

Thoughts on Anarchy

A Personal Perspective

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August 9, 2018

(I have been working on a book for fifty years or more. That's a long time. Anyone who sticks with it will realize that i think we humans are in a dire situation. Personal relationships are disappearing at the same time that degradation of our Mother Earth is accelerating. In what follows i present a brief summary of my vision for a way forward.)

As a life-long activist, the question that comes naturally to my mind is, "What can be done?" Many solutions have been suggested:

- Various electoral programs have been proposed. The Democrats try to convince us that solutions lie in the direction of governmental and other social programs that more equitably distribute resources—healthcare, income, justice, education, food and such. Unfortunately, they have never been able to overcome the fact that all such programs are designed to treat everyone as if they are the same and are administered by individuals who are strangers to each other.¹

The Republicans seem to believe that the cream has risen to the top and that those who control the corporate system are naturally superior and, given free rein, will make the right choices for the future. The evidence seems to me to be conclusive that they are wrong. These are the people who have and do promote an economic system that allows those who own the resources, no matter how they have obtained them, to use and abuse those resources so as to maximize power for themselves, no matter the cost to others and to our Mother.

Others vying for political/electoral power in the U. S. are variations on the theme: more or less ecologically destructive capitalism, more or less libertarian capitalism, more or less equal distribution of the fruits of the capitalist system. But it seems to me that no matter what form it takes, capitalism is primarily part of the problem. It teaches people to continually use more resources in order to make more products in order to make more profit. It teaches people to rely on wage labor to produce goods and services. As Marx correctly pointed out, wage labor leads to conflict between the owners of the means of production,

¹ I remember being astonished when my academic mentor, Merrill Jackson, told me that in some judicial systems the goal was to find potential judges who knew best the parties to the legal action. Unlike in the U. S. system, where judges are expected/required to recuse themselves if they know the parties.

who want to maximize their profits by minimizing what they pay “their” workers, and workers, who want to maximize their wages in order to live more comfortably. And everybody treats everybody else as a means to an end.

Whether “progressive” or “conservative”, the above solutions assume the viability of capitalism as the economic system in the U. S.

- Socialism and Communism have long been posited as solutions to the problems created or exacerbated by capitalism. The thing that is missing in all of these putative solutions is that whether capitalist, socialist, or communist, these governing systems are all based on bureaucratic stranger relationships: that is, on relationships that are partial, instrumental, based on explicit or implicit roles, and, as history has repeatedly shown, tend toward the creation of an elite that believes in its own ethical and intellectual superiority and, thus, legitimacy.

In other words, all of the above systems depend on the existence of a state, whether it is conservative or liberal and capitalist or socialist or communist, each attempts to define the type of state it supports and defends. The appeal of anarchy, to me is that it eschews the existence of a state.

Now, i think it is self-evident that some people are more intelligent than others: are quicker to learn, quicker to gain insights, and quicker to develop consciousness of the nature of situations. Nonetheless, it seems to me that when people have been given the right to rule over others they have ultimately abused that power. So, the question arises: is it simply in the nature of human beings that people take advantage of others? Is that just what we do? The answer, i think, is, no. It’s not in our nature if there are exceptions; and what i learned in the study of social science is that there are exceptions. Those exceptions exist in what anthropologists call “tribes”. I learned to define a tribe as “a group of kinfolk descended from a group of kinfolk in an unbroken line forever.” We humans have spent about 95% of our time on earth living in tribes. The majority of societies on earth today are tribes. And i think history shows people fighting like hell to remain in tribes.

To me the primary appeal of anarchy is that it envisions the possibility of social organizations based on personal relationships. I see it as a way to organize social relations on a personal basis. It’s a way to make decisions based on discussions among the people, who trust that viable directions/solutions will emerge from their personal interaction. I understand it to be essentially non-hierarchical.

Years ago, i read a book by the anthropologist Dorothy Lee called *Freedom and Culture*. It was a revelation because she described cultures and meanings that i had never encountered in my white, middleclass upbringing. One thing she talked about was the Native American notion that “the chief stands with the people.” She said that many people encountering native peoples think that the “chief rules the people.” Not so, says Lee. The picture she paints is of the kin group talking over their challenges until a consensus emerges and is articulated by someone who has been listening careful to everyone and taking into account their viewpoints and their needs.

Some have argued that in many African and Polynesian tribes the chef does, indeed, *rule* the people. I have never seen evidence of this being true and would be grateful to see it—as it is always good, in my experience, to have one’s ignorance corrected.

Whether liberal democracies, fundamentalist theocracies, socialist or communist bureaucracies, the thing all other governmental forms have in common is that they are based on stranger

relationships. If my social science colleagues and our forbearers are right, personal relationships are essentially different from stranger relationships and they produce essentially different types of people and societies.

