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No Really, What is Anarchism?

Eric Fleischmann

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The terms ‘anarchist’ and ‘anarchism’ are returning to the center stage of political lingo in the twenty-first century. To quote my own article on Center for a Stateless Society:

President Donald Trump has repeatedly attempted to associate Black Lives Matter with anarchists and anarchism. He has tweeted such threatening posts as just the phrase “Anarchists, we see you!” with a video of a man dressed in black at one protest, and he has referred to protesters in Portland, Oregon as “anarchists who hate our Country” and called for Governor Kate Brown to “clear out, and in some cases arrest, the Anarchists & Agitators in Portland.”

It is certainly true that many anarchists—such as myself—have been involved in Black Lives Matter protests, but it is obvious that President Trump is not making an objective ideological observation but rather is attempting to use anarchist as a ‘dirty word’ intended to make protestors out to be terroristic criminals.

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Joe Biden employed a similar tactic in the following statement: “I’ve said from the outset of the recent protests that there’s no place for violence or destruction of property. Peaceful protesters should be protected, and arsonists and anarchists should be prosecuted, and local law enforcement can do that.”

The mainstream media’s understandings of anarchism since (at least) the nineteenth century have involved a desire for chaos, disorder, and destruction. In early twentieth century North America, anarchists were depicted as bearded, often-foreign men with bombs, knives, or other weapons, threatening symbols of the United States, liberty, or civilization. Modern day examples might include psychopathic terrorists like Solomon Lane from *Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation* and *Fallout* who, as Villains Wiki explains, seeks to create “a new world order based on unstoppable accidents and terrorist attacks that will actually turn the entire world into a massive terrorist superpower.”

Or, more generously, there is the character Zaheer in *The Legend of Korra* (voiced by punk rock legend Henry Rollins) who seeks to bring down all governments, prompting the protagonist Korra at one point: “The idea of having nations and governments is as foolish as keeping the human and spirit realms separate [a reference to a previous season’s plot]. You’ve had to deal with a moronic president and a tyrannical queen. Don’t you think the world would be better off if leaders like them were eliminated?”

The latter example is a tad kinder to the ideology, but media depictions of anarchism rarely give a full view or even the benefit of the doubt. There are numerous schools of thought — generally differentiated by their economic models — that fall under the descriptor of anarchism, ranging from anarcho-communism to individualist anarchism (and even ideologies that claim the title to the dismay of almost all other anarchists such as anarcho-capitalism and the racist, crypto-fascist national anarchism), but I would like to semi-

informally compile some quick (unfortunately largely Western) information to hopefully help anybody begin to genuinely answer the question “what is anarchism?”

I am no expert in etymology, but according to (may a higher power forgive me) the Internet, it seems that ‘anarchy’ is derived from the ancient Greek *anarkhia* (‘without a ruler’) – composed of *an-* (‘without’) and *arkhos* (‘ruler’) – which was first recorded as having been used in 404 B.C.E. in reference to the Year of Thirty Tyrants in Athens during which there was no one ruler or *archon*. This transformed into the Medieval Latin *anarchia* and French *anarchie* (both meaning roughly the same thing as the Greek). Thus, for numerous centuries, ‘anarchy’ was used to refer to confusion in the absence of authority.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the first usage of the term ‘anarchism’ as opposed to ‘anarchy’ was in 1642. However, it is popularly accepted that the first usage of it as a political ideology in itself is by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who wrote in 1840, “*Anarchy*, – the absence of a master, of a sovereign, – such is the form of government to which we are every day approximating.” Thus, Proudhon adds the *-ism* – stating in a hypothetical back-and-forth “‘What are you, then?’ – ‘I am an anarchist.’” – to denote a deliberate political ideology.

Proudhon acknowledges that “[t]he meaning ordinarily attached to the word ‘anarchy’ is absence of principle, absence of rule; consequently, it has been regarded as synonymous with ‘disorder.’” Then he rejects these previous understandings, stating that “[a]lthough a firm friend of order, I am (in the full force of the term) an anarchist.”

A formal and ‘mainstream’ definition of anarchism can be found in the 1910 edition of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, in which Pyotr Kropotkin writes that anarchism is “the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government – harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by

free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.”

Furthermore, it must be added that many thinkers have identified anarchism as the libertarian branch of the much larger socialist movement. Mikhail Bakunin — the famous anarchist rival of Karl Marx — identified anarchism as “Stateless Socialism” and writes that “freedom without Socialism is privilege and injustice” and that “Socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality.”

Continuing, in *Anarchism and Other Essays*, Emma Goldman writes that anarchism is “[t]he philosophy of a new social order based on liberty unrestricted by man-made law; the theory that all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary” — which might be a commonly accepted definition by students of politics, who may not be deeply knowledgeable on the subject.

But two more contemporary thinkers, David Graeber and Noam Chomsky, give definitions that, when coupled together, deepen an understanding of anarchism. Graeber, in *The Democracy Project*, writes that “[t]he easiest way to explain anarchism...is to say that it is a political movement that aims to bring about a genuinely free society — and that defines a ‘free society’ as one where humans only enter those kinds of relations with one another that would not have to be enforced by the constant threat of violence.” Noam Chomsky says, in an interview with Harry Kreisler, that...

The core of the anarchist tradition, as I understand it, is that power is always illegitimate, unless it proves itself to be legitimate. So the burden of proof is always on those who claim that some authoritarian hierarchic relation is legitimate. If they can’t prove it, then it should be dismantled.

There are many questions left to be asked of anarchism: how will individual violence be handled? How will a stateless society protect itself from neighboring states? What economic formations will take shape in the absence of a state? However, these are not questions to be answered here.

The most salient concept demonstrated is that anarchism is *not* an ideology of violence (or at least it is *significantly* less so than those ideologies that call for concentrations of violence in the state and its cronies) but one which opposes violence at a systemic level and seeks liberation and voluntary interaction in all spheres of life.