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Like almost any political term, 'anarchism' is very broad in scope and covers a huge range of ideas and practice. Instead of trying to give an exhaustive description, or detail everything that is and isn't anarchism, this article will attempt to get to the heart of it, and capture the essence, as far as possible, at the core of anarchism. Giving a complete definition of such a broad term would take many more words than will fit here and has been done well in other places (e.g. An Anarchist FAQ).

Any short, simple statement trying to define anarchism will necessarily fall short: it will lack nuance, depth, and be open to misinterpretation. However, if a concise defining phrase is what we're seeking then, "favouring cooperation over authority", seems about as complete and accurate as can be captured in just a few words, though it does, of course, leave a huge amount of room for discussion.

Anarchism embodies a kind of skepticism of power and domination in that it assumes that the burden of proof lies with those who wish to exert them. In other words, I don't have to give reasons why I should be free, you have to give reasons (and good ones!)

why I shouldn't be. The definition given above naturally splits in two: favouring cooperation and disfavouring authority.

On the pro-cooperation aspect, anarchism proposes alternate (leaderless) models of organisation and concepts for better, more egalitarian organisational mechanisms and structures. On the anti-authority aspect we find analysis of the current system, criticism of its manifestations, exposition of its lies and machinations, and challenges to its institutions through direct action.

There are many myths and misconceptions about anarchism and, though this will not be an exhaustive list, it seems useful to address a couple of the more common ones. The first is that anarchy equals chaos and no rules, and anarchists are those who want chaos (or bomb-throwing mayhem) and a society where everyone simply does whatever they feel like all the time.

There may very well be some people who wish for this, but no one can seriously expect to be able to run a complex society this way. However this seems to be the definition most often upheld by the mainstream.

Beyond simple misunderstandings of the term, the most common criticism of anarchism is that it is utopian and therefore unrealistic. That it requires that all ill intentions cease in the absence of repressive force, and everyone becomes something like a perfect being.

Anarchism makes no promises of such an idealistic world to come, only one to strive for — and this it surely has in common with most any other ideology. Dictionaries tend to define anarchism in terms of its opposition to governments, but this is really something that comes out of anarchism rather than being a defining feature.

The fundamental question underlying any political philosophy is: what values or ideals do we wish to promote and emphasise, and which ones will we devalue and de-emphasise? In the state-capitalist world in which we live, one of the main values that un-

spend our time. Where we work, live, and socialise there are already businesses, institutions and establishments that decide what these experiences are like. We mostly tend to just accept them as they are because any one of us, as an individual, can have little effect on them. What we need to do is organise amongst ourselves to transform these institutions into egalitarian, inclusive leaderless ones, or to create new ones of our own. Seek out and get involved with such organising groups and, where they don't exist, find like minded people with whom to start them.

If we wish to have a hand in deciding what our world is like, and we wish to leave something behind for future generations, each of us needs to get active and involved.

Further Reading

Alan MacSimóin, Follow the Leader?, 2011, struggle.ws
Edward S Herman & Noam Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, 1988
An Anarchist FAQ, theanarchistlibrary.org

example, is usually leaderless, with no one particular person deciding what movie to go see or where the group spends the evening.

What tends to happen is someone makes a suggestion and sees if the others are on board. If somebody strongly disagrees then perhaps another suggestion will be made, and so on until the group comes to general agreement, also known as consensus.

Such a leaderless group can be thought of as an informal anarchist collective, using informal consensus decision making. In anarchist organising, formal consensus decision making works in much the same way, except the rules/guidelines tend to be codified and agreed upon.

The thrust of anarchist theory and activity is separable into six fairly distinct, though overlapping, areas:

Create. Building the new egalitarian institutions, collectives and enterprises, which are to comprise the massive-scale popular organisation effort that will be required to bring about the society we wish to inhabit.

Transform. Altering existing authority-based institutions and groups into ones with more egalitarian structures.

Advocate. Anarchist advocacy, spreading the theory and practise of anarchism, through writing, lectures, interviews, workshops, etc.

Challenge. Challenging the authority of power-centres of all kinds, seeking good justifications for their authority and, when none are found, seeking to dismantle them. In practise through direct action and in theory through analysing and critiquing aspects and institutions of the current system.

Expose. Seeking out and making public the secrecy, lies, corruption and other machinations of the system.

Reform. Chipping away at some of the more oppressive aspects of society through the available avenues within the current system.

Whatever kind of world we want to live in, it will not simply be granted to us by our 'masters', we will all need to be involved in the running and decision-making of the communities in which we

derpins the political system is authority — the right for someone to have control over others' actions.

Some people are in charge of others and make decisions for them, or on their behalf. We are expected to (for the most part) obey those who are in charge of us, and be obeyed by those we are in charge of. This is how most of society's organisations are arranged, there is a hierarchy of authority from the 'ordinary' members or workers, up through some sort of management structure to a single person and/or small committee at the top (board of directors, council, etc).

