

Individualism and Inequality

Joe Peacott

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Economics: A Means or an End for Anarchists?

All anarchists seek a world free of government and every other coercive institution. This is what makes them libertarians. But this is often the only thing on which they can agree among themselves.

Different anarchists have all sorts of priorities and visions for the future society. Their ideas about what goals are most important to achieve in an anarchist world influence their thoughts about how economic exchanges, decision-making, and social relations would take place in a libertarian setting. For instance, many anarchists seem to consider economic equality as their primary aim, and a libertarian social order organized on some sort of collective or communal basis as the way to achieve it. They seek anarchy because they believe it is the best method of attaining economic parity.

Individualists, on the other hand, believe that individual freedom of action, as long as it does not impinge on the equal freedom of others, is the most important goal of anarchists. According to this view, libertarian economic and social interactions should serve to promote and protect the autonomy of the participants. And individualists believe that an anarchist society based on private property, free exchange, and use and occupancy land tenure would be best suited to this purpose.

Private Property and Capitalism

Anarchist individualists advocate private ownership (or in the case of land, tenure) of property and free exchange of goods and services both now and in any future anarchist society. We believe that individuals should retain the full value of whatever they produce and should be free to occupy and use only that land which they can put to use without employing the labor of others. Of course, being anarchists, we also maintain that individuals would be free to pool their labor, property, and/or land in order to increase their economic efficiency, better provide for others in need, or simply enjoy the company of their fellows. But these would still be voluntary, private arrangements, wherein the individuals concerned would share the products of their labor and contribute to the joint project as long as they see fit, while retaining their freedom to leave the enterprise if and when they so desire.

Although individualists envision a society based on private property, we oppose the economic relationships of capitalism, whose supporters misuse words like private enterprise and free markets to justify a system of monopoly ownership in land and the means of production which allows some to skim off part or even most of the wealth produced by the labor of others. Such a system exists only because it is protected by the armed power of government, which secures title to unjustly acquired and held land, monopolizes the supply of credit and money, and criminalizes attempts by workers to take full ownership of the means of production they use to create wealth. This state intervention in economic transactions makes it impossible for most workers to become truly independent of the predation of capitalists, banks, and landlords. Individualists argue that without the state to enforce the rules of the capitalist economy, workers would not allow themselves to be exploited by these thieves and capitalism would not be able to exist.

Inequality in an Individualist Society

One of the criticisms of individualist economic proposals raised by other anarchists is that a system based on private ownership would result in some level of difference among people in regard to the quality or quantity of possessions they have. In a society where people are able to realize the full value of their labor, one who works harder or better than another will possess or have the ability to acquire more things than someone who works less or is less skilled at a particular occupation. But economic inequality would not have the same significance in a non-capitalist anarchist society that it does in today's societies.

The differences in wealth that arise in an individualist community would likely be relatively small. Without the ability to profit from the labor of others, generate interest from providing credit, or extort rent from letting out land or property, individuals would not be capable of generating the huge quantities of assets that people can in a capitalist system. Furthermore, the anarchist with more things does not have them at the expense of another, since they are the result of the owner's own effort. If someone with less wealth wishes to have more, they can work more, harder, or better. There is no injustice in one person working 12 hours a day and six days a week in order to buy a boat, while another chooses to work three eight hour days a week and is content with a less extravagant lifestyle. If one can generate income only by hard work, there is an upper limit to the number and kind of things one can buy and own.

More important, though, than the actual amount of economic inequality between individuals is whether the person who has more wealth thereby acquires more power or advantage over others. In a statist world, one can buy political favors with one's money and influence government action affecting oneself and others. This would not be an option in an anarchist society since there would be no government or other political structure through which individuals or groups could coerce others and use their greater wealth to further aggrandize themselves through political means, as happens in a society of rulers and subjects.

But even if money could not buy power in a libertarian community, some might object to a private property system and its inevitable inequality on another basis. They may believe that economic differences are necessarily unjust, or that people unable to work much or at all because of physical limitations would be unable to obtain the resources to make a life for themselves. Individualists would argue that economic inequality of some sort is inevitable in any truly free society. People have varied needs, wants, and mental and physical abilities and are therefore unequal in many ways. Some produce more, some produce less, and there is no injustice in the fact that this would result in different amounts of wealth. A society or community that prohibited those who so desired from retaining the full value of what they produce in order to create an artificial economic leveling would infringe on the freedom of individuals and thus violate a basic anarchist principle. As for those who produce little or nothing because of some disability, there are other means of providing for the less fortunate than communal economic arrangements. There is a long tradition of groups of individuals taking care of sick, injured, and otherwise incapacitated people through voluntary organizations from friendly societies to cooperatives of various sorts to trade unions. People who value private property are no less benevolent than those who favor free collectives, and would figure out any number of ways to care for those in need of assistance from others.

Inequality in the Commune and Collective

While individualists concede that there would be some economic inequality in the society they promote, their critics among other anarchists often presume that the kind of societies they envision would be completely egalitarian and free of inequity. But, although the collectives proposed by anarchist syndicalists, communist anarchists, and libertarian socialists might well be free of economic differences, this would likely take place only at the expense of the liberty of some of the members of such communities, creating an inequality in individual freedom.

It is unlikely that people in any future world would all be of one mind about everything, any more than they are today. Some will wish to live and work alone, interacting with others only when necessary. Others will wish to work in groups and share everything. And others, perhaps most, will prefer one of these models to another at different times and for different purposes, or even some combination of the two. And any anarchist society worthy of the name must allow for this.

As noted above, individualists believe that pooling of resources, land, or anything else by autonomous individuals can be fully compatible with individual freedom. Unfortunately, however, there are some anarchists who advocate the outright abolition of private property, not allowing any opportunity for those who prefer a different economic arrangement. If such an economic model was imposed on the world, those who wished to live otherwise would not have the freedom to do so. Allowing people no alternative to joining the local commune or syndicate would simply replace the tyranny of state capitalism with the oppression of an involuntary “community.” There would consequently be an inequality between the society, or more likely, the committee or other “delegates” who presume to represent it, and the individual. The group will make decisions and the dissenting individual must comply. Thus, in many a collective or commune no one will be poorer than another, but some will certainly be less free.

This is not to imply that all communist or collectivist anarchists believe in imposing their economic views on those who view the world differently. Many who advocate some form of communal society are as committed to personal liberty as are private property advocates. But there is a tendency on the part of many anarchists to present a “one size fits everyone” economic model for the future, not realizing the possible implications of such an all-encompassing ideal.

For Economic *and* Social Freedom

Individualists see the economic system they propose as simply the means to an end. And that end is a free society of free individuals. We believe that only free economic exchange, based on private property, can produce and protect every individual’s autonomy, their freedom to live as they see fit, which we believe is the essential goal of the anarchist project. Moreover, while such an arrangement would encourage and reward individual initiative, more collectively-oriented people would be free to construct whatever group enterprises they wish by coming together and sharing production, consumption, or both.

People in a society based on individual ownership of property and tenure of land would be able to choose whatever economic or social system best suits their interests, personal relationships, geographic location, and temperaments, without sacrificing the option of changing their minds and making other arrangements whenever they decide to do so. While some amount of economic

inequality would be unavoidable in such a world, schemes which seek to bring about absolute parity in wealth and possessions would simply produce another kind of inequality, where individual wants and desires would be subservient to those of the group, and limits would be placed on the freedom of those who wish to live their lives in their own way. Such social inequality between and among individuals and groups and the limits on liberty which it would produce are precisely what individualists, and, one would hope, all other genuine anarchists, seek to eliminate from the world.

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