

Heretical Thoughts

or Why I Am an Anarchist

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Contents

POSITIVES	3
NEGATIVES	4
THEORETICAL WEAKNESSES OF THE ANARCHIST MOVEMENT	6
1.	6
2.	9
WHY I AM AN ANARCHIST – PART I	10
1.	10
2.	11
WHY I AM AN ANARCHIST – PART II	12
WHY I AM AN ANARCHIST – PART III	18

During the decades that I have been involved in left-wing politics, I have written many things, in different formats and in various venues. Much of this material has been “negative,” specifically, critical discussions of political/economic events along with more fleshed-out analyses of such ideologies as Trotskyism, Stalinism, Leninism, and Marxism. In part because of this, a while ago I decided that I needed to write something of a more “positive” nature, specifically, an article explaining why, and in what sense, I consider myself to be an anarchist.

This decision was also motivated by the fact that in recent years, a number of friends, comrades, and readers (and former friends, comrades, and readers) have indicated confusion about or opposition to my adoption of an anarchist standpoint, since I had been a Marxist for much of my life. In fact, I thought I had dealt with this question (explaining why I became an anarchist) in a series of articles in the *Utopian* that presented a critique of Marxism (published in book form by Black Cat Press as *The Tyranny of Theory, A Contribution to the Anarchist Critique of Marxism*). As I wrote these pieces, I assumed that once I had shown why I believe Marxism to be totalitarian, readers would recognize that I had retained my revolutionary aims but would also understand why I now consider anarchism to be a more appropriate framework within which to pursue them. This turned out to be a mistake. Some of these people took my critique (along with their own experiences and thought processes) as a motivation to move to the right, to become reform-minded socialists or even simply pro-capitalist liberals. Others remained more radical but were left at sea, since they knew little about anarchism and were unable to come to a clear understanding of what anarchism is and why I would embrace it. (This may have been in part because, unlike Marxism, anarchism does not constitute or present itself as a fully logical, unified ideology.) Thus, a former supporter of the Revolutionary Socialist League and subscriber to the *Utopian* admitted that he “had not made the transition to anarchism.” Others seemed bothered primarily on the aesthetic level. One longtime reader of the *Utopian* sent me an email that consisted of little more than a tirade against my embrace of the term “anarchism” (since it is commonly associated with chaos and rampaging motorcycle gangs) and my use of the word “comrade” (since it reminded him of Hollywood Grade B movies from the 1950s).

I therefore determined that I ought to present a more positive, and more thorough, explanation of my anarchist views. But that is easier said than done. This is because, at least at the moment, I do not feel very optimistic about either the prospects for an anarchist transformation of society or the current state of the anarchist movement.

POSITIVES

To be sure, there are a few things about the global situation and the anarchist milieu that I do find at least somewhat gratifying. In the interests of avoiding too much stress on the negative (which will come later), it is worth mentioning them:

1. The world did manage to avoid a complete economic collapse at the time of the Great Recession. While some leftists thought and still think that such an event would have been a good thing, believing that it would have sparked a revolution, this was/is certainly not my position, since there was no guarantee that a world-wide economic disaster would have brought about a revolution but a very high probability that it would have led to a great deal of misery. To confess to what some may view as treason to the revolutionary cause, I am therefore grateful that the international ruling class and its economic advisers

had learned enough from the Depression of the 1930s to avoid the policy mistakes that exacerbated that crisis and that they moved quickly to bail out the banks and take other steps to shore up the system. (Of course, it would have been nice if instead of just rescuing the financial institutions [and the auto companies], they also put some cash into the hands of the ordinary victims of the housing crash and punished some of the top bank executives, but it was probably unreasonable to expect this.)

2. Mass popular uprisings have occurred in North Africa, the Middle East, Ukraine, and elsewhere. While these insurrections have not ultimately gone beyond demands for bourgeois democratic governments (and did not always achieve even that), they have helped to keep the idea of popular revolution, at least in its broadest sense, alive.
3. Particularly in the United States and to some extent elsewhere, the successes in the long battle for full rights for and acceptance of Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender people have been nothing short of astounding. This represents a substantial broadening of the social space for all of us who do not fit comfortably into traditional patriarchal structures and roles, and even for those who do. It also represents a substantial defeat for the right-wing movement, which in some other respects has seemed to be on the offensive.
4. The mobilization of the Latino community against the mass deportations of undocumented immigrants (and the resultant tearing apart of families) and explicitly targeting the Obama administration, suggests the existence of significant disaffection with the Democratic Party among its supporters.
5. The destruction of the hegemony of Marxism and Marxist organizations over the radical milieu in the United States and internationally and the development of a substantial anarchist movement over the last decades may portend the emergence of a socially significant, competent, and truly anti-authoritarian left.
6. A small group of individuals at the top levels of the U.S. business elite have begun to recognize that global warming is having a negative effect on the profitability of the capitalist system (largely by raising the costs of natural resources and of production through flooding, droughts, and other “natural” disasters). These include Henry Paulson, former head of Goldman Sachs and the Secretary of the Treasury under the Bush administration, who recently launched and now leads a charitable foundation that is attempting to address the problem of air pollution in China; the chief executives of such corporations as Pepsico; and a retired hedge fund manager, Tom Steyer, who has set up a super-PAC designed to help elect politicians, regardless of party, who are committed to doing something about climate change and to help defeat those who are not. Most recently (and somewhat ironically), the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, controlled by the heirs of oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, announced that it would be divesting itself of all its investments in fossil fuels.

