

The Age-Old Question

Is Anarcho-Capitalism Anarchism?

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Is anarcho-capitalism a form of anarchism? The resounding cry from anarchists of all stripes—including myself—is NO! The debate rages on, but two questions are raised by this claim: why isn't it anarchism and if it isn't anarchism then what is it? I believe the answers are: because it fails to meet the deeper commitments of anarchism and is actually a form of radical libertarianism. And this brings up the further question: what then is the relationship between libertarianism and anarchism? I will attempt to substantially elaborate on the former response in order to lead to an open ended exploration of the latter. First though, it bears mentioning that, for much of the world, libertarian and anarchist are used more or less interchangeably. 'Libertarian' was first used in a political sense by anarcho-communist Joseph Déjacque and remains in use as an inherently leftist idea in much of the world outside of the United States. However, in 1955, Dean Russell proposed that classical liberals abandon the public title of liberal and advanced that "those of us who love liberty trade-mark and reserve for our own . . . the good and honorable word 'libertarian.'" So libertarian in its common usage in the U.S. really just means, at least at its core, liberal. And the meaning of liberalism can be found in its etymological root, with Bettina Bien Greaves writing in the preface to Ludwig von Mises's *Liberalism: In The Classical Tradition* that "[t]he term 'liberalism,' from the Latin 'liber' meaning 'free' referred originally to the philosophy of freedom" and summing up its real-world applications as represented by "the free market economy, limited government and individual freedom." Essentially: liberalism takes the form of a belief in the essential liberty of the individual, the real-world practice of which is the greatest possible minimization of the state and the greatest possible maximization of the market. These are therefore the basics of libertarianism.

Of course, liberalism now dominates the world in its corrupted, hegemonic form of neoliberalism, but at its inception, as Kevin Carson writes, "[t]he liberalism of Adam Smith, David Ricardo and the other classical political economists was very much a left-wing assault on the entrenched economic privilege of the great Whig landed oligarchy and the mercantilism of the moneyed classes" before primarily taking "on the character of an apologetic doctrine in defense of the entrenched interests of industrial capital."¹ So while libertarianism has a common origin

¹ The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy accounts that "[t]hough not all scholars agree on the meaning of the term, 'neoliberalism' is now generally thought to label the philosophical view that a society's political and economic

with neoliberalism, it is certainly not the status quo and can therefore be identified as this original radical essence of liberalism brought to bear in the 20th and 21st century. Admittedly, this is giving a lot more credit than is due to vulgar libertarians who, as Carson accounts, “use the term ‘free market’ in an equivocal sense,” seeming “to have trouble remembering, from one moment to the next, whether they’re defending actually existing capitalism or free market principles” and consequently become apologists for the status quo and ruling elite, but Jason Lee Byas argues that libertarianism—despite its misuses—is still fundamentally a radical form of liberalism and further that “[t]o say that libertarians are *radical* liberals is to say more than just that we are more extreme.” It means “taking an idea to its roots, and applying that idea consistently.” Radical liberalism leads to the conclusion that “although our interests are naturally aligned, they are wildly at odds in the world around us. This unnatural disharmony comes from the imposition of power and the way aggression feeds upon aggression” and that though “[t]here is little adrenaline behind the legislator’s vote, the bureaucrat’s checklist, or the policeman’s casual stroll, . . . they are acts of war all the same. Throughout that monotonous charge, the unknowing infantry’s supreme objective is always the protection of political authority.” In turn, radical libertarianism—*radical radical* liberalism—takes these observations regarding power and violence and the aforementioned aspects of individual freedom, limited government, and the free-market economy to the conclusion of absolute individual sovereignty, zero government, and everything being provided by a market. This is the vision of anarcho-capitalism as described by thinkers like Murray Rothbard and David Friedman, and it may sound like anarchism in the colloquial sense, but the abolition of the state and voluntary association of a genuinely free market is not enough to qualify as anarchism.

