant gradual efforts will be violently suppressed. Perhaps, but if the gradual efforts involve no violence or coercion, it would be politically risky for the government to suppress them. They would have to crack down on people's liberties to such an extent that they would be illustrating to the public exactly the point we are trying to make. We risk less by trying persuasion, including our ideals. There are also practical reasons to avoid the use of violence (with the possible exception of self-defense). The party that resorts to violence first is almost always blamed by the public for causing the conflict. A violent attack on the government would give it another excuse to justify its own existence, the excuse it would need to eliminate us. Armed struggle encourages the formation of a conspiratorial directing elite, which may not be controlled by its supporters (as Fidel Castro said recently, "Revolutionaries do not resign"). Successful armed struggle relies on the use of treachery and violence, and these strategies may carry over even after the original enemy is defeated. And victory does not go to the most worthy, but to the most powerful. Some anarchists simply believe that violence and coercion are morally wrong, and would not use these means, even if there were hope of achieving the desired end.

Historically, violent revolution has achieved modest results at a staggering cost in death and suffering. France, Mexico, the U.S., Russia, China and Cuba have all experienced "successful" revolutions, yet these societies are not substantially freer nor is the working class substantially better off than in Great Britain, Sweden or Canada. But, you may protest, these were not true social revolutions. Conceded. But true social revolutions require the conscious, enthusiastic support of the general public. This support can only be won on the political or educational front and not on the military front. Once there is popular support for anarchist ideas, the only force required will be to disband any government forces which refuse to disperse. You can't

win the public's support militarily. You can only frighten people into passivity or rouse them to lash out in a confused, unorganized manner. The case for revolution directed by a vanguard group or party on behalf of the oppressed requires us to argue that the public has either been brainwashed, that they are too ignorant to understand their own self interest, or that they have been beaten into passivity. If any combination of these are true, what good will it do to use armed struggle on their behalf, if they do not consciously support social change? They will either fight against us or passively watch us die. Complex, voluntary, and cooperative social arrangements are unlikely to appear spontaneously. As the anarchists in Spain discovered during the social revolution and civil war there in the 1930's, you cannot direct society and not direct society at the same time. If people do not organize themselves, they will either flounder in chaos and be unable to resist the forces of reaction, or they will allow themselves to be led by politicians. Significant numbers of workers did organize themselves in Spain, but the working class as a whole was not able to achieve the level of self organization necessary for it to do away with the leadership of the revolutionary parties. There can be no revolutionary government that serves anarchist purposes or which can lead to anarchy. The only way to avoid the creation of a new elite is if the mass of society is consciously aware of what it is trying to accomplish.

As the anonymous authors of "You Can't Blow Up a Social Relationship" pointed out, "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."³ Alexander Berkman wrote, "As [people's] minds broaden and develop, as they advance to new ideas and lose faith in their former beliefs, institutions begin to change and are ultimately done away with. The people grow to understand that their former views were false, and that they were not truth, but prejudice and superstition... The social revolution, therefore, is not an accident, not a sudden happening. There is nothing sudden about it, for ideas don't change suddenly. They grow slowly, gradually, like the plant or flower... It develops to the point when considerable numbers of people have embraced the new ideas and are determined to put them into practice. When they attempt to do so and meet with opposition, then the slow, quiet, and peaceful social evolution becomes quick, militant, and violent. Evolution becomes revolution. Bear in mind, then, that evolution and revolution are not two separate and distinct things. Still less are they opposites as some people wrongly believe. Revolution is merely the boiling point of evolution. Because revolution is evolution at its boiling point you cannot "make" a real revolution any more than you can hasten the boiling of a tea kettle. It is the fire underneath that makes it boil: how quickly it will come to the boiling point will depend on how strong the fire is. The economic and political conditions of a country are the fire under the evolutionary pot. The worse the oppression, the greater the dissatisfaction of the people, the stronger the flame... But pressure from above, though hastening revo-