NEGATIVES

Unfortunately, these positives are far outweighed by what I see as negatives:

1. Despite a growing awareness of the threat of global warming, both among the population at large and in at least a section of the capitalist class, very little of substance is being done to deal with it and with the widespread environmental degradation it is causing. While I believe that a long-term, systemic transformation of energy production (from fossil fuels to renewables) is currently underway, it is moving far too slowly to be able to avoid large-scale ecological damage: growing pollution of the land, the atmosphere, and the oceans; melting polar icecaps, the dying-off of coral reefs, rising sea levels, and increasing coastal flooding; destruction of Arctic tundra; an escalation in the frequency and intensity of destructive weather conditions, such as tropical storms, blizzards, droughts, flooding, and tornadoes; and the escalating extinction of the planet's plant and animal species. Very few people in the United States and internationally have become alarmed enough to want to do something substantial about the problem, especially if this involves a significant level of sacrifice. As a result, I expect that the world will experience severe — and for a period of time, mounting — environmental disasters involving the deaths, illnesses, injuries, and suffering of millions of people (and plants and other animals).
2. Economic growth in the United States and in Europe will remain tepid for the foreseeable future, resulting in the continuing erosion of popular living standards and increasing economic inequality within these societies.
3. Local wars and conflicts (such as those now occurring in the Middle East) are likely to proliferate, as human beings, divided into competing nation states, ideologies, and religions, fight over natural resources, land, food, and water, and to augment their economic and political power at each other's expense.
4. Despite its growth and development in recent years, the international anarchist movement remains small, ineffective, and socially marginal. As I will discuss in more detail later, in my view, a successful international anarchist revolution would require that the vast majority of the world's people, particularly among the lower and middle classes, come to understand, embrace, and be willing to fight for a libertarian, anti-authoritarian — democratic, egalitarian, and cooperative — vision. I see no signs that a significant portion of humanity is ready to adopt, let alone work for, such a revolutionary libertarian outlook.
5. The limitations of the international anarchist movement are reflected in the fact that in the revolutions that have occurred in the past few years, significant anti-authoritarian currents — that is, libertarian forces powerful enough to have a palpable impact on developments — have not emerged. As a result, insurgent movements have largely remained confined within a pro-capitalist framework and, conversely, have lacked a socially transcendent vision. To put this another way, virtually all of the popular forces involved in these struggles accept “globalization”; their differences are over the precise terms under which they wish to be integrated into international capitalism. For example, in the recent and on-going struggles in North Africa and the Middle East, the opposition forces are largely divided between two pro-capitalist tendencies: one, based mostly in urban middle-class, university-educated layers, intent on establishing bourgeois democratic (and pro-Western) governments (and willing to support military dictatorships as a means to do this) and adopting the cultural accoutrements of Western societies; the other, centered more in lower-class

urban and rural sectors, focused on setting up Islamic (but still pro-capitalist) regimes and maintaining at least some traditional, particularly patriarchal, social structures. A partial exception may be occurring in Syria, where, according to accounts, some of the population has managed to utilize the civil war to build democratic local structures to tend to their daily needs and to organize resistance to both the Assad regime and to the various right-wing Islamist militias contending to for power. Also, in the north of the country, among the Kurds, the PKK (the Kurdish Workers Party) has reportedly jettisoned its Stalinist program and embraced decentralized, even libertarian, conceptions, which it is attempting to implement while battling the retrograde Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

6. The anarchist movement in the United States suffers from significant weaknesses. These include that fact that, as is the case with the international anarchist milieu but even more so, it is small and isolated. Beyond this, the movement suffers from serious theoretical shortcomings, which I believe are preventing it from having an impact on broader sectors of the population. It is to these that I now turn.

THEORETICAL WEAKNESSES OF THE ANARCHIST MOVEMENT

Throughout its history and continuing today, the anarchist movement has suffered from a variety of theoretical weaknesses. Here I would like to discuss two.

1.

The first is what I see as a kind of pollyanna-ism, that is, a facile, shallowly optimistic outlook. This attitude has been apparent from the beginning of the anarchist current and is embodied in some of its most fundamental beliefs. For example, virtually all the seminal thinkers of the movement held to what I see as a rosy, one-sided conception of human nature, and following from this, a simplistic notion of what would be necessary to establish anarchist societies. To be more specific, the “fathers of anarchist thought” — Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, and Pyotr Kropotkin — seem to have believed that humanity is inherently anarchistic, and that all that’s really necessary to create a global anarchist society is to liberate people from their enslavement by the state (and the oppressive social and economic systems and ideological apparatuses the state sustains). Once this is done, the vast majority of people will naturally and spontaneously organize their lives according to anarchist principles, while the altered social conditions will relatively quickly and easily re-educate the few antisocial individuals who might resist. (If I am simplifying, it is only slightly.)

This argument has been repeated, in different forms at different times, throughout the history of anarchism, so that today, many anarchists base their belief in the viability of anarchism simply on the claim that “people naturally cooperate.” It is, of course, true that people cooperate, but it is also the case that people compete, that is, engage in hierarchical, aggressive, and domineering behavior, and that cooperation often — in my view, even usually — occurs in hierarchical settings. A very rough analogy would be wolf packs and comparable groupings of other social animals, including our closest biological relatives, the chimpanzees. In these social formations, the animals cooperate, but they do so within hierarchical structures and competing groups. While we do

know that, prior to the emergence of class societies, human beings lived in cooperative, relatively non-hierarchical societies (so-called “primitive communism”), it is easy to forget that these associations were centered around small numbers of people usually genetically related to each other, while a distinctly non-cooperative relation -competition for scarce resources often erupting in war – existed between these distinct kinship-based groups. In some sense, then, cooperation tends to occur within an antagonistic (and at least potentially hierarchical) framework: an “in group” (“us”) cooperates to defend itself against an “out group” (“them”). The crucial question is: Is humanity capable of establishing and sustaining a truly global, species-wide, non-competitive, non-hierarchical society, that is, one not based on an “us vs. them” attitude. I don’t think this question can easily and confidently be answered in the affirmative, and I think it is incumbent upon the anarchist movement to give more thought to, and to provide more explanation of, how an international anarchist society could be established.