This may seem like an odd statement to make, as many definitions of anarchism center on free association and zero government. Emma Goldman explains anarchism from an anti-government standpoint as being “[t]he philosophy of a new social order based on liberty unrestricted by man-made law; the theory that all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary.” David Graeber, from a ‘voluntary order’ perspective, concludes that “[t]he easiest way to explain anarchism . . . is to say that it is a political movement that aims to bring about a genuinely free society — and that defines a ‘free society’ as one where humans only enter those kinds of relations with one another that would not have to be enforced by the constant threat of violence.” And Pyotr Kropotkin combines both types of views in the definition of anarchism as “the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government — harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.” And if one chose not to read further than these cherry-picked quotes, it would seem that these

institutions should be robustly liberal and capitalist, but supplemented by a constitutionally limited democracy and a modest welfare state.” However, Carson espouses that in reality a “structural model of farming out government functions to private capital, at public expense and with guaranteed private profit, and within a web of state-enforced monopolies and legal protections, is at the heart of what’s called ‘free market reform’ under neoliberalism.” Not to mention the use of the welfare state in the U.S. as a form of human regulation which, as suggested by Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, expands during times of civil disorder and retracting when the danger to the status quo has passed; and how all of this is tied in a nice package of imposing U.S. interests on the rest of the world through imperialism and neocolonialism as well economic globalization that Carson effectively argues is also the product of state intervention.

definitions would seem to point to anarcho-capitalism, being, at least in its basic principles of voluntary exchange and individual property ownership, a form of anarchism.

However, a deeper question arises: are these descriptions of what anarchism is or rather a description of an end goal reached through rigorous meeting of deeper commitments? The latter is believed by Byas, who maintains that “anarchism . . . [is not] simply synonymous with voluntary association and nothing more. Voluntary association is necessary and non-negotiable, but the anarchist’s work is not over if non-violent forms of domination persist.” As John Clark argues, the “essence of anarchism” is not simply “the theoretical opposition to the state, but the practical and theoretical struggle against domination,” which “does not stop with a criticism of political organization” but goes to the root of the thing in condemning “the authoritarian nature of economic inequality and private property, hierarchical economic structures, traditional education, the patriarchal family, class and racial discrimination, and rigid sex-and age-roles.”² Another, more concise explanation might be found in the famous line by Noam Chomsky that...

“[t]he core of the anarchist tradition, as I understand it, is that power is always illegitimate, unless it proves itself to be legitimate. So the burden of proof is always on those who claim that some authoritarian hierarchic relation is legitimate. If they can’t prove it, then it should be dismantled.”

And Byas explains that ancaps “often [forget] to emphasize . . . [this] centrality of non-domination in the anarchist ethos.” In advocating for an economy centered around private ownership of the means of production—a socio-economic order that not only reproduces hierarchy but came into existence through primitive accumulation and other forms of violence like settler-colonialism and imperialism—fail to meet the deeper commitments of seeking to abolish hierarchy and domination beyond just that off the state, and so, while qualifying as radical libertarianism, anarcho-capitalism is *not* anarchism.

This thesis is contested by Roderick Long in his contribution on libertarianism and anarchism to *Brill’s Companion to Anarchism and Philosophy*, where he—though not an ancap himself—holds that anarcho-capitalism does qualify as anarchism even if it considers “the forms of domination in Clark’s list as legitimate, either in the weaker sense of not being rights-violations and so not permissible targets of forcible interference, or in the stronger sense of not being problematic even in terms of private morality.” He presents—as I see it—two major arguments: 1) North American individualist anarchism like that of Benjamin Tucker, Josiah Warren, Voltairine De Cleyre, and Lysander Spooner is considered a legitimate form of anarchism, and “anarcho-capitalism is best understood [as] a subset of individualist anarchism.” And furthermore, “[m]any of the features of anarcho-capitalism to which social anarchists point as grounds for exclusion from the anarchist ranks appear to be shared by individualist anarchists”—in particular private defense agencies. 2) The system that ancaps describe as ‘capitalism’ is not the existing statist economy but rather an actually free market. And not only then does such a system allow for non-capitalist projects such as mutual aid, cooperatives, and communes but massive inequalities, parasitism, and monopolism are “largely the product of state intervention rather than free markets, and so should not be expected to feature in any realistic implementation of anarcho-capitalists’ ideals, whatever the anarcho-capitalists themselves expect.” Long only loosely addresses the issue of deeper

