

Author and Authority

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Anarchism is in trouble. Despite the gradual growth and strengthening of the anarchist movement over the past 10 years—more newspapers, journals, bookstores, actions, etc.—we aren't really engaged in changing the society. This failure isn't caused simply because we aren't working hard enough, but because we are adrift ideologically. In fact we are working hard, but with very little idea of why we are doing what we are doing.

Contemporary anarchist politics seems to be based on a kind of loose pragmatism: forming a political organization seems like a good idea, opening a bookstore seems like a good idea, publishing newspapers and journals seems like a good idea. But our "good ideas" haven't matured into a course of action. To quote old what's-his-name, we are doing a lot, but with no real idea of what is to be done.

To be effective revolutionaries—to change the world—we need to believe that we are part of the revolution now. I think that we will only be able to believe this preposterous idea if we have developed a strategic vision of the process of revolution that begins today and continues into the new society.

I think that the "revolutionary anarchist" section of the anarchist movement is the group most likely to develop such a strategic vision. I think that this rough revolutionary anarchist politics is fairly close to coalescing into a coherent, if not totally worked out, strategy. But I think that there are several barriers in the way, two of the most important being: our reliance on a loose and somewhat flimsy set of philosophical ideas to justify our politics, and a lack of a theory of the process of empowerment. In other words, we lack convincing arguments both about why people might throw off their chains, and about how they might do so. It is these two questions that I attempt to address in this article.

Philosophy and Politics

Politics is based on philosophy. For each idea we have about what is happening in the world, we have some idea about why we think it is happening. Our criticisms of this society, and our vision of a possible future society, are based on ideas about human nature, justice, morality, subjectivity, etc.

Clearly, if our ideas about these subjects are not correct, then our politics will not succeed: if people are really greedy, violent and selfish by nature, we will not be able to build a society based on mutual aid and cooperation. If we want to change the world, we cannot rely uncritically on our philosophical assumptions; we have to ruthlessly challenge and correct them. Equally important, we have to be able to argue for our ideas and defend them against attacks by people with other ideas.

The problem is, most of the most important philosophical ideas on which we base our politics are not provable. Is there a god? Who knows? Is there a determined human nature? How would we prove this one way of the other? Are there such things as justice and morality? Is there a knowable "reality," or is our concept of the real created by the fictions we use to explain things?

We can't answer these questions, but we also can't fall into the trap of inaction: that we cannot act because we cannot base our actions on anything because we cannot be sure of anything. It seems to me that our goal should not be to stop believing because we cannot prove the existence of the things we believe in, but to believe in a way that does not make us prisoners of our preconceptions. That is, I think we need to believe critically.

I'm not arguing that we should believe in any bullshit if it looks like it might allow us to destroy this society; just the opposite, I am arguing that what we believe and how we believe will determine whether or not we are able to build the new society out of the old.

Subjectivity

A necessary condition for making revolution is what I call the “actualization” of subjectivity. That is, unless people become convinced of their own power to evaluate the world around them, come to conclusions about taking action, and take effective action, it will not be possible to destroy this society and make a new one.

This happens two ways. First, the experience of living under new, directly democratic social conditions—through creating social movements and counter institutions. Second, through the conscious adoption of revolutionary politics and theory that advocate the creation of a society based on the full expression of subjectivity.

This actualization of subjectivity is essential to revolution. A body of revolutionary ideas without a belief in one's power to act is meaningless. It is only as people come to believe that they are capable of acting in matters that affect them that they become able to participate in the destruction of this society and the creation of a new one.

I think that there is one major obstacle to the actualization of subjectivity: authority.

Authority

All systems of thought that we think of as authoritarian have in common a reference, either explicit or implicit, back to some “higher power.” This is most obvious in the case in which the reference is back to an actual, living God. However, this same kind of reference back to a higher power also underlies ideas that are ostensibly neutral—or even hostile—to the idea of a God.

