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What is Autonomy?

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Autonomy is one of the most important of all anarchist principles, and a building block for understanding anarchist philosophy more broadly. So what is it, exactly? Well... basically, it's freedom. But more than that, it's a particularly an anarchist type of freedom.. the freedom to make decisions, and then act out those decisions without asking permission from a higher power. In some ways, autonomy is similar to liberty, a political concept that dates back to Europe's so-called "Age of Enlightenment" in the 18th century. Back in those days, liberty was a radical new idea that sought to put limits on the absolute power of kings and queens. Its early advocates argued that human beings possessed certain inalienable rights, granted to them by God, which rulers had to respect. This idea was obviously pretty popular, and so it soon became the rallying cry of the French and American Revolutions, which helped overthrow feudalism and usher in the era of liberal democracy.

Over the centuries, countless astute, and not-so-astute political thinkers, from Voltaire and Thomas Jefferson, to Alex Jones and Glenn Beck have claimed liberty as a universal human right. But to say that this principle hasn't been universally applied would be a gross understatement. This is because from its very beginnings,

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the concept of liberty has existed within a framework of European global conquest, a process facilitated by colonialism, slavery and genocide. Even today, the language of liberty is still used to mobilize people's support for imperialist wars. Remember when the United States government claimed they were bringing freedom to Iraq? The roots of this contradiction lie in the fact that liberty has always been tied to the existence of states, and the associated legal category of citizens. Often this is described as a social contract. In exchange for obedience to state authority, citizens are granted rights and freedoms, such as freedom of expression, freedom to associate, and the right to pursue happiness or bear arms. Non-citizens, or citizens of other states are not included in this contract. And even putting aside the problem of who gets to be considered a citizen, just like anything else that is given to you, rights can also be taken away. At the end of the day, it's politicians and courts who get to decide what rights you are allowed to exercise at any given moment.

Autonomy, on the other hand, doesn't rely on a state-based framework of rights. Rather than concentrating power and decision-making in the tops of social and political hierarchies, autonomy starts at the level of the individual, and scales up. If you're a visual thinker, it might be helpful to imagine it as sort of like an inverted pyramid. As the scope of autonomy grows to include more and more people, we move from talking about individual autonomy to collective autonomy: the power of groups of people to make collective decisions on issues that affect them directly. Individual and collective autonomy are indivisible under anarchism. You can't have one without the other. Autonomous collectives are made up of autonomous individuals, who have all made the decision to work together to pursue their common interests. Unless you're living in a cabin in the woods, it's difficult to exercise individual autonomy outside of a collective, first of all because those in power make it hard to get away with, and second because human beings are inherently social creatures.

Building collective autonomy is what anarchism is all about. Whether this assumes the form of an autonomous feminist collective that gets together to make decisions on how to fight patriarchy, or neighbourhood assemblies that come together to fight gentrification... or even the millions of Kurds in Rojava who are building social structures that are autonomous from the Syrian state. While these are just a few examples, the thing that connects them all is a shared pursuit of greater collective autonomy. And that's something we should all be striving for... because at the end of the day... do you really need someone in authority telling you what you can or can't do?