² This quote is taken from its reproduction in Roderick Long’s article on libertarianism and anarchism.

commitments to anti-hierarchy and non-domination, writing it off as a “strategy of exclusion-by-definition.” I think this is a serious error, as it opens the door to allowing reactionary values into the anarchist movement. Is there nothing inherent in anarchism that rejects racism, misogyny, homophobia, and other forms of bigotry? Long points to Pierre-Joseph “Proudhon’s misogyny, anti-Semitism, and homophobia” but continued place in anarchist canon as essentially proof that there is not—even if such a rejection is good. But are we to view them as compatible or as errors in the early development of the ideology? I believe the latter, and Proudhon himself once said, “I dream of a society where I will be guillotined for being a conservative.”³

But moving on to the arguments that Long makes more substantially, I actually agree that anarcho-capitalism is in some way descendent from individualist anarchism but not because the former is a form of anarchism but because the latter is a form of proto-libertarianism. Individualist anarchism shares a “continuity with classical liberalism” just as anarcho-capitalism does and they both advocate for the complete reduction of the state and the expansion of the market into everything—including law and defense. However, the 19th century individualist anarchists went further to champion progressive social values like, as Long outlines, “feminism, free love, antimilitarism, and labor empowerment.” And their free market ideology is best understood not simply as institutions like private defense agencies being “conceived as . . . implemented” not in a “capitalistic context” but “an anti-capitalistic one,” but further that an expansion of the free market in all spheres will generate results favorable to those aforementioned values and destructive to capitalism in general. Long contests this belief, arguing that not only were some 19th century individualists (in particular Spooner) not wholly opposed to interest, rent, and wage labor *per se* but “just as Tucker expected and predicted that genuinely free markets would *undermine* capitalist institutions, but did not make his support for *laissez-faire* conditional on the accuracy of this prediction” and “he saw the connection between [anarchism and the undermining of capitalist exploitation] as causal rather than definitional, and acknowledged that if he had to choose between individual liberty and a more equitable distribution of wealth, he would choose liberty.” Long cites two points in particular to back up this assertion:

[Tucker’s] more succinct phrasing elsewhere: ‘*Equality if we can get it, but Liberty at any rate!*’ [And how,] [w]hile opposing interest, Tucker noted that he had “no other case against interest than that it cannot appear (except sporadically) under free conditions,” and that he would cease to oppose interest if he could be convinced “that interest can persist where free competition prevails.”

Setting aside what I believe to be the anomalous views of Spooner, I think using these as reasons to say Tucker (particularly as the fountainhead of free market anti-capitalism) did not see the undermining of exploitation as an essential part of his politics is a misunderstanding of both of these sentiments.

The latter of these points can be best understood as a continuation of a sentiment presented by Proudhon, who writes that he does not intend...

to forbid or suppress, by sovereign decree, ground rent and interest on capital. I think that all these manifestations of human activity should remain free and voluntary for all: I ask for them no modifications, restrictions or suppressions, other than those

³ It’s unclear where this quote comes from originally but it is cited often.

which result naturally and of necessity from the universalization of the principle of reciprocity which I propose.