The belief that human beings (or at least most of them) are inherently anarchistic implies the questionable notion that all that is needed to create an anarchist world is to wake them up, to show them that the state can be destroyed and freedom achieved if only enough people merely realize that they are oppressed – bamboozled by patriotism, religion, bourgeois propaganda, pro-capitalist education, and the mentally dulling routine of daily life – and that it is in their power to create truly free societies if only they would. And over the years, this has led to the very troublesome attraction on the part of some sectors of the movement to “propaganda of the deed” – detonating bombs, robbing banks, and launching armed insurrections independent of mass movements – in attempts to arouse the benighted masses. To be sure, such tactics have been utilized by only a minority of anarchists, but they have done incomparable harm to the cause. Rather than liberating people from their thrall to the state, such methods (aside from killing and wounding innocent victims) usually wind up throwing people into the hands of that entity, as they look to the authorities to protect them from what appears to them to be random and senseless violence. These types of actions have also helped to smear the entire movement with an image it does not deserve, one that is reinforced by popular stereotypes. That this type of thinking remains significant in the anarchist milieu can be seen in the fact that one of its largest sectors today consists of the Insurrectionalists, who continue to implement such stupid, self-defeating tactics.

This naive outlook is also apparent in recent theoretical work. In his readable, erudite book on the history of the anarchist movement, *Demanding the Impossible*, Peter Marshall describes all sorts of political and philosophical figures either as anarchists or as being very close to anarchism who by other judgments might be seen to be not very anarchistic at all. Two examples are Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre.

While Nietzsche does not deserve his reputation as a precursor of Nazism which is so popular on the left (among other things, he was not a nationalist; he also abhorred mass movements, feared the state, hated Germans [although he was one], and admired Jews), and while anarchists might learn a lot from reading him (something Emma Goldman recognized), he was not, in fact, close to being an anarchist. He might best be described as an “individualistic aristocratic conservative.” Not least, he detested all forms of socialism, which he viewed (as he saw Christianity) as an expression of the “ressentiment” (envy) of the masses. And where he had any concern for lower class people at all, he despised them and saw them as, at best, providing the biological basis for the emergence of superior human beings, a tiny, essentially artistic, elite that is capable of living in a cosmos without meaning.

Also, contra Marshall, Jean-Paul Sartre was far from anarchism. As with Nietzsche, there are things anarchists might cull from his philosophy, but beyond his version of existentialism, and what some believe to be in total contradiction to it, he was an unabashed defender of, and an influential apologist for, Stalinism (the Soviet Union under Stalin, including forced collectivization and the purges, the “socialist” side of the Cold War), which he saw as being the embodiment of History. This is readily apparent in his later work, *Critique of Dialectical Reasoning*, which argues that bureaucratization is the inevitable outcome of all revolutions, that it is necessary to the historic process, and that it is therefore progressive. Ergo, Stalinism, despite its obvious flaws and horrendous crimes, represents progress and should be supported.

There are many similar examples throughout Marshall’s book (which is definitely worth reading, albeit with a critical eye). They reflect, as I see it, the comforting but superficial view that, underneath everything, all, or almost all, human beings are anarchists at heart.

I certainly wish this were the case, but I don’t think it is. If it were, it is hard to believe that we wouldn’t have already established a world-wide anarchist society or at least that we wouldn’t be witnessing, if not participating in, anarchist revolutions throughout the world. Obviously, this is not what’s happening. People’s behaviors and motives are far more complex than they are often portrayed in anarchist thought, and in many ways, human nature is supportive, and even constitutive, of contemporary society. Human beings are not just cooperative and loving, they are also selfish, uncaring, dishonest, competitive, manipulative, domineering, aggressive, and (in the case of too many individuals) downright evil. (To put it crudely, along with indifferent individuals, there are too many assholes in the world, which asshole-ness is not going to go away just because social conditions have changed.) Although I will almost certainly be attacked for saying this, I believe that contemporary global capitalist society represents human nature as it has evolved so far.

To be sure, capitalism does not simply take human nature as it is given. As we know from our own experiences and from looking at the various forms of society under which people have lived, human nature is rather malleable, encompassing a fairly broad spectrum of personality types and behaviors. Capitalism strongly encourages and rewards (“selects for”, to put it in Darwinian terms) certain types of people and behavior and punishes others. At the extremes, saints are not usually “successful” in our society (in the sense of accumulating wealth and power), while the higher one goes in contemporary capitalism (and other types of class systems), the more psychopaths (people without or with only poorly-developed consciences) are generally found.

So to say that capitalism represents human nature as it has evolved to this point is not to say that I believe human beings cannot change or that a truly free society cannot be established. It is only to say that it will require a lot more work, and a lot more change, than many anarchists now recognize or are willing to admit. I believe (or would like to believe) that an international anarchist society is possible, in other words, that it is within the potential of human beings to create it. But I also think that people will have to be convinced to want it, to organize and fight for it, and to change their thinking and behavior to make it possible. It is not simply a matter of waking them up, organizing them to fight their oppressors, call a general strike, and carry out an insurrection.

2.

The pollyanna-ism I have been discussing is also apparent in the broader anarchist movement in the form of an intellectual superficiality and laziness. There are far too many anarchist activists who have read little and know little. There are too many who have been involved in the movement for years (even decades) who have not read much about anarchism; too many who, if they read at all (and some even boast that they don't), simply surf the internet, scanning articles or parts of articles, and speak and write as if they know something; too many people who pick up and throw around a few leftist cliches, such as "ruling class", "capitalism", "imperialism", "racism", "patriarchy", and "fascism", but who have done no serious study of these issues and know little about what they actually mean; too many who claim to be concerned about the environment but who cannot competently argue the case for human-induced global warming; too many who present themselves as militant opponents of "creationism" but who cannot give a coherent account of the modern (neo-Darwinian) theory of evolution.