As i detail at some length in my book, personal relationships are based on familiarity such that each one in the relationship knows the other well, knows them as whole people, perceives them to be unique, and feels them to be a part of one's self. In contrast, stranger relationships exist among individuals who have only partial, role-based relationships with each other and the relationships themselves are instrumental. Even when one is doing it "for his/her own good" one can manipulate strangers.

Several things impressed me about what i read in the issue of Utopia Magazine that Jon sent to me. One was that the writers of the articles seemed to be fundamentally interested in what each other were saying—not in scoring ideological or intellectual points. No one seemed to be afraid of saying that they didn't know something. And the writing was personal and specific, not abstract and highfalutin'.

The mainstream media usually dismiss Anarchists as bomb-throwers who have no substantial contribution to make to political discourse. This should not be surprising, as the establishment owns the mainstream media.

On the contrary, anarchists seem to me to be the people most open to ideas that are compatible with my own thinking. Personal relationships are the most meaningful aspect of human life. We are a culture increasingly dependent on stranger relationships. For many of us, material possessions have become the symbol of our worth and the substitute for our personal relationships. We are drowning in our stuff—our material possessions and our garbage. We spend so much time looking at screens that we are forgetting how to hold conversations. This is particularly dangerous for children who have not yet learned to converse. Loneliness and depression are epidemic, and the suicide rate is steadily rising. We have dumped so much minute plastic in the oceans that it is killing sea life. Ice caps are melting and coastlines are flooding. And the poor fool in the White House is so intent on proving that he is important that he is willing to sacrifice our country, indeed the future of us and our children on the bonfire of his vanity.

Whom do you trust? Until we have familiarity with each other, until we know each other as whole people, until we become part of each other's identity we don't know whom we can trust.

Politics is a strange business. It's about power—about giving power to people we don't really know and can't really trust. In this so-called democracy, we are asked to trust politicians on the basis of media propaganda, sound bites, and campaign speeches. I have had the experience of working with people for years, face-to-face, before i discovered they had been stabbing me in the back.

Anarchy is the only political approach i know that has the potential to be based on person-to-person relationships and is, therefore, the only one that appeals to me.

This brings me to the topic of strategy and tactics. My thoughts on strategy are two-fold. Firstly, i would like to see us always working toward creating communities, that is, networks of personal relationships, that are capable of sustaining the people when this whole house of cards collapses. Secondly, i think the less we cooperate with and participate in the bureaucratic planning system the more we will weaken it and strengthen ourselves. The one thing the system can't abide is non-participation. Who's going to do the work? Can you picture any of the 1% cleaning their own toilets?

This does raise the question of electoral politics. I am of two minds on that. On the one hand, i agree that to vote is only to encourage them. On the other, elections *do* have consequences; and, too often, it's the least privileged among us who pay the price when the least progressive of the capitalist parties are successful at the ballot box. I agree with Ron that people have to make up their own minds about that.

Tactically, i think there are many choices. I gravitate toward education, consciousness raising and skill development.

1. Education, i think, has two major components. The first is the basics taught in grammar school. Reading, writing, and arithmetic. Without them, one is lost in the modern world. A young man sometimes works for me in my garden who cannot do the arithmetic to determine if i am paying him correctly or not. I do, but he must take it on faith. What does one do in a modern urban setting if one cannot read a sign or fill out a job application? Beyond the basics, it's my belief/prejudice that the better understanding one has of history, the better off one is. Our present society did not emerge full-blown, from nowhere and from nothing. It developed from particular social situations, from particular people and particular cultural meanings. If, for example, one knows nothing about the history of so-called "race" in America, one could be led to believe that African Americans are just bellyachin'-when nothing could be further from the truth. Without understanding the history of the European conquest of North America, one might think that the right to decide who can live here, on this stolen land, is legitimately in the hands of those who control the present political boundaries.
2. I have a rather simple-minded view of consciousness. I think it is the ability to perceive relationships between and among social phenomena. For example, to be conscious of white skin privilege is to be aware of the ways in which one's well-being is due to the exploitation or subjugation of another. Other examples: one could be said to be conscious of the interrelationship between wage stagnation and extreme wealth inequality, or among gerrymandered voting districts, corporate control of elections, and Republican control of state legislatures. In light of this perspective, i think that it behooves us to continually be about the task of raising consciousness, our own, each other's, and that of the people with whom we engage in political/social/cultural discussion and analysis. As we realize relationships it's a good thing to share those realizations and to check their validity with others.
3. When i speak of skill development as a tactic, i am thinking of learning and teaching practical skills that help people to survive when, for one reason or another, they do not have others to call on. Growing food, cooking, maintaining clothing, basic first aid, helping those who cannot help themselves (particularly the young, the old, and the infirm), are all practical skills that must be mastered within any community that is going to thrive. By learning them and teaching them we nurture self-confidence and encourage ourselves and each other to take on and meet other challenges. Feelings of powerlessness are dangerous to our self-esteem.

The Enemy

It has taken me too long, to realize that we are really in a zero-sum game. My Christian upbringing leads me to want to love my neighbors and those who would despitefully use me.