Here Proudhon is not defending interest or rent but rather acknowledging that anarchism does not function in a prohibitory manner like statist ideologies but rather creates a situation in which interest *could* exist but probably would not. As Carson writes, drawing from Tucker's own analysis of the money monopoly, it is "the state's licensing of banks, capitalization requirements, and other market entry barriers enable banks to charge a monopoly price for loans in the form of usurious interest rates." The admiration of liberty over equality in the former part of Long's above quote can, in turn, be best viewed not as an endorsement of any system as long as it does not have a state but rather as a sentiment found in the context of his opposition to state socialism. Despite self-describing as a socialist, Tucker was vehemently opposed to its statist form, writing, "there is no half-way house between State Socialism and Anarchism" and describing the former as "*the doctrine that all the affairs of men should be managed by the government, regardless of individual choice.*" It is in this opposition that Tucker calls for liberty over equality, believing that ultimately the first would lead to the second but opposing any ideology—like state socialism—that held its priorities the other way around as it would never truly establish freedom or equality. This is how we should understand James J. Martin's account of Tucker writing in his old age that "Capitalism is at least tolerable, which cannot be said of Socialism or Communism;" not as an endorsement of capitalism that, as Susan L. Brown rationalizes, provides "the shift further illuminated in the 1970s by anarcho-capitalists" but the bitter words of a committed anarchist who watched the rise of the authoritarian-statist USSR in the last 15 or so years of his life.⁴ So while certainly the 19th century individualist anarchists were not willing to give up their entire ideology because some of the outcomes might not create as much equality and liberation as they thought, this does not mean that one can do away with these egalitarian and liberatory end goals—a necessary process if anarcho-capitalism is to be brought into the anarchist canon.

And even admitting a libertarian (as opposed to anarchist) continuity between individualist anarchism and anarcho-capitalism, I would also like to make a strategic argument about to whom the heritage of individualist anarchism belongs. Charles Johnson accounts how the debate between ancaps and social anarchists over the ownership of this heritage can be deeply disingenuous, with ancaps obscuring and neglecting "the socialistic bite of the individualist understanding of class, privilege, and exploitation" and social anarchists cutting "a lot of corners in explaining the individualists' positions" in order "to make them seem significantly less pro-ertarian, and more friendly towards collectivistic and communistic socialism, than they actually were." And furthermore, he points out that individualist anarchists "are still about and hardly need a bunch of anarcho-capitalists and social anarchists to do the talking for us." Johnson says he doesn't "have much of a dog in the fight, except insofar as it gets a bit tiresome watching the two bicker over the individualist tendency within the movement as if they were arguing over the contents of their dead grandmother's will," but I think we as contemporary individualist anarchists still fighting for both free markets *and* an end to capitalist exploitation need to assert that said inheritance as our birthright. Right-wingers have attempted to claim our tradition before; the French proto-fascist group Cerele Proudhon attempted to selectively draw from Proudhon's critique of statist democracy to justify vicious nationalism. Tucker writes that...

⁴ See Brown's "The Free Market as Salvation from Government: The Anarcho-Capitalist View" in *Meanings of the Market in Western Culture*.

[o]ne of the methods of propagandism practised by these agitators is the attempt to enroll among their apostles all the great dead who, if living, would look with scorn upon their ways and works. Every great writer who has criticised democracy and who, being in his grave, cannot enter protest, is listed as a royalist, a nationalist, and an anti-Dreyfusard. Chief among these helpless victims is the foremost of all Anarchists, to whom these impudent young rascals constantly refer as *notre grand Proudhon*. Indeed, they have formed a *Cerele Proudhon*, which publishes a bi-monthly review under the title, *Cahiers du Cerele Proudhon*.

We should take heed from this historical anti-reactionary stance by Tucker and, instead of becoming awkward apologists for anarcho-capitalism, should take on the legacy of 19th century individualist anarchism ourselves. As I said at the start, this is more of a strategic claim than a purely factual one, but I do not think that detracts from its importance when so many ancaps and other right-libertarians are falling prey to the allure of fascism, monarchism, white nationalism, and other forms of reactionary authoritarianism.