(Of course, the anarchist movement is not alone in its ignorance. It's a problem with our entire society. Thus, President Barack Obama was unable to spell "respect" correctly when, earlier this year, he honored Aretha Franklin for her recording of the song with that title. [Nor did he remember, if he ever knew, that the tune was written and first recorded by Otis Redding, who was certainly not a nobody in the R and B scene of the 1960s.] Likewise, several years ago when the California high school exit exam was introduced, the members of the Los Angeles Board of Education, working with pencil and paper and taking a lot of time, struggled with some very easy algebra problems that a competent ninth grade math student could solve in his/her head in a couple of minutes. And there are huge numbers of supposedly educated people who cannot answer even simple scientific questions, such as what causes the seasons.

Why should the broader population take the anarchist movement seriously if large numbers of its members cannot coherently explain what anarchism is or defend anarchist positions on current issues? The ruling class — its entire spectrum, liberal, moderate, and conservative — has an army of theoreticians and spokespersons, well-educated, well-trained, and very well paid, at its disposal. How can we hope to contend with them if we cannot competently answer their arguments and put forward our own? Similarly, if, as I have long believed (or hoped), there will at some point be an upsurge in popular struggles, and if, as I have also expected, this will lead to a significant resurgence of Marxism and Marxist organizations, the anarchist movement will have to deal with them. At the present time, the country's colleges and universities are rife with Marxism (which says something about Marxism, and about academia). If there is an upwelling of mass struggle and many of today's students and professors join in, the Marxist movement will have immense numbers of capable, articulate spokespersons at its disposal. Beyond this, given Marxism's dogmatic, scholastic nature, it will be relatively easy for Marxist organizations to train their rank and file cadres in at least the rudiments of their politics. Will anarchist activists be able to hold their ground against them? I'm not so sure. Today, many anarchists know very little about Marxism. Even worse, many anarchists are sympathetic to it and often parrot Marxist positions on various issues. Others, instead of working to arm the anarchist movement against Marxism, try to convince anarchists that they have a lot to learn from it. For their part, the vast majority of Marxists are not so ecumenical. They have no comparable illusions about anarchism, which they see as a highly noxious — "petit-bourgeois" and "objectively counterrevolutionary"

— tendency. In short, as the anarchist movement currently stands, I am not confident that it will be able to defend itself against political currents and organizations that are deeply hostile to it.

This intellectual dilettantism reflects and is expressed in a tendency to be obsessively concerned with local organizing. Much of this work is impressive and worthy. But it is occurring, at least to some extent, at the expense of engaging in regular, well-informed, and serious discussions of current political issues, the development of anarchist theory, and the political education of anarchist activists. While in the short run, such practical work may be gratifying, good intentions, organizing talent, and energy will not, by themselves, add up to an anarchist revolution or even to a healthy, capable, and growing anarchist movement.

WHY I AM AN ANARCHIST — PART I

Given all this, why do I consider myself to be an anarchist? There are several questions involved, so let me try to explain myself as best I can.

1.

First, there is the issue of terminology: Why do I use the term “anarchist” to describe my political orientation, rather than “socialist,” “communist,” “anarcho-syndicalist,” or something else? Given that US society is so conservative, that the country lacks a tradition of mass radical movements, and that, as a result, most people in the United States are ignorant of the meaning of the terms revolutionaries use to describe themselves, almost any word we use is going to lead to misunderstandings. The goal in choosing a label, it seems to me, is to try to lessen this confusion as much as we can. For example, many anarchists call themselves “communists” or “anarcho-communists.” But to me, the word “communism” is too closely identified with the “Communism” of the former Soviet Union, China, et. al., with their appurtenances of bureaucracy, secret police, prisons, labor camps, purge trials, and mass murder (forced collectivization in the Soviet Union, the “Great Leap Forward” in China, the “killing fields” in Cambodia), to be of any use. Personally, I’d like to make it as clear as possible that those kinds of regimes and those types of policies are not what I am advocating. Perhaps “socialism” would be better. Certainly, its connotations are more benign than those of “communism.” Yet, to most Americans today, “socialism” means the vast expansion of the state, having the government take over and run large sections of the economy and society as a whole. This, too, is not what I am proposing. (A propos, many people believe that Barack Obama is a socialist, while those who are somewhat more sophisticated consider the systems in Scandinavia, with their large welfare apparatuses, to be socialist. While many might see such set-ups as preferable to what we have in the U.S., I’d rather not risk being identified with such state-heavy [and still] capitalist societies.) Going further, my main problem with “anarcho-syndicalism” is that it is too specific, narrowly prescribing that the economic system we wish to establish will be managed through industrial-style labor unions. While that is certainly one option, I don’t wish to be identified with such a precise blueprint and would instead leave it up to those involved to determine the form of society they wish to establish. So, I am left with the term “anarchist”, even though its commonly understood meaning is disorder, destruction, and (yes) gallivanting biker clubs (“The Sons of Anarchy”). It seems easier to me to explain to more sedate citizens what I mean by “anarchism” than to try to assure them that I do not advocate the drastic augmentation of the power and reach of state, while many of the more alienated members

of our society are at least somewhat more likely to relate positively to the word. As one young acquaintance of mine responded when I first told him that I was an anarchist, “Anarchists are cool, man!”

2.