For example, the idea of natural rights—that human beings have certain inalienable rights, such as to life and liberty—implies necessarily that there is some “higher” source that has deemed it so. If these “rights” cannot be taken away by humans, they cannot have been granted by humans.

These various “higher powers”—god, nature, morality, natural right—can be grouped together under a general metaphor of “author.” The author of any work is the conscious, intentional presence at its root. Thus any kind of “higher power”—either one named explicitly or one whose existence is implied—can be thought of as the “author” of systems of philosophy based on references back to this higher power.

The authors that are at the root of “authoritarian” systems of thought all share two features: transcendence and intentionality.

By transcendence I mean that the influence of the “authors” extends to all people, in all places, at all times, and is beyond human intention or control. For example, murder in our society is seen both as a crime and a sin. It is a crime because it is contrary to the laws humans have created. But, even in a society in which murder were not a crime—or if there were no longer any society to so define it—murder would still be a sin. Why? Because sin is a violation of God's law (or the murdered person's “natural right” to life), which is not bound by time, place, person or human intentionality: it is transcendental.

By intentionality I mean that it is through their acts of intention (authoring) that the authors affect human beings. For example, it is “wrong” to bear false witness because, effectively, God said so. Similarly, humans have a right to life, liberty, etc. not because of some law, or because of any social convention, but because the author intended it to be so, or so the ideas necessarily imply.

The converse is also true: ideas that are transcendental and intentional (or require intentionality) are authors or root themselves in an author.

For example, gravity is transcendental, but it is not intentional—it needs no one to intend its existence for it to exist. It may be argued that gravity exists because of some prior intention, but such an intention is not strictly necessary for gravity’s existence.

However, the entire idea of rights is rooted in authority: rights are fundamental aspects of human existence, which may be abridged and ignored, but continue in their transcendent existence not because they are honored, but because they were intended to exist. Every “fundamental human right” may be denied to each of us, but that doesn’t mean, so the argument goes, that they don’t exist—i.e. that they exist beyond, and despite, any human intention or act.

Secular authority—the authority of the state—and transcendental authority—god’s authority—are different in name only. Both root themselves, either implicitly or explicitly, in transcendental, intentional authority. For example, that the preamble of the US Constitution cites our inalienable rights as having been conferred upon us by our creator is not simply a concession on the part of the founding fathers to the mythology of the day: they firmly believed that the authority of the new United States sprang from god’s authority.

Authority and Subjectivity

Subjectivity—the power to act for oneself and, perhaps more importantly, the belief in that power—is central to the revolutionary project. It is this actual and potential power to act that underlies both the possibility of destroying the inherited society and the possibility of creating one in which people act consciously on all matters that affect them.

A necessary condition for revolution is the desire and ability (belief) to act to change this society, despite the enormous pressure against such acts. A necessary condition for creating a new society is the desire to act and the belief that such acts could result in something new.

While subjectivity is necessary to revolution, it is not sufficient. People who fully believe in their power to act need to be able to conceive of actions worth taking. A mass of people whose subjectivity had been actualized would not automatically make the kind of revolution that we are interested in. They may well decide to form some other kind of society. It is only when people who are acting as subjects embrace anarchist politics and build a society based on those politics that we will have an anarchist society.

How Authority Destroys Subjectivity

The existence of and belief in authority is destructive to subjectivity in two main ways:

First, authoritarian societies seek to deny subjectivity—the only real threat to their continued existence—by perpetuating social conditions that prevent people from acting, and from developing a belief in their own capacity to act.

Second, belief in authority destroys subjectivity because it asserts that people are not truly free to act in all matters that concern them.

Many important areas of subjective activity are reserved for the author, and we are constantly told that we have no possibility of control over these aspects of our lives. Thus we can be free in many ways, but never totally: we may change the world, but not the moral structure of the universe. It will only be possible to both destroy this society and create a new one if the people involved in that process come to see themselves as able to exercise their conscious intentionality over all matters that affect them. The act of belief in the author destroys our ability to believe ourselves capable of making decisions solely on our own authority.