³ "You Can't Blow Up a Social Relationship", p. 20, 1989 See Sharp Press reprint of a pamphlet originally published by anonymous Australian anarchists in 1979.

lution, may also cause its failure, because such a revolution is apt to break out before the evolutionary process has been sufficiently advanced. Coming prematurely, as it were, it will fizzle out in mere rebelling; that is, without clear, conscious aim and purpose.”⁴ The recent riots in Los Angeles are an example of mere rebelling, without a conscious aim beyond venting anger and looting. The uprising in Chiapas, Mexico is an example of a much more developed, but still premature, rebellion. Both of these rebellions were quickly isolated and contained in the absence of widespread popular support. We must work to build the functioning parts of a new society, while maintaining a clear vision of our alternatives. We must not be co-opted by the State on the one hand, nor recklessly overestimate our support on the other. Through education, interaction, and example we can work to gradually rid humanity of statism, nationalism, deprivation, racism, sexism, violence, child and animal abuse, and all the other evils humanity is afflicted with. But we have to get our own act together if we expect people to take us seriously.

In the event that the existing order collapses on its own, people would be free to organize themselves into groups regardless of what the majority is doing. As long as a group is large enough to be economically viable and to defend its autonomy, even relatively small groups could set up new social relations. The issue of violence only arises because of the ruthless suppression of secessionist movements by the world’s governments.

Q: What if some people really do prefer having a government?

A: As long as the relationships are strictly voluntary, and not enforced by poverty or force, it would be hard for anarchists to justify suppressing any voluntary association, just as it would be difficult to justify suppressing religions, superstitions or vices. Under what conditions is the use of force justified? Only in response to the prior use of force. But governments, by definition, are institutions of coercion and control, so only if a government supported itself through voluntary donations, or enforced its will by merely asking for compliance, could it conceivably function without coercion, in which case it would not really be a government at all.

“Panarchy” is the name for a society made up of a multitude of diverse but peacefully coexisting forms of social relations. The theory of panarchy is that people have different ideas and preferences about how to organize themselves. Instead of each group trying to achieve the power to impose its ideas and preferences on everyone, each group organizes itself and allows other groups to do likewise. One variant even has people sharing the same geographic space, with each individual acting according to his or her own conscience, in much the same way that different religions coexist in societies that allow some religious freedom. The difference would be the absence of a supreme authority setting rules that all must obey. Of course this would require everyone to respect the choices of others, and to refrain from using coercion or violence. Anarchists would do their thing, and those who wanted to continue to voluntarily submit to a particular type of government could do so. Why won’t

⁴ “ABC of Anarchism” also known as “What is Communist Anarchism” by Alexander Berkman, p. 36–38, 1977 Freedom Press reprint of a book first published by the Vanguard Press in 1929.

the statist allow us this same freedom today? Panarchy should appeal to everyone, because as it is now, no one really gets what they want. We all must live under a mish-mash of strictly enforced rules that come out of battles fought on the elite turf of the official political process. Panarchy is letting people “do their own thing”.

Q: How do you propose to achieve anarchist social relations?

A: We argue that the proper course for the anarchist movement is to concentrate its efforts on two tasks: educating the public and organizing our own social relations here and now as much as possible. Our objective should not be to overthrow the existing social relations, because those social relations are not viewed as intolerable by most of the public. We need to inform people about our ideas and demonstrate to them that anarchist social relations can actually function. Gustav Landauer suggested that when people saw functioning villages based on voluntary cooperation, the public’s envy would result in more and more villages being formed. These voluntary organizations will eventually render the old, coercive institutions useless, and they will be done away with or rendered powerless, like the monarchy and the Church have been in the past. By combining our efforts with other non-statists in a panarchist federation, we could greatly hasten the pace of non-coercive social change.

Q: Is anarchy a goal that can actually be reached, or is it only an ideal to be approximated?

A: If you approximate your ideal well enough, eventually you reach your goal.

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The quote on the cover is from "Paths in Utopia" by Martin Buber, p.46, 1988 Collier Books
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