More substantial than this is why I now identify with the anarchist current of the historical socialist movement rather than with the Marxist. As I have written at length, I see Marxism as an inherently statist, totalitarian creed whose practical outcomes reflect the logic of its underlying assumptions and conceptions. After having tried for many years to elaborate and promote a democratic, libertarian form of Marxism, I now believe that the idea of a “libertarian Marxism” is a contradiction in terms. Because of Marxism’s commitment to centralization, because its key strategic goal is the seizure of state power and the establishment of a revolutionary dictatorship, and because it is based on a philosophy that purports to explain all of reality, natural and social, within one logical construct and that simultaneously sees itself as opposed to all other philosophies, I believe that Marxist-led revolutions, if they succeed, will result not in classless, stateless societies, but in new variants of totalitarian, or at least authoritarian, systems. In contrast, I view the anarchist tradition in a much more positive light.

To be sure, the anarchist movement has its share of deficits. Beyond the weaknesses I discussed above, many of its foundational figures were seriously flawed. Proudhon was an unabashed male supremacist, a French patriot, and an anti-Semite. Bakunin believed in, and tried to organize, secret, hierarchical, and conspiratorial organizations to try to carry out the anarchist program. (In one such effort, he wound up collaborating with a truly nefarious individual, Sergei Nechaev, who held to the most extreme of cynical of moralities, and consistent with this, carried out, and justified, the murder of at least one innocent person.) On a personal level, I find Kropotkin to be the most sympathetic of the seminal figures of the modern anarchist tradition. Yet, despite his undoubted services to the development of anarchist theory and to the anarchist movement more broadly, toward the end of his long life he wound up supporting the Entente (Great Britain, France, Italy, and Tsarist Russia) during World War I, and in this way, justified the senseless mass slaughter that that conflict entailed.

(Of course, key individuals in the Marxist movement were no angels either: Marx was an authoritarian personality if there ever was one; Engels was a racist; Lenin and Trotsky possessed the mentality of religious fanatics; Stalin was a thug; Mao, a pathological narcissist. On the other hand, some historical anarchists were truly admirable, among them, Errico Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Emiliano Zapata, and Nestor Makhno.)

Beyond these details of biography, the anarchist movement lacks the theoretical breadth and depth that is one of the more impressive facets of Marxism. Among other things, to my knowledge no anarchist has produced an analysis of capitalist society that comes close to matching Marx’s in its cogency and sophistication (which is probably why so many anarchists have looked to Marxism when it comes to “economics,” despite the fact that the theory predicts, and hence advocates, a highly statist and centralized economic system — state capitalism — as the outcome of the historic process).

One of anarchism’s perceived debits, however, is more imputed than real. The movement has often been derided for its historical failure, the fact that anarchists have never — nowhere and at no time — succeeded in establishing an anarchist society. This is contrasted with the supposed

successes of the Marxist movement, whose different organizational embodiments have managed to seize power in a variety of countries and to create (or begin to create) revolutionary societies according to the Marxian program. But this contention is a red-herring. Marxism's "successes" have been, not the creation of the state-less and class-less cooperative society advocated and predicted by Marx and Engels or even systems moving in that direction, but the establishment of brutal and corrupt regimes that exiled, jailed, tortured, and killed millions of people, and made a mockery of the ideals they claimed to uphold. Moreover, in those countries in which Marxist regimes still exist they have done so only by moving to create traditional-style capitalist societies. By my lights, this is not success; it is failure. In any case, judging revolutionary movements by such criteria as "success" or "failure" is to miss the point. It is of the very nature of libertarian programs and currents that they will fail, probably many times, before they succeed (if, indeed, they ever do succeed).

Despite these and other weaknesses, real and imputed, I find the anarchist tradition and movement much more to my taste than Marxism. In contrast to Marxism, which presents itself as a logically unified whole, anarchist theory is diverse; there are many different types, even styles, of anarchism. While I used to see this as a problem, I now view it as a source of strength, since it militates against the drive toward ideological conformity that characterizes most political movements. As an extension of this, anarchism implies that the fundamental philosophical questions are not subject to definitive answers. Philosophically, then, anarchism implies a pluralism of outlooks, not a totalitarian uniformity. I also find the spirit of anarchism — its militant, uncompromising commitment to the cause of human freedom, individual and collective — much more attractive than that of socialism, which seems dull and bureaucratic, and than that of Communism, which strikes me as arrogant, rigid, and puritanical. (It is this, along with its pluralism, that makes the anarchist movement so much more colorful than the Marxian.) Finally, anarchism's hostility to the state, and specifically to the notion that revolutionaries should strive to seize political power and set up revolutionary dictatorships, means that the anarchist movement is much less likely, after successful insurrections, to establish authoritarian and totalitarian regimes than are other currents on the left (or the right). As an indication of this, where such "revolutionary" governments have been established, anarchists have been among their most dedicated and militant opponents, often at great costs to themselves.

WHY I AM AN ANARCHIST — PART II

Going further, there is the question of what I mean by anarchism in the broadest sense of the word, that is, why I advocate the overthrow of contemporary capitalism and what kind of society I propose to establish in its place.

My starting point is a critical view of our current global system. Despite its achievements, contemporary capitalism, even in its "ideal" (that is, bourgeois democratic) form, leaves a lot to be desired. Although it presents itself as a democracy, in reality, a very small, very rich, and very powerful elite governs our society. They own or control its economic resources and dominate its political life. True, the members of this class rule through an apparently democratic political structure. As a result, they are not the only ones who have political rights. In the United States and similarly structured societies, all adult citizens have the right to vote, to express their opinions orally and in writing, to form organizations to promote their positions and fight for their

interests, to join political parties, etc. This is certainly better than living under dictators or in one-party states, but it is not really very democratic. While in theory, an individual worker and a large corporation meet as equal entities in the supposedly free market, how can one compare the economic might of a giant corporation with billions of dollars at its disposal with the power of an individual worker, who consumes most of his/her income and who runs the risk of getting fired and becoming permanently unemployed if he/she tries to do something as simple as organizing a union? The same disparity exists in the political arena. How can one weigh the political leverage of an isolated voter of average means against that of a wealthy individual (let alone a corporation) who can give (legally and illegally) huge amounts of money to political parties and to individual politicians and who has ready access to a variety of means of disseminating his/her views: via the mass media, by writing or sponsoring books, giving money to universities, organizing conferences, establishing non-profit organizations, or just privately networking with fellow members of the upper crust? Moreover, even without such direct subornation, the effective operation of the system requires that politicians and state functionaries cater to the interests of the dominant economic institutions and individuals and to the needs of the system as a whole. To think about this situation concretely ought to be enough to realize how absurd it is to call it “democracy.”

