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Jim Shamlin

The Anarchist Utopia

1997

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“Another brief piece written for *THE ANARCH*, ‘The Anarchist Utopia’ focuses on defining the ‘perfect’ society Anarchists should endeavor to achieve. Like ‘Economic Corollaries,’ this piece tends to be more vague about ‘what is’ than about ‘what isn’t’ – but that is the result of the same obstacle: the closer an anarchist comes to defining the one and only way people should live in this perfect society, the further the resulting definition strays from anarchism, which mandates a society in which people are free to organize their lives as they see fit.”

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It is too often characteristic of utopian visions to be fantastic departures from the society we currently inhabit. The cartoonish exaggerations that “ideal” societies comprise make such concepts seem idealistic – not only impractical, but impracticable. Even if an individual considers such a radical change desirable, the implicit or explicit acknowledgment of its extravagant scale is counterproductive to the very purpose of utopia: it engenders apathy rather than enthusiasm for the realization of the utopian vision.

Moreover, to suggest that life in an anarchist utopia would be radically different from life in present society is to overestimate the importance of government: It is axiomatic to anarchism that government is an unnecessary element in present society, so the degree to which an anarchist utopia differs from present society should reflect a change that is equal in scale to the influence of government in the present society. Thus, the goal of anarchism is not a radical utopia, but a relatively minor adjustment, the benefits of which would have a relatively minor effect upon the course of our daily existence.

Regardless of whether one lives in a dictatorship or a democracy, the fundamental needs of the individual citizen, and the courses of action necessary to the fulfillment of those needs, remain the same. Moreover, when the history of societies in general is considered, it is technology rather than government that has affected the ways in which the needs are fulfilled¹. A single invention, the tractor, has done far more to alleviate hunger on a global scale than countless generations of myriad forms of government.

Moreover, the needs of the individual citizen are *individual* needs — this would seem to be tautological, and would be ludicrously redundant to mention if arguments to the contrary, that government is somehow essential to human existence, did not explicitly or implicitly rely on quite the opposite: that the needs of the individual are necessarily [but often inexplicably] dependent upon society, and vice versa.

That is not to deny that cooperation among individuals facilitates the accomplishment of goals that satisfy the same requisites. Indeed, when cooperation is egalitarian, each party can fulfill his needs with greater ease than would be possible through individual effort. Even when such “cooperation” is more parasitic, the ben-

¹ Many situations are blamed upon government that are actually the result of technology, the influence of which is far greater.

The proletariat who presses buttons for eight hours a day to ensure that would not be freed from his lot. Regardless of the form of government (and regardless of the existence of government), people need to eat (among other activities), which requires the mass-production of bread (among other goods), which requires the same process to manufacture, which requires the same roles to be fulfilled.

Said another way, that same task will remain necessary and will continue to exist so long as human beings need to eat, and that individual will inevitably be disappointed (as many similar individuals have been throughout history) when an otherwise successful political revolution fails to change a reality that, as it turns out, is utterly unrelated to politics.

providing for their own needs — without coercion, without compulsion, without exploitation — which is to say, without government.

Many similar “societal” needs exist that can likewise be fulfilled without government. Admittedly, there are few “real world” examples, thus statisticians argue that it is impossible for individuals to provide themselves a wide array of public goods. There is no example of national defense except that which government provides, there is no way to prevent crime except that which government provides, and so on. There is no case study of any solution for any problem, nor any method for achieving any goal, in any instance in which government has given itself a monopoly of coercion and prohibited individuals from serving their own needs.

Exceptions to this (admittedly) broad statement are rare — by design — but their existence provides proof for an important assertion: it is entirely possible for individuals to provide themselves anything they need or desire without the third-party coercion of government. Once that hypothesis is accepted, it is difficult, even impossible, to perceive the necessity of government at all.

As for the specific structure and function of the anarchist utopia, none is provided. There are myriad detailed plans for obtaining the entire gamut of public goods without governmental “assistance.” If any plan accomplishes the former while remaining true to the latter, it remains a viable option that may be considered according to any criteria those involved by it care to provide.

Said another way, the anarchist utopia is not a detailed portrait of an ideal society, it is a blank canvas, upon which any person, forbearing force, may depict the object of his desire. Anything more, or anything less, would be unacceptable.

caused no end of exploitation: “society.” Force is often justified in the service of “society” without further investigation — the very sort of investigation that would define a specific group that is quite capable of serving its own needs without conscription. For example, taxes are levied in order to build a school for the good of “society” (or, a smaller amalgam of the same species, “the community”) — but whom, specifically, should this goal interest? Within that community, there are parents who wish their children educated and companies⁷ whose perpetuation and growth requires a steady influx of skilled (or at least trainable) workers — the accomplishment of this goal is in their interest, and it is by their voluntary involvement and cooperation that this goal should be fulfilled.