Even if it were possible to destroy the material conditions of oppression, we would not necessarily then be free. We participate in our own oppression by believing the core values of our oppressors: that transcendental authority exists and is valid. We need to destroy both the material conditions and the philosophical bases. We can't really do either unless we are doing both.

I would argue that, in fact, it is the process of re-creating our subjectivity that is "the revolution." The revolution starts long before even the first bureaucrat is hung with the guts of the first capitalist; the heart of the revolution is the on-going process of people actualizing their subjectivity.

Anarchism and Authority

If we agree that the actualization of subjectivity is the central aim of a revolutionary movement, and that ideas rooted in transcendental authority are destructive to subjectivity, then clearly we must have politics that are anti-authoritarian. The problem, I argue, is that anarchist politics are not anti-authoritarian.

Anarchists have historically identified ourselves as opposed to all forms of authority—the state and its assertion of being authorized by the social contract; the heterosexual family and its assertion of being authorized by Nature; capital and its assertion of being authorized by human nature; God and his claim of being the transcendental author at the root of it all, etc. But, despite this rejection of concrete forms of authority, anarchists have consistently re-invested our politics with authority and implicit references to a transcendental, intentional author.

For example, anarchist politics makes constant reference to ideas such as rights (human and natural), justice (as a transcendental system of fairness), and morality (as a transcendental system of right and wrong). All of these ideas, and many more, necessarily make implicit reference back to a transcendental author.

What the anarchist tradition rightly recognizes is that people need to run their own struggles; not just because of the tendency for leaders to become rulers, but because the struggle is fundamentally about running our own lives: the structure is the content. The anarchist tradition's rejection of leaders and the trappings of hierarchy and authority are not simply a "good idea," they are the beginnings of a fundamental break with authority.

But it is anarchism's implicit belief in authoritarian ideology that implicates and involves us in the project of authority. Thus, like the existing society, anarchism discourages the development of the subjectivity necessary for destroying this society and creating a new one. As it exists, anarchism has no hope of creating the society it claims to be fighting for. In order to be successful on its own terms, anarchism must abandon its reliance on ideas that are rooted in authority.

Beyond Anarchism

To rid itself of ideas based in authority, anarchism would need to give up the following concepts: rights (human and natural); justice (as it refers to a transcendental arbitration of fairness; not as it refers to the creation of social contracts about acceptable behavior); morality (universal concepts of right and wrong, good and evil).

A politics without these ideas is not easy to conceive. It would need to abandon all claims to moral superiority (an anarchist society is fundamentally better than a non-anarchist society), rootedness in nature (an anarchist society is more natural), and rootedness in the moral structure of the universe (an anarchist society would ensure that human rights were protected, and is thus better/more desirable).

It seems to me that this change would not really affect the basic description of anarchism: a political philosophy that advocates the creation of a society in which people participate directly in making all the decisions that affect them, and in which social power is distributed evenly among the citizenry. What it would affect is the reasons why we are in favor of such a society. We would need to abandon all reasons that make claims to any authority other than our own.

Human Nature

A brief digression. One problem is that most traditional anarchist ideas could be maintained if we believed in a biologically determined human nature. Sadly, this is another argument for which there is no definitive answer.

I think that I have been able to show how belief in transcendental authority, the non-existence of which cannot be proven, is destructive to the psychological conditions necessary to make anarchist revolution. Reference to a determined human nature seems to me to have some of the same problems. Rather than relying on our conscious, intentional activity to justify our ideas and hopes, we are again seeking to ground our politics in something transcendental and beyond our control. In effect, we would be saying that, while we may be able to make a new society, the underlying force of that change is beyond our control. This, too, seems to me to be destructive to the process of developing an actualized subjectivity.

Possible Sources of Personal Authority

If we agree that we need to shed transcendental authority as the basis of our politics, and that we need to discover a defensible source of personal (not just individual, but both individual and collective) authority, then we need to examine what the sources of such authority might be.