Beyond the question of the inequality power, capitalism has other drawbacks. Most apparent is the huge — and increasing — disparity of wealth. A tiny handful of people are very rich, a few more can be described as comfortable, a greater number just manage to make a living, while many, many more struggle simply to survive, often in truly abject conditions, with few pleasures, few prospects, and even fewer hopes. Our current political system reflects these disparities, so that little or nothing is done to alleviate, let alone truly improve, the conditions of those on the bottom. The system also ensures that economic, social, and cultural tasks only get done if a profit can be made from them. As a result, essential social needs do not get addressed and are often not even recognized. In addition, as I mentioned, capitalism tends to bring out the worst in people, emphasizing the competitive and aggressive sides of our natures over the cooperative and caring aspects. Thus, nation states vie over territory and natural resources, resulting in political tensions and wars. Religions and ideologies struggle for dominance, leading to conflicts, armed and unarmed. Economic entities and individuals also compete with each other. One result of this is that it is in the interests of economic actors to cheat — to take advantage of customers’ and competitors’ weaknesses, including and especially their gullibility, wherever and whenever they can — and to exploit such aspects of their surroundings as they are able. Another outcome is economic instability, occasionally taking the form, as we’ve recently seen, of severe and disruptive economic crises, which lead to widespread suffering and the tremendous waste of productive resources. Perhaps the most salient effect of our economic arrangement is what is known as the “tragedy of the commons,” with its most obvious result being the environmental disaster we are now facing. The way our system is set up, it is primarily the job of the government, along with some non-profit organizations, to look after the communal interests that private entities have no positive incentive to address. Yet, given that the government and such charitable institutions are controlled by the rich and powerful, these communal concerns wind up on the bottom of the list of priorities, when they get tended to at all.

The consequences of our current social arrangements are staggering. Aside from the economic stagnation, social disparities, and environmental destruction I have mentioned, there are, just looking at the United States: the shameful size and appalling conditions of our homeless popula-

tion; the record numbers of people incarcerated the country's prisons (many of whom have only committed "crimes" against themselves, such as the possession and use of drugs, or have merely crossed the border in an effort to find work); the callous treatment of military veterans; the many thousands of people suffering from substance addiction; a frightening scale of sexual assaults and seemingly random violence (much of it coming from the police); an epidemic of suicides, both in and outside the military; a decaying infrastructure (roads, tunnels, and bridges; airports, rail lines, and urban transit systems; water mains, aqueducts, dams, and levees), a lack of affordable housing; poorly performing schools; and a corrupt, hypocritical, and commercialized culture centered on entertainment and consumption and promoting self-centered, hedonistic, and rude behavior.

In contrast to such an undemocratic, semi-functional structure, I (and other anarchists) envision a society based on the radical dispersal of wealth and power, collective and democratic decisionmaking, and comradely concern and consideration. Since it is not likely that the elite will agree to relinquish their wealth and power out of the goodness of their hearts (they all believe they deserve them), this may require some degree of coercion, specifically, the mobilization of the overwhelming majority of the people, — poor, working class, and middle class — to persuade them, or to force them. Assuming this were done, society would no longer be polarized, as it now is, between a small and ever richer elite, on the one hand, and a mass of poor and (at best) modestly comfortable people, on the other, and we might be able to organize society on much more democratic, more cooperative, and more productive lines than it now is. As others have written in greater detail and far more eloquently than I, workplaces, such as factories, farms, warehouses, stores, hospitals, offices, and schools, could be run by assemblies and committees of manual and white collar workers, technical/organizational staff, and members of the surrounding communities; while communities could be organized by similar bodies, all of which would link up on the regional, national, and international levels. Obviously, this would take some doing, since large numbers of people would have to learn how to meet, discuss issues, resolve differences, and make and carry out decisions in reasonably peaceful, democratic ways (and outside of hierarchical structures), something we have not always been very good at. And there are a myriad of questions that would have to be addressed, such as how to re-arrange and manage the economy, how to encourage science and technological development, how to coordinate and finance the various sectors of the economy and society, how to finance the arts. But if enough people were truly convinced that a reorganization of society along the lines anarchists have proposed were necessary, I think it reasonable to expect that such decisions might eventually be arrived at.

If such a revolutionary transformation were accomplished, we might be able to stop competing and start cooperating to solve the grave problems confronting the human species and the rest of the planet; eliminate the huge military, repressive, and bureaucratic apparatuses; spread work around so the employed do not have to toil so hard and long, and the unemployed can be employed; build affordable housing to get the homeless off the streets; institute job training and re-training programs where they are necessary; focus resources on rebuilding our infrastructure, including and in particular, our public schools; institute feedback loops to increase productivity and cut down on waste; develop and utilize the mental capacities of all human beings, not just a select few who happen to be in positions that enable them to exercise their cognitive facilities; encourage a broad range of the arts (not just those that are profit-producing).

At this point, three questions are posed: Is it possible to create such a society? Would it be workable? And, is it desirable?