Statists are quick to retort that those people would not serve their own needs unless forced to do so. Theoretically, that is as ludicrous as the assertion that a starving man wouldn’t eat unless he were forced to do so. In practice, the statists have an advantage: the law is written such that those same people are forbidden to act in their behalf. There are many laws regarding the educational system, the impact of which is to prevent interested parties from providing for their own needs, thus the lack of case studies. However, there are selected areas in which government has gotten out of the way, and in those areas, ISDs⁸ have sprouted, flourished, and in some cases overrun the state-provided system. While it stands to note that ISDs are far more effective at educating students than state-provided systems, the most important aspect, in terms of the present discussion, is that interested parties are, indeed, capable of

⁷ Please pardon the shorthand here: “companies” is not meant in a purely capitalistic sense. In a socialistic community, which is equally possible by the precise definition of anarchism, such “companies” would include any organization whose purpose is to provide goods or services. That is to say that a syndicate or community-owned factory would likewise need trained workers.

⁸ Independent School Districts, run by the very people whose interests are served by the educational system.

effits of the relationship are preferable to at least one party². But simplicity, on any scale, does not equal necessity.

Excepting certain species of insect, every animal is able to sustain itself in isolation. Humans, the dullest of which is far more cunning than the “smartest” beast, are no exception, but rather an exceptional example of a species that can live, even thrive, in solitude. The customary counterpoint to this hypothesis is that man does not presently live in isolation, nor is there historical evidence that he ever has³. It is “impossible,” proponents of statism aver, to even conceive of man living without a society to support him — but the same individuals find it equally impossible to conceive of man living without air conditioning or electric hair-dryers. Like the latter items, socialized existence is a luxury item. It *is* possible for man to exist in solitude, for a single individual to fulfill the requirements of his existence and even to obtain some measure of luxury by individual effort. Because certain goals are *more easily* achieved by cooperation does not mean that they can *only* be achieved by cooperation.

Even if one acknowledges that a cooperative social existence is preferable to the arduous [but not impossible] task of individual sustenance, or even goes to the extreme of deeming social existence essential, there is still no evidence that such cooperation necessitates government.

² Except in rare circumstances, this is generally the party who wishes to institutionalize and/or perpetuate such forms of “cooperation.”

³ The latter is a tautology — history is a written record, writing is not necessary except in social situations, in which one individual wishes to communicate with another — therefore the fact that an individual living in isolation did not write of his existence for others to read is proof of nothing except the transparency of the sophistry to which some will stoop in order to get others to accept counterfeit evidence in support of an utterly doomed hypothesis.

Granted, if the mutual efforts of individuals working in conjunction are to be effective, organization is necessary. When a mere two or three are involved, this organization can be informal — but when many are involved, practice has demonstrated that hierarchical control structures are the most efficient way of directing activity — and while government provides exactly this sort of structure, it is not the only method by which the activities of a multitude of individuals can be organized.

Witness the organization of non-governmental organizations: Corporations such as General Motors have as many employees as some nations have citizens, non-profit organizations such as Greenpeace⁴ organize the efforts of multitudes around the globe, and even purely recreational organizations are most often directed from within. Furthermore, it stands to mention that many non-governmental organizations such as these far surpass government itself in their efficiency and their effectiveness.

Granted, this makes a concession that not all anarchists would immediately embrace: social existence, and any instance of cooperation among individuals, necessitates adherence to certain guidelines and rules. One can not logically maintain that a score of people who act in pursuit of a goal may act in ways that are counterproductive to that very goal and still attain any measure of success. Proponents of governmental control are quick to aver that this reinforces the necessity of government — but this immediately ignores one important aspect of cooperation: it is voluntary.

In the modern quagmire of connotations, “cooperation” has come to mean any instance in which individuals appear to be working in unison — but there is an entirely separate term for instances of “cooperation” in which one or more parties is involuntarily involved: exploitation — and this latter term most accurately describes the “organization” provided by government.

⁴ In terms of scale, it stands to mention the Greenpeace is, itself, a \$4 billion multinational corporation.

Should an individual decline to contribute to charity, there is no counterattack; but should an individual decline to “contribute” to government⁵, he can expect an armed response. Should an individual decline to work for a given employer, he is free to seek employment elsewhere; but should an individual decline conscription by government, he can expect an armed response⁶.

Ethical considerations aside (a phrase that’s too often implicit in discussions of government), it has not been determined that third-party force is in any way necessary to the cooperative efforts necessary to societal existence. On an atomic level, a person who is starving does not need to be forced to eat. The same can be said of any goal: if the end is necessary and desirable to an individual, he needs no other compulsion to achieve it. This is not nullified by the number of individuals involved. Even in instances where attaining a goal requires a complex system of cooperation among many individuals, which itself necessitates organization, that organizer does not need to force cooperation to occur in pursuit of a goal that all involved deem necessary and desirable. It is only when those involved do not wish to achieve a given goal that force becomes necessary — which prompts (but does not often receive) an immediate return to ethical considerations.

The necessity of force becomes apparent only when issues are muddled with amalgams — one amalgam, more than any other, has

⁵ Public officials, of late, have grown quite fond of the euphemism “tax contributions” — a most repulsive contradiction-in-terms.

⁶ The phrase “can expect armed response” may seem harsh according to some standards — but it is those standards, rather than the phrase, that should be questioned: an individual who declines a “request” by government can expect to be wrested from his home, manacled and locked in a cage, there to be beaten and raped by his captors. This precisely describes the method and function of our modern penal system. How these same actions, completely unacceptable when practiced by any other organization, are somehow acceptable practice for government, no logic can explain.