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In defense of anarchism

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January 4, 2010

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In an earlier post, Ladd Everitt posed a provocative question: “Can peace be obtained through anarchy?” He answered: Maybe someday in the distant future when humanity becomes perfect, but not anytime soon because society needs protection from neo-Nazis. Wait, what?

If government is such a great protection against Nazis, then why did the Nazi Party pose its greatest threat to humanity when it was *democratically elected* into control of a *national government*? Democracy birthed the Nazi menace; it didn’t prevent it. In fact, anarchists would say that it’s exactly this kind of centralized political structure, with citizens willing to follow the commands of whoever wins power, that creates the opportunity for aspiring authoritarians to seize control and do their worst.

But Everitt isn’t the first to raise this specter of ‘ultimate evil’ to justify government and its inherent abuses. It’s a common scare tactic regularly deployed by politicians to legitimize all sorts of loathsome policies. Most recently, in his Nobel Prize lecture, President Obama sounded the Hitlerian alarm in a shameful attempt to justify his expansion of war in Afghanistan. Obama’s predecessors,

Bush and Cheney, were also quite fond of this brand of rhetorical fearmongering, attempting to legitimize the “War on Terror” and the imminent threat of the “Axis of Evil.”

Nevertheless, humanity may always be faced with destructive or greedy opportunists who aim to harm others for their own personal gain. The anarchist solution is, quite simply: *Don't put them in charge*. Better yet, *don't put anyone in charge*, because history has demonstrated, over and over again, that power corrupts. Even the most well-intentioned peacenik will either be transformed into a scheming, power-hoarding monster by the political process, or will never gain a position of power in the first place. With such widespread support for powerful leaders, it's easy to see why the most destructive people on the planet are running amok, wielding governmental and corporate power, and controlling entire regions of the globe. The results speak for themselves, none of which would be possible without millions of acquiescent adults enabling their leaders, eager to follow their every command.

But how could an anarchist society resist power-seekers who want to dominate and control others? There is only one way: more anarchists. There is strength in numbers, and the more the better. Perhaps Everitt misses this possibility because he makes the common mistake of imagining anarchy without anarchists. That is, his hypothetical scenario of an anarchist society doesn't seem to have many anarchists in it. Instead, it's full of roving fascists (which seems more appropriate for a hypothetical society of *roving fascism*, no?).

To be fair, the confusion may lie in the difference between the terms anarchy and anarchism. The first, anarchy, describes a societal condition where no government is present, but it doesn't tell us much else. For example, is it a permanent, sustainable anarchy? Is it only a temporary anarchy? Did government disappear against the wishes of the society, only to be re-formed again? Or, was the government intentionally disbanded by a community of anarchists?

Anarchism seeks a very specific kind of anarchy: free societies based on the principles of mutual aid and free participation that reject all forms of political and economic exploitation. It's a proactive form of social organization that involves much more than the mere absence of government, and is quite different from the way the media uses the term anarchy. The media uses *anarchy* to mean chaos, especially when governmental power or police presence momentarily disappears. For example, the *anarchy* on the streets of L.A. during the Rodney King riots, or the *anarchy* in a third world country when the central government loses control, giving way to gang warfare, etc. Both instances could technically be called *anarchy* (no government), but they're certainly not the same anarchy that results from anarchism.

When government suddenly disappears from a society whose citizens still approve of the principles of governance, it's not surprising that violence, chaos, and violent gang warfare often ensue. But that's not an indictment of anarchism, it's an indictment of the principles of governance: class hierarchy, armed enforcement, violent punishment, vicious competition, militarism, and economic exploitation. In the U.S., for example, most Americans gladly exchange freedoms for the relative security and order that results from the institutionalized violence of government. If their government were suddenly removed, chaos would likely result, especially if Americans continued to act upon the logic of domination and exploitation. Without a fundamental change in principles, this kind of temporary anarchy could precipitate a violent struggle for domination, until one group beats all others into submission, restoring relative peace and order under a new government.

But is that really peace? If governments provide peace, then it's a rotten kind of peace. It's a peace that's forged through fear and violent domination. Governments are consistently and predictably abusive because they maintain order through punishing violence. Social order and peace on the surface hide the dirty business of threats, punishment, and exploitation underneath.

Under a particularly nasty government, it's common to expect constant wars, torture, surveillance, secret prisons, corporatism, corruption, environmental destruction, and the perpetual risk of nuclear annihilation. But even under the most benign government, policy is still influenced by only a portion of society (usually a tiny, wealthy minority), regardless of dissenters; taxation is mandated to fund all policies, whether one abhors them or not; the acceptance of the rule of law is assumed at birth, without consent; and any meaningful opposition to the established order of things (more than simply voting every few years for one of two similar candidates, or protesting within 'free speech' zones) is greeted with fines, imprisonment or worse. This is the kind of peace that results from all forms of government, regardless of whether conservatives or progressives dictate policy: do what you're told, or else.

For those at the bottom of the system, it's even worse. The logic of any hierarchy demands that some people are at the top and some people are at the bottom. When a society is organized according to political and economic hierarchies, the result is a privileged class of owners and rulers that benefit from a lower class of the most heavily abused and exploited. Ironically, even many proponents of nonviolence support this arrangement, enjoying the relative comfort, security, and wealth that the systemic exploitation of the poor provides. They may protest wars abroad with slogans like "There is no way to peace; peace is the way," disagree with their government's most obvious excesses, or advocate reforms, but most still continue to fund, support, and participate in their political system of systemic violence.

There are alternatives, of course. Peace without government may seem difficult to imagine, and even harder to achieve, but it's not without precedent. There are many examples of anarchist societies that have existed in the past, so it's inaccurate to claim that civilization needs to be perfect before anarchist societies can exist. Still, how can new anarchist societies be sustained? Anarchism is different from other political movements in that it can't be imposed

on a population by a small group of rebels through violent revolution, nor can it be implemented through governmental reforms. Government will only be replaced by free societies when enough people in a community affirm that it's unacceptable to be ruled, or to rule others, and organize themselves into a large enough group to withstand those seeking to rule them. They would have to agree that it's no longer acceptable to benefit from the pain and suffering caused by the exploitation and domination of others. This doesn't require people to become perfect or morally enlightened, but to make a different set of choices, based on a different set of principles, and to back them up with action. If anarchist principles are to ever become popular enough to make this a widespread reality, a more honest portrayal of anarchism seems like an essential prerequisite.