To me, the key to whether such a radical reconfiguration of our social arrangements is feasible is the attitude, the consciousness, of human beings. To make such a change possible, the vast majority of the people currently inhabiting the planet would have to want to radically change how they live. They would have to become tired of our current system, be able to envisage a new — democratic, cooperative, and egalitarian — arrangement, and be willing to struggle to set it up. In other words, the radical social change I have described would require a profound alteration of the psychology of the human species. If such a transformation does not occur, if such a desire to establish a new way of living does not arise — if it is not strong enough or if it is not widespread enough — anarchism will remain nothing more than a dream in the minds of small bunches of deluded visionaries (as it has been for millennia).

Are there any grounds for believing that such a psychological/spiritual revolution is possible? I can think of several, although taken either singly or in any combination, they are not decisive.

1. There is the fact (mentioned above) that for much (probably most) of our history, human beings did live in relatively non-hierarchical groups, suggesting that cooperative, egalitarian arrangements are possible, even if only on a local scale.
2. We have comparable indications from people's ordinary lives, as they organize clubs, social gatherings, and sporting events among themselves without the help of authority.
3. Beyond this, we have the evidence that in times of crisis, such as flooding, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires, mudslides, and similar disasters, considerable numbers of people "come together" to lend each other support and comfort, in other words, to relate to each other in a more familial, less "alienated" way than they usually do.
4. If eyewitness accounts are to be believed, the emergence of such mutualistic, "comradely" behavior emerges on an even larger and deeper scale during times of popular revolts, such as the Paris Commune, the Russian and the Spanish revolutions, and more recent social upheavals. True, even here, such behavior has been geographically and temporally limited (the euphoria does not last), but such developments are suggestive of broader possibilities.
5. There is, finally, the fact that some of the world's most popular religions have included, among their fundamental beliefs, visions of a paradisaical condition (from which I believe the socialist and anarchist utopias derive), at either some point in the past, some point in the future, or in some altered state (e.g., after death). The strength of these visions and the fact that they are so widely held suggest that the conception of such an ideal condition and the desire for it exist deep in the psyche of human beings.

Given all this, I believe that it is not totally ridiculous to hope that if humanity were faced with a substantial global crisis, such as the widespread environmental destruction that is probably looming, a large enough number of people might be willing to consider rearranging society along the lines anarchists have proposed. However, as I indicated above, all this is more suggestive than probative.

Assuming for the moment that the transformation that anarchists advocate is possible, is it workable? To me, the answer to this question is the same as the answer to whether it is possible. That is, I believe that if a substantial enough number of people were to become truly committed to reordering our economic and social arrangements, they will also be able to make it work.

Finally, there is the question: is the radical reordering of society along the lines anarchists propose desirable? While, to convinced anarchists, the answer to this question may seem obvious, it is not so to most people. Aside from the dangers involved in any radical social change — the risk of violence and destruction, the danger that social disruption may bring out the worst in people rather than the best, the possibility that a revolution may result in the establishment of a dictatorship of fanatics (and bureaucrats) rather than the ideal society envisaged by anarchists — there is the fact that current, capitalist, society, despite its recent problems and its obvious drawbacks, has considerable assets to its credit. Although it may be unpleasant for revolutionaries to admit it, these are substantial and ought not to be ignored.

Among them:

1. The system has been, and continues to be, very effective at generating new technology — scientific, economic, and medical. On this front, the results of the system have been impressive, despite the predictions of Marxists that at a certain stage in its development (which Lenin and Trotsky saw as having occurred around the turn of the 20th century), capitalism would “fetter” the “forces of production.” While this may be partially true of the human forces of production (insofar as millions [billions?] of intelligent human beings continue to spend much of their lives doing virtually meaningless, repetitive tasks in capitalist enterprises large and small, leaving aside the millions who are unemployed or only marginally employed), it has certainly not been the case with what Marx and Engels called the “material” forces of production. An honest look at the scientific, technological, and medical progress of the 20th and 21st centuries should be enough to demonstrate this, and I see no reason to believe that such progress will not continue indefinitely.
2. The capitalist system has also been able to accomplish what many Marxists of 50 years ago thought was impossible, that is, the industrialization of what were then described as “undeveloped”, “underdeveloped”, or “semi-developed” countries. Today, many regions that had then been seen as helplessly “distorted,” mired in stagnation because of the dynamics of the world market and imperialism, now appear to be well on the road of “modernization.” To be sure, this has often, even usually, required the aggressive involvement of the state in these countries’ economies, which might be described, very loosely, as “socialism”, thus seeming to vindicate the Marxists’ predictions. Nevertheless, the modernization of much of what used to be called the “Third World” has in fact been occurring, including in places where this seemed particularly doubtful, e.g., sub-Saharan Africa. (Thus, Nigeria has recently outstripped South Africa as the largest economy on the African continent.) As an integral part of this, millions of people have been lifted out of poverty in the last several decades, so much so that capitalist apologists are now crowing that more people have been rescued from poverty in the last 50 years than in all prior history.
3. One consequence of this development has been the destruction or at least the weakening of traditional hierarchical structures, particularly patriarchal social institutions, around the world. This has resulted, and is continuing to result, in the (partial) liberation of millions of women as they, and the societies of which they are a part, are drawn into the maelstrom of the international capitalist division of labor. This, too, runs counter to the predictions of many Marxists, who argued that capitalism would be incapable of carrying out such “bourgeois democratic tasks” to the degree it has. It is true enough that such liberation as

capitalism promises is limited and one-sided, insofar as millions of women remain and will continue to remain subordinated to the international capitalist hierarchy, as well as being trapped within surviving patriarchal structures, but it is substantial.

4. As part of this modernization, capitalism in its bourgeois-democratic form provides millions of people with a considerable degree of political and economic freedom. While from an anarchist standpoint such freedom may be limited, even illusory, it may not seem so to people recently living under oppressive social conditions, e.g., traditional social institutions and military or other types of dictatorships. Meanwhile, capitalist economies offer the possibility – for many, the reality – that they may improve their economic situations, and for a few, that they may get rich.