This final point is what leads me to critique the idea that ancaps should be accepted as anarchists on the basis that what they call capitalism is not the existing system but a truly free market and that consistent application of free market principles would lead to a world very dissimilar to the present day economy. Anna Morgenstern believes that if ancaps “genuinely wish to eliminate the state, they are anarchists, but they aren’t really capitalists, no matter how much they want to claim they are.” This is because in the absence of the state “the cost of protecting property rises dramatically as the amount of property owned increases;” “without a state-protected banking/financial system, accumulating endless high profits is well nigh impossible;” and “under anarchism, such a thing as ‘intellectual property’ wouldn’t exist, so any business model that relies on patents and copyrights to make money would not exist either.” This would in turn make “mass accumulation and concentration of capital . . . impossible;” “[w]ithout concentration of capital, wage slavery is impossible;” and “[w]ithout wage slavery, there’s nothing most people would recognize as ‘capitalism.’” And there are certainly ancaps that advocate for a genuinely free market—they often choose to describe themselves as voluntaryists—even as it clashes against traditional capitalist principles; in particular, Karl Hess and Rothbard during his time allied with the New Left come to mind. The former admits (and is echoed at least at one point by the latter) that...

much of that property [which now is called private] is stolen. Much is of dubious title. All of it is deeply intertwined with an immoral, coercive state system which has condoned, built on, and profited from slavery; has expanded through and exploited a brutal and aggressive imperial and colonial foreign policy, and continues to hold the people in a roughly serf-master relationship to political-economic power concentrations.

But the aforementioned vulgar libertarianism rears its ugly head again and again with *many* ancaps defending the existing system (minus the most obvious elements of statism) without looking into its violent framework of white supremacy, patriarchy, settler-colonialism, imperialism, etc. (that, it should be noted, do rely fundamentally on the state to be perpetuated). And because this backdrop of horrific violence is required for the existing features of capitalism—like wage labor, large-scale private property, and immense wealth inequality—to

continue, said structure is assumed by vulgar ancaps to be essentially what a free market would look like; and they therefore find themselves defending these monstrous systems.

Long admits that ancaps “are likelier to endorse hierarchical features of existing economies,” but the problem is much more severe than that. This reasoning—alongside a desire to appeal to the white middle-class in the United States—led Rothbard and Lew Rockwell to conceptualize the ideology of paleoconservatism. This backward ideology follows Rockwell’s agreement with conservatives that...

political freedom is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the good society. . . . Neither is it sufficient for the free society. We also need social institutions and standards that encourage public virtue, and protect the individual from the State.

This leads to him to a number of principles like:

VII. The egalitarian ethic is morally reprehensible and destructive of private property and social authority.

VIII. Social authority, as embodied in the family, church, community, and other intermediating institutions, as helping protect the individual from the State and as necessary for a free and virtuous society.

IX. Western culture as eminently worthy of preservation and defense.

X. Objective standards of morality, especially as found in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as essential to the free and civilized social order.

And so ultimately, as Tom Bagwell explains, paleolibertarians place “heavy emphasis on nationalism and closed borders keeping their Austrian economic system contained within their nation-state. They also place heavy emphasis on racial and cultural identity particularly . . . arguing that right-libertarian economics only works among whites of European descent and that European and North American states should be kept largely or exclusively [white] (European).” And it is exactly this colonial, racialized, chauvinistic, logic that has led Hans-Herman Hoppe to argue—by taking Rockwell’s above ideas to the absolute extreme—that “contemporary libertarianism can be characterized . . . as theory and theorists without psychology and sociology, much or even most of the Alt-Right can be described, in contrast, as psychology and sociology without theory” and that therefore these two movements should unify on some level in opposition to egalitarianism, social justice, and other ‘cultural Marxist’ ideas and institutions in favor of an ultraconservative, ethnocentric society based on Eurocentric ideas of hierarchical social order. This type of thinking is a marked trend in hubs of anarcho-capitalist thought. Look at the article “Do White People Have A Future?” from lewrockwell.com that calls for white people to arm themselves against “immigrant invaders” and warns that “white societies will disappear in the emerging barbarism;” or the piece “For a New Libertarian” from the head of the Mises Institute—where Hoppe is a senior fellow—that lauds “blood and soil and God and nation” and “elite families;” or the mods of the subreddit [r/anarcho_capitalism](https://www.reddit.com/r/anarcho_capitalism) admitting to embracing “monarchism, conservatism, AuthCapism, Christian Capitalism, National Socialism” because “it’s inevitable” and they are no longer “larping as anarchists;” or Liberty Hangout publicly promoting Catholic theocracy and Holocaust denialism. And even as well meaning right-libertarians struggle to maintain the