But, unfortunately, this isn't about my actual neighbors. This is about people who would never dream of living in my neighborhood. To them it would be a nightmare. This is about people who will stop at nothing, *nothing*, to maintain their power and social position. This is about the Koch Brothers, the DeVoses, that poor fool in the White House, and others too numerous to mention, many whose names we don't even know.

It's about people who oppose U. N. resolutions recommending breast-feeding over corporate-produced formulas. It's about people who refuse to permanently prevent Asian carp from entering the Great Lakes (the thirsty world's largest single supply of fresh water). It's about people who deny healthcare, healthful food, clean air and education to others just because those others are poor. It's about people who feel they have the right to choose whether other women should have abortions, whether voting rights can be denied to others, whether soldiers should be sent into battle to protect oil supplies, and whether climate change should be taken seriously. These are people who will stop at nothing; they are merciless.

Maybe i am self-deluded. Undoubtedly i am self-deluded. (The problem with self-delusion being that one cannot see one's own.) But i still think that both strategically and tactically the wise course is non-violence. To be the change we want to see in the world. I have said for years that i think it is revolutionary in America to be non-violent. And that the system will bring itself down. Our job is to find ways to get as many of our people out of it as possible before it collapses. By "our people" i mean those who are capable of empathy.

We humans are complicated creatures. Each of us is imprinted by our own experience. The world doesn't mean exactly the same thing to any two of us. And none of us is completely evil just as none of us is completely good. I think we need to find ways to build communities that enable us, as the old song says, to "accentuate the positive." I don't believe we can ever eliminate the negative, but we can identify it, shine a spotlight on it, and minimize it. I know that's possible because i am a Detroitter and i spend my life among numbers of people who do all they can to eliminate racism) That's not an easy thing to do in America, and we Detroitters don't get enough credit for the degree to which we accomplish that.

The urban agriculture community, of which i am a part, is as fine a group of people as i have known in my seventy-four years. People meet each other as persons, each of whom is unique and important in his or her own right. It's a safe place to be where people freely help each other, share resources, and truly love to spend time together—working or playing. In fact, there are lots of times when we can truly be said to be doing both.

I regularly eat in a restaurant that is located in the most racist city i have ever known—Dearborn, Michigan. Yet even parts of Dearborn are turning around, and the M & M Café is a good example of what can happen as it does. The owners are a Polish and Lebanese couple who have been welcoming customers of all ethnicities and feeding them healthful,² delicious food for thirty-five years. They have provided the nucleus around which a multi-racial, multi-cultural clientele has formed. I don't know of another eating establishment anywhere as comfortable or diverse.

A couple of days a week i go to Fitness Works. It's gym in Detroit that is predominantly African-American, is run by African-Americans and could not be more welcoming to my lily-white self. Again, i am treated as a person, not a thing. It really has become a happy place for me. It's true there are a few there who treat me as white, but very few.

² Well, maybe the carrot cake isn't so healthful, but it certainly is delicious.

Being an aging, overweight, diabetic female, i have my share of health issues, which i take to the Henry Ford Health System. My primary care physician is an African-American Christian. I assume my ophthalmologist is a Jew. (I'm going by his last name; the subject has never come up.) My psychiatrist is from Pakistan and my Physical Therapist, Endocrinologist, and Ob/Gyn are all from India. (I don't know who's Muslim and who's Hindu or whatever.) And the vast majority of nurses, nurse practitioners, and other support staff are African-American. Although it is a large, bureaucratic organization there are people in it who are capable of treating their patients as persons, not as numbers. I can't imagine getting better healthcare anywhere.

The point here is that diversity is possible and desirable. We can just get along—as Rodney King wanted. Humans are capable of it; but, again, it's a matter of accentuating the positive and meeting people where they are. We live in a culture that increasingly emphasizes and is dependent upon stranger relationships. Persons³ are disappearing as individuals⁴ become more numerous.

There is a tendency in American culture, exemplified best by the Republican Party that encourages us to hate and fear and to be suspicious of one another. It teaches us to take advantage of one another and to embrace ideology and ignore science. As long as we are kept apart and ignorant of each other's humanity, those who control the show will remain in charge and will continue to sell us down the river until there is nothing left to sell, and the river is so polluted that the fish can't even live in it.

I think our response to climate change must wash away capitalism, materialism, and bureaucracy. We can no longer afford to use resources that are not badly needed by the people. We can no longer afford to allow material acquisition to be a substitute for personal relationships. And we can no longer afford rule by bureaucrats looking for advantages for themselves.

It is, indeed, a life or death struggle for our species. It makes me very sad to think our amazing species may cause its own extinction.

³ Those whose identities have been formed in personal relationships.

⁴ Those whose identities have been formed in stranger relationships.

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Retrieved on 11th August 2021 from utopianmag.com
Published in *The Utopian* Vol. 17.5.

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