The main value that's sacrificed under this system is freedom. The freedom for people to decide for themselves — or even, in many cases, have any input into decisions that affect them — is ceded to managers or, within the electoral system, 'representatives'.

What we're supposed to gain from this sacrifice is order, and a well functioning system. This rests on the assumption that outside of authoritative systems order is impossible. History has tested this assumption many times and has found it wanting: the Paris commune, the Spanish Revolution, the Limerick Soviet. These are just some examples of events in history in which communities decided to favour the value of freedom over authority and oppression.

Devaluing authority as an ideal doesn't mean we eliminate it completely. This would be undesirable, and surely impossible. One can think of many examples where authority is not only favourable but essential. For example, if we see a toddler about to run out on the road into oncoming traffic, we would exercise authority over the child in order to physically prevent them from doing so. Instead of seeking to abolish authority, anarchism prescribes that authority requires justification.

Strong justification. This justification is primarily owed to those over whom authority is to be wielded, If I wish to exercise authority over a group of people the best way to justify it would be to get their agreement. This, of course, does not always make sense and is not always possible, as in the example above — we do not stop

to get the child's permission before we prevent them from running into traffic.

Authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism are both strong values that seem to develop naturally within all us of from the time we are children. We are resistant to authority ("You're not the boss of me!") and at the same time we exercise authority over those smaller/weaker than us — a child might take a toy from a smaller, younger sibling.

The notion that authority requires justification is also an early development. If asked why did you take the toy, the child generally doesn't simply say, "I'm bigger and stronger and I wanted it." Instead we're more likely to hear justifications like, "Well they weren't using it anyway" or "I had it first." It's much easier for someone wielding authority to justify it to themselves than to the subject of the authority.

Of course the younger sibling in the example is unlikely to accept or agree with the justifications and would, if they could, resist the imposition of authority and keep the toy in question.

So what this example also points to is the fact that authority doesn't exist on its own, and cannot uphold itself by its own virtue. Instead it needs to be underpinned by violence, or "might makes right". In the example of the siblings, the older child is essentially backing up their authority with something like an implied threat. They want the toy, they take it, and, since the younger child is physically overmatched, any struggle to retrieve it will likely be met with some force.

Similar implied underlying threats exist within the world's political system(s). The word 'violence' is a rather poorly defined term, and doesn't have a very agreed-upon definition; how it is used in this article in the context of authority is to mean, "something bad will happen to you if you don't obey." It's quite easy to test that this is the case within society, just stop obeying and see what happens. Just to take one example, let's say you decide that you want

These two issues bring a sense of extreme urgency to the anarchist pursuit, an urgency that has been noticeably lacking from the governments and institutions of the state-capitalist system. To the contrary, their responses have been, on the one hand, planning for the further exploitation of natural resources (e.g. Arctic oil and mineral exploration), and, on the other, spending billions upgrading nuclear arms (in contravention of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty). The powerful minority is failing to address these (and many other) issues, that necessarily leaves it up to the rest of us! A common (possibly even the standard) response to the overwhelming complexity and severity of the world's problems, is a kind of passive urban nihilism: the world is screwed, there's nothing I can do as an individual, might as well just get on as if it's not happening: concentrate on work, or raising my family, or just partying.

This response is perfectly understandable, the problems are much too huge for any one person to attempt to address. But we should keep in mind that those most responsible, the rich and powerful, would barely fill the average town hall.

They are organised, active and engaged, and they command massive military and police force, but their numbers are small and their grip on power tenuous — and they are well aware of this, hence the massive propaganda enterprise and military spending. However understandable this passive despair reaction is, it has the function of supporting the continuation of the power division, since it tends to isolate and demotivate people so they don't pay attention to what their leaders are up to.

And even if our world is beyond the point of saving why should we not live together as well as we can for as long as we can? We need to get ourselves organised and figure out what we want to do about our problems and how we want to live together.

Anarchist organising is something almost everyone is familiar with, in informal settings. A group of friends on a night out, for

majority of the world's population, polling data from almost everywhere it's gathered shows this pretty clearly.

The will to end, or at least address, them exists — what seems to be lacking are popular, widespread, interconnected institutions that can challenge the power and domination of the wealthy minority, along with showing alternate, more egalitarian, modes of organisation.

Anarchism holds that these should be institutions of cooperation and mutual aid, worker- and community-controlled enterprises that are well structured but leaderless and without top-down power hierarchies. Human beings have all sorts of natural tendencies: greed and generosity, compassion and animosity, solidarity and individual ambition.

Leadership roles tend to not only attract, but also emphasise the negatives of greed and personal ambition; while leaderless, egalitarian organisations encourage the positives of generosity and solidarity. There are many such organisations in existence: worker owned co-operatives, community groups, and activist collectives are just some examples that come to mind of non-leadership organisations.