It seems to me that the only personal authority we can safely claim is desire: we wish to destroy this society and create a new one simply because we desire to live in that other society. We desire this individually and collectively, and we believe that there are other people who also desire it.

We cannot, for example, argue that we are fighting for an anarchist society because we “personally” think such a society would be right and good. Such an argument is only thinly disguised transcendental authority: we would really be saying that we are relying on our personal interpretation of authority, and rejecting that of the church and state. I think there are two problems with this. First, it is individualism, which I think is contrary to the collectivist project of building

a new society. Second, it paradoxically removes from our hands the real power to make the very decisions we claim to be making. That we have the power to interpret transcendental authority is a very different claim than that we have the power to exercise our own authority; the first limits our subjectivity, the second expands it.

Strategy and Practice

I have some very basic ideas about a general model of the process of politicization and radicalization, and the role of revolutionaries in this process.

For a variety of reasons, a lot of people are in opposition to this society. These people do some or all of the following things, not necessarily “in order,” nor necessarily at the same time: (1) remain in relatively isolated opposition, (2) cease to be in opposition—or cease to identify themselves as in opposition, (3) become part of a group of people in more or less organized opposition, or (4) become part of a group of people in more or less organized opposition, and move, with some other members of that group, into revolt against society.

Groups in revolt against society have several options: cease to be in revolt, returning to opposition or even ceasing to be in opposition at all; remain in revolt; move from revolt to revolution—from the willingness to disrupt the existing social order to being willing to build a new social order.

The process of the progression from opposition to revolt to revolution is a process of increasing subjectivity—the power to act, and the belief in one’s power to act (and be effective)—along with a development of politics and ideas about what actions might be worth taking. The increase of subjectivity is the result of a dialectical interaction between the experience of living within a new set of social relations and developing ideas about the possibility of new social relations.

At all the stages of radicalization—developing an identity of being in opposition to the society; moving from opposition to revolt; and moving from revolt to revolution—self-conscious revolutionaries play a role. First, in identifying conditions and struggles that place people in opposition. Second, by arguing for democratic structures within organized opposition or revolt, thus creating new social relations. And finally, by arguing for a broad analysis that identifies other similarly positioned groups, argues for building coalitions and new institutions with them, and for creating and believing in a vision of a different society.

If we accept that people who find themselves in opposition to the society are likely, through that experience, to be developing their critical interpretation of the world, their desire to act, and their belief in their capacity to act, then clearly we should attempt to relate to these people as likely revolutionaries. In particular, we should orient towards social movements as the most likely locations of these processes.

At the same time, we should be participating in the creation of new social institutions that both pose a threat to this society, and hold out the possibility of becoming the bases of a new society. By this I mean self-organized institutions of communities in revolt—free schools, liberated zones, worker-run shops, etc.

I’m not arguing that we are trying to create a society in which everyone believes the same things. Just the opposite, I am arguing that subjectivity is developed as people participate in the various struggles that they find important: you can’t make someone actualize their subjectivity.

Conclusion

None of my argument is especially new. Most of it has been covered in much greater depth by other people. Rather than trying to break new philosophical or theoretical ground, I am trying to show how I think these ideas fit together.

I am asking that we be consistent in ideas that we have already adopted. I try to carry that consistency to its logical conclusion. Not even that conclusion is new—it has been covered pretty thoroughly by the existentialists. What may be new is the perspective: the inconsistencies in our ideas may be fatal.

I am making some damning criticisms of anarchism as it currently exists. In following these criticisms to what seem to me to be their logical conclusions, I have no doubt made omissions and errors. I look forward to debate around these issues.

Finally, if we decide that we need to reject a whole bunch of anarchist theory, are we still anarchists? Hopefully, this article can provide a small starting point for both of those discussions: the project of finding a substantial basis for anarchist theory, and the project of deciding whether or not anarchism as a tradition/movement is capable of incorporating the conclusions it leads us to.

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