Given these assets, given the dangers involved in the attempt to radically transform society, and given the fact that it is not obvious that an anarchist society is possible or workable, it is understandable to me why most people today are not sympathetic to the anarchist cause. Nor do I believe it likely that this will change in the foreseeable future, as much I might wish it were otherwise. As a result, I am not, as I've mentioned, optimistic about the prospects of anarchism in the coming period.

My pessimism is also motivated by the fact that I no longer accept the reasoning of historical utopian thinkers that motivated their belief in the certainty or at least the high probability of socialist/anarchist revolutions.

Marx and Engels, and following them, most Marxists, believed that the ideal society – socialism/communism – was the logical outcome of the internal dynamics of capitalist society. To them, communism was immanent in human history; it was the goal (the “telos”) toward which history was moving. This is why they called their brand of socialism “scientific” and why the terms “inevitable” and “inexorable” appear so often in their writings. While I once accepted a version of this idea, I no longer do so. Despite their claims, Marx and Engels never proved their contention, and in fact, I do not think it is provable in any meaningful sense of the term.

In apparent contrast to this view, anarchist thinkers attempted to make their case by appealing to human reason. That is, they tried to demonstrate the moral necessity of a revolutionary transformation of society and attempted to show the reasonableness and practicality of anarchism. And central to these attempts was their belief that human nature was consistent with anarchism, that human beings were, at bottom, anarchists. A little thought, however, suggest that this view is really not all that different from the Marxian. Marxism contends that the human behavior we see under contemporary society is an everted or “alienated” form of a deeper, “truer” human nature, one that is based on and embodied in social labor, which is inherently cooperative; and that it is the underlying logic of this social labor, this alienated version, or mode, of human nature, that will bring about the liberated society. Underneath the philosophic apparatus, both views – anarchist and Marxist are saying pretty much the same thing: socialism/anarchism is...inevitable, probable, or possible...because it represents the underlying logic of human nature.

After Marx and Engels, other Marxists, such as Rosa Luxemburg, coined the phrase “Socialism or Barbarism.” This meant that, in their view, humanity was and is faced with a stark choice: either the working class overthrows global capitalism and establishes an international socialist society or the human species will be plunged into “barbarism,” a primitive, savage condition, such that existed prior to the establishment of civilization. Such barbarism was presumed to

be the virtually certain result of an inter-imperialist war, an international economic collapse, or some combination of the two. A more recent version of this idea is that such “barbarism” will be the result of an ecological catastrophe, perhaps combined with a global conflagration and an economic crisis, as humanity struggles over increasingly scarce resources, particularly arable land, food and water.

Although I, too, once held such a view, I do not do so any more. I now expect that human civilization, even as it is currently organized, is likely to survive. As I indicated, I believe our economic system is somewhere in the early stages of a slow, and probably very painful, transformation of its energy basis from the combustion of fossil fuels — coal, oil, natural gas — to renewable sources. This process will require several more decades and will, along the way, result in considerable environmental destruction and a great deal of human suffering, but I think it is likely that it will be accomplished.

WHY I AM AN ANARCHIST — PART III

So, given these considerations, why do I still call for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a democratic, egalitarian, and cooperative society; why, in other words, do I still consider myself an anarchist?

Whereas I once held to an ideological (that is, a Marxist) belief in the necessity of establishing international socialism, my views today are primarily based on ethical considerations. I find contemporary society to be morally repugnant. I don’t see how one can survey the ecological devastation our planet is currently experiencing, let alone envision what is likely in the future, without a deep sense of dread. I cannot contemplate the international political scene — the wars, the seemingly endless parade of national, ethnic, and religious conflicts, with so many dead, disfigured, and displaced — without being depressed. I cannot assess the reality of the millions of lives being lived out, and wasted, on the world’s streets and in its prisons without outrage. I cannot view contemporary cultural life — the obsession with wealth, athletic prowess, good looks, fame, and consumption, on the one hand, and the anger and despair, reflected in pandemics of substance abuse, suicides, rapes and other types of assaults, and senseless massacres, on the other -without nausea. And I cannot look at the lifestyle — the colossal wealth, the unbelievable hypocrisy, the insufferable egotism, and the colossal cynicism — of our country’s elite and its global counterparts without disgust. It all seems so putrid, and I refuse to accept that this is the best that human beings can do.

To survive in this morass, to maintain my sanity, my sensitivity to others, and a degree of hope, I find it essential to maintain, in my mind, an alternative conception, a contrasting notion of what the world could be like, of how people might treat each other, and of how the human species ought to relate to our planet. So, beyond seeing anarchism as a program and a strategy, I also embrace it as a vision, a goal toward which human beings might strive. And even if such a vision turns out to be a mirage, even if the goal is never reached or is not even reachable, it helps me to live day to day, as I attempt to approximate the vision in my relations with other people — family, friends, and casual acquaintances — and with the little splotches of the Earth I am privileged to touch.

Yet beyond even this level of desperation, anarchism, for me, is a stance, an attitude. Even if I, as an isolated individual, have no power, have absolutely no influence over any other aspect of

reality, I still retain my mental autonomy, and I (still) refuse to make peace with the abomination that is contemporary society.

Finally, to me, anarchism is a spiritual state. I like to believe that there are other people out there -however many or few they may be, wherever they live, from whatever backgrounds they come, whatever religions they believe in or philosophies they hold – who share the same moral outlook, who inhabit the same cosmic reality, as I do. And I try to connect with such people, whenever and wherever I meet them, in the little ways that I can.

THAT IS WHY I AM AN ANARCHIST!

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Ron Tabor
Heretical Thoughts
or Why I Am an Anarchist
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