Many of these use 'bottom-up' forms of organisation, with members making the decisions and accountable delegates appointed to carry them out. This form of organisation seeks to eliminate (using agreed rules and guidelines) the possibility of a leadership emerging to make decisions 'on behalf of the members' and keep the group under the control of its membership.

Of the problems the power-hierarchy based system has created, there are two that loom particularly large: environmental devastation, which seems poised to eliminate the possibility of decent human existence on the planet; and nuclear weapons, which, either through war or accident (and there have been many close calls on both) could also make our planet all but uninhabitable, but on a much shorter timescale — this is an extremely serious threat that is largely missing from mainstream media and conversation.

electricity in your house but you can't (or don't wish to) pay for it. First step is probably to stop paying your electricity bills.

What's likely to happen then is you'll be written to, called on, phoned, texted, emailed, or all of the above, with requests and entreats to pay off the bills. These are likely to then escalate to demands and threats — of being cut off and/or having debt collection agencies employed to retrieve the payment.

Once your electricity is inevitably cut off, if you decide to just reconnect it yourself, you'll then be committing a crime and the electricity company (assuming they find out) may very well press charges. If you keep pushing it far enough, particularly if you are open and forthcoming about what you're up to, eventually people (police) will come to your house and physically remove you and lock you up, and if you resist this part of the process you will be subjected to what most anyone would agree is violence — i.e. battery.

The authoritarian, hierarchical nature of the system inherently makes greater reward available to those further up the hierarchy. The division is extreme currently, with a fraction of a percent of the world's population owning most of the wealth, but the general trend is only to be expected: those in power will naturally pay more attention to their own needs and desires, like most people.

This is at the heart of class division. Class analysis is an extremely complex and in-depth subject and a single paragraph can barely hope to scratch the surface, but, put simply, in a 'democracy', there's a specialised class: the elite, political, or manager class.

These are the responsible, intelligent people (historically, men) who presume to know what's best for everyone and have the role of doing the thinking and planning. The part everyone else is expected to play is to mostly be spectators, and occasionally to turn out to the voting booths to choose between one or another member of the specialised class to be a leader (these days usually called a representative).

The underlying framework of this system has changed very little, if at all, since early civilisation. The ostensible leaders (even in dictatorships) rule only as long as they have the support of those with real power — the wealthy elites who own society. In older times, merchants and manufacturers; these days, CEOs, hedge-fund managers and such. What has changed is how power is imposed upon the masses.

Thanks to labour organising and other large-scale mass direct action, the amount of freedom available to the public in western societies has increased dramatically and the oppression, and degree to which those in power are able to resort to violence, has decreased (particularly if you're of the 'right' colour, creed, nationality, gender, etc). It was becoming easier for people to organise collectively and effect positive changes in public policy. No longer could the people simply be beaten down.

The ability for people to achieve societal, system change is a serious threat to the established order: most people would like the world to be more fair, which necessitates the rich and powerful become less rich and powerful. Naturally this is something they're against: to oppressors, fairness and equality feel like oppression.

As totalitarian states grudgingly gave way to 'democracies', propaganda took over from the bludgeon as the main tool for controlling populations and set itself to the task of diverting people away from organising and participating in politics, and of promoting values that serve the interests of power.

This tendency is visible right up through all the major institutions of society beginning with the family unit and the education system. Schools tend to instill values like obedience and competitiveness and individual achievement, and discourage values like dissent, challenging authority and mutual cooperation.

The public relations industry is by now a massive, multi-billion euro enterprise, the main function of which is influencing and controlling the public mind. Spectator sports, tv shows, advertisements, movies, and the like, all serve to divert and distract people's

attention from the ills of society, while building up power-serving values.

Those who succeed or 'make it' in this system will tend to be those who have had the required values successfully instilled in them. And those who reject these values will tend to be ostracised or marginalised by society's institutions.

A tiny minority of the population have had their hands on the reins of the system, shaping and designing it to their ends, while at the same time trying their best to hide this from the masses.

International investment agreements are negotiated in secret; neoliberal capitalist organisations have almost no answerability to the public, just to their shareholders (the majority of whom are other members of the wealthy elite); and governments plead national security whenever they can, and employ other instruments in order to hide what they're up to.

The level of secrecy in place is a good indicator both of the extent of public opposition to the policies, and also of how damaging they are — destroying the environment, and spreading tremendously powerful weapons throughout the world, are two examples that come to mind.

This is not a conspiracy of course, it's just how the system works, and what it tends to emphasise. If you're the CEO of a major corporation and you decide to adopt fairer, greener, or more equitable (and, therefore, popular) policies you'll soon find your corporation floundering or, more likely, lose your job.

If you're a politician seeking to implement popular policies you'll be less likely to receive the backing of the business community (which includes, crucially, the media) and most likely find yourself losing out to the candidate who aligns themselves with economic interests.

The state-capitalist system upholds and propagates a lot of dangerous and damaging trends in humanity — economic inequality, resource depletion, environmental destruction, warfare, large scale discrimination and racism, among others. They are opposed by the