false neutrality of thinness, former ancaps like Stefan Molyneux and Christopher Cantwell have turned toward explicit white nationalism. These are all natural outcomes of defending the horrifying ‘package deal’ of capitalism and almost all other present systems of oppression—from white supremacy to patriarchy and beyond.

So what does this conclusion mean for someone (like myself) who identifies as both an anarchist and a left-libertarian? Since libertarianism has been identified as an ideology based fundamentally not on anti-hierarchy and non-domination but on the minimization of government and maximization of market and therefore distinct from anarchism, can there ever be principled overlap between the two? To answer this, one should observe that a characteristic difference between left-libertarians and right- to far-right libertarians is the latter’s commitment to a progressive and liberatory thickness. Thickness is, as defined by Nathan Goodman, “any broadening of libertarian concerns beyond overt aggression and state power to concern about what cultural and social conditions are most conducive to liberty.” While many right-libertarians like Walter Block try to avoid the problem by claiming a false neutrality or ‘thinness’ and far-right libertarians like the aforementioned Rockwell and Hoppe see this as an opening for their reactionary social order, it leads left-libertarians to being committed to not only limited-to-zero government, individual sovereignty, and absolutely free markets but also—just like the 19th century individualist anarchists—values and ideologies, as outlined by Johnson, like “feminism, anti-racism, gay liberation, counterculturalism, labor organizing, mutual aid, and environmentalism.”

And these are not just personal values tacked onto an anarcho-capitalist framework but rather necessary for and entailed by its principled application. Johnson argues, for example, that “rejecting these ideas, practices, or projects would be logically compatible with libertarianism, [but] their success might be important or even causally necessary for libertarianism to get much purchase in an existing statist society, or for a future free society to emerge from statism without widespread poverty or social conflict, or for a future free society to sustain itself against aggressive statist neighbors, the threat of civil war, or an internal collapse back into statism.” He holds in particular that wealth inequality needs to be addressed “with voluntary anti-poverty measures” because “[e]ven a totally free society in which a small class of tycoons own the overwhelming majority of the wealth, and the vast majority of the population own almost nothing is unlikely to remain free for long.” Or take Cathy Reisenwitz, who asserts that libertarians should incorporate sex-positive feminism into their thinking because it “seeks to destroy the judgment and shame which keep people from being able to fully enjoy sex, or a lack of sex, or anything in between” and “[l]ibertarianism should seek to destroy the judgment and shame which keep people from being able to fully enjoy any kind of peaceful, voluntary exchange. In this way, it will fully engage in creating a world which allows the greatest amount of peaceful, voluntary exchange possible.” And furthermore, left-libertarians, according to Carson, seek to “demonstrate the relevance and usefulness of free market thought for addressing the concerns of today’s Left” such as racism, wealth inequality, landlordism, and ultimately capitalism in its entirety. Look at the points made by Morgenstern above about the impossibility of wealth accumulation and consequently wage labor in a genuinely free market, or consider Carson’s argument that the “outcomes of free market competition in socializing progress would result in a society resembling not the anarcho-capitalist vision of a world owned by the Koch brothers and Halliburton, so much as Marx’s vision of a communist society.” Ultimately, left-libertarianism—when it is taken to the extreme of total government abolition and totalizing free(d) markets—meets the criteria for radical libertarianism but also holds the same anti-domination and anti-hierarchy commitments of

anarchism. This means that left-libertarian anarchists can be properly described as anarchists (and even draw upon ancap thinkers like David Friedman, Rothbard, etc. as radical libertarians) without requiring anarcho-capitalism to be included under the ideological umbrella as well.

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