

What is Anarchism?

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“Right now I’d like to strengthen the federal government.”

- statement by the alleged anarchist Noam Chomsky in *The Progressive*, March 1996

A most incredible confusion exists as to what exactly anarchism **is**. Some of this is due to the media images of chaos, terrorism and mad bombers. A pseudo-anarchism also grew up out of the remains of the New Left, a subject that I have dealt with elsewhere. Of late, we have Chomsky’s seeming betrayal of anarchism and the bizarre spectacle of anarchists marching in defense of the Welfare State. The word “anarchist” practically screams for clarification.

Anarchism is the ideal of a society **without coercion**, a society where membership in all organizations is **voluntary**. Such an ideal society may never come into existence, yet the anarchist considers it something worth working toward. While we most certainly don’t need **ideologies**, we still need **ideals** to push us forward. When robbed of ideals we can easily descend into the vulgar materialism of consumerism or false ideals like Communism and Nationalism. Admittedly, ideals are not for everyone, and neither is anarchism, especially in its demanding the maximum of responsibility and self-reliance.

Not quite anarchos, but...

What about the people who go part way – those who accept most, but not all of the message? What are they? I suggest that people who generally want less coercion in society, yet do not accept the “final goal,” should be called **libertarians** and not anarchists. Those who accept only a portion of the anarchist message, say, mutualism, federalism or decentralism, should be called **mutualists, federalists** and **decentralists**, not anarchists. Generally, such people lump themselves in (or get lumped in) with anarchists and this is a cause for a great deal of confusion.

What I am talking about is the problem of the difference between the “final goal,” and the actual process of movement. This is a problem which haunted the authoritarian and revolutionary radicalisms, but does not have to be a problem for anarchism. Anarchism is the **goal** and libertarianism, decentralism, etc. is the process.

No shame nor sectarianism need be implied in not being considered an anarchist. There is nothing wrong with being “merely” a libertarian or decentralist. I just want to clear up a problem of definition and minimize confusion, for if “anarchism” means any old thing, then we have lost an important idea – the anarchist ideal.

One outcome of this attempt at definition is the realization that most, if not all, supposed anarchist movements were not really anarchist, but at best, libertarian. How else to describe a movement like syndicalism, led by anarchists, but made up overwhelmingly of workers who accepted only part of the anarchist program? Does it not then make sense that members hived-off into Communism, Fascism or Social Democracy when the syndicalist movement fell on hard times?

(Another problem is people, like Chomsky, who claim to be anarchists, yet when push comes to shove, are not even good **decentralists**.)

For the past thirty years I have been making an error one might awkwardly describe as *movementism*. I have been searching for practical ways to build an anarchist movement, not realizing that my search was futile – a kind of modern day quest for El Dorado. An anarchist movement is most unlikely ever to occur, and what I’ve always described under the heading of “practical anarchism” would be more correctly termed “practical libertarianism.”

Anarchism was not born as a mass movement. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the first person to call himself an anarchist, was not the leader of an anarchist movement, but of a broad-based workers' movement called Mutualism. Neither was Bakunin in a specifically anarchist movement, but was a militant within the First International, and his group was known as Collectivists. Only after 1876 do we find a large group categorized "anarchist," and then only pejoratively by Marx and his friends to attack the libertarian movement.

In the 1890s during the "classical" French Anarchist movement, contrary to what one might think, there were few anarchists. The two largest anarchist publications, *La Revolte* and *Pere Peinard* – combined – had only 1500 subscribers. Two decades later, at a time when the anarcho-syndicalist CGT had hundreds of thousands of members, the two largest anarchist papers had the same small number of subscribers. From 1890 to 1940, at any one time, there were probably no more than 3000 active anarchists out of a population of 40 million. (Jean Maitron, *Le Mouvement Anarchiste en France*.) However, several million people supported at least *some* anarchist goals – i.e., in mass movements such as the syndicates, mutual aid societies and regionalist-decentralist organizations.

The future of anarchism, if there is one, will at best involve a few thousand people, as individuals or small groups, in larger libertarian decentralist organizations. (Some will choose to work alone, spreading the anarchist message through writings and publications.) It is imperative that such people, so few in number, yet with potential influence, should know what they are talking and writing about. Anarchism has already been distorted and dragged through the mud enough times in its history. Please, let's try to get it right this time! One cannot emphasize enough: though few in number, anarchists do not form a "vanguard" or an elite of know-it-alls to lead these movements. We are people who choose anarchism as our ideal and act upon it.

The Fetishism of Class

Another source of confusion is **class-reductionism**. Older forms of Anarchism had a populist concept of class (the People vs. the Elite), but modern anarchists borrowed marxist class analysis. Thus, we have an emphasis upon the "working class" and the supposed need for "Class Struggle Anarchism" – This creates a situation where rationalization of support for the State can easily occur. For example, the welfare system is considered a "victory" of 1930s class struggle. Cutbacks are supposedly the result of the "capitalists" who want to "beat back the working class" – Ergo, "anarchists" support the welfare State – a clear perversion of anarchism.

This scenario is the product of an archaic and Manichean world view which ignores the fact that the welfare system was a co-option of the workers' movement by the corporate elite, and that most contemporary workers **support** the cuts, as they are sick of paying high taxes. Class reductionism does not take into account today's economic realities, at least in the developed world, where workers are no longer the poverty-stricken, beaten-down wretches of the past, but are consumers, taxpayers and investors.

An Anarchist Statement of Principles

A clear and unambiguous statement of anarchist principles is needed to separate the muddled authoritarian sheep from the anti-statist goats. Such as the statement below:

- Anarchism is not terrorism or violence, and anarchists do not support, aid, or sympathize with terrorists and so-called national liberation movements.
- Anarchism does not mean irresponsibility, parasitism, criminality, nihilism or immoralism, but entails the highest level of ethics and personal responsibility.
- Anarchism does not mean hostility toward organization. Anarchists only desire that all organizations be **voluntary** and declare that a peaceful social order will exist only when this is true.
- Anarchists are resolute anti-statists and do not defend either “limited states” or welfare states. Anarchists are opposed to all coercion. Poverty, bigotry, sexism and environmental degradation cannot be successfully overcome through the State. Anarchists are therefore opposed to taxation, censorship, so-called affirmative action and governmental regulation in general.
- Anarchists do not need scapegoats. Poverty and environmental destruction are not ultimately caused by transnationals, the IMF, the USA, the “developed world,” “imperialism,” technology, or any other devil figure, but are rooted in the power to coerce. Only the abolition of coercion will overcome these problems.
- Anarchism does not posit any particular economic system, but only desires a non-coercive economy composed of voluntary organizations.
- Anarchists are not utopians or sectarians, but are sympathetic to any effort to decrease statism and coercion and to replace authoritarian relations with voluntary ones.

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