

Property is Violence, So Let's Keep It to a Minimum

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“The land monopoly... consists in the enforcement by government of land titles which do not rest upon personal occupancy and cultivation... the individual should no longer be protected by their fellows in anything but personal occupation and cultivation of land.”

-Benjamin R. Tucker, “State Socialism and Anarchism”

Ironically, the non-aggression principle as understood by much of the libertarian right can in practice be used to justify a whole lot of aggression. With regards to this subject Murray Rothbard stated that *“no man or group of men may aggress against the person or property of anyone else.”* On paper that might sound very similar to Tucker’s stance against invasion and coercion, but in practice it couldn’t be further away. To understand why we have to define some basic conceptions of property, the state, and anarchism. What do these words mean in practice? Let’s find out.

If property is anything, it’s the ability of one person to use violence, of either the lethal or non-lethal variety to prevent another person from using a thing oneself is using. I rely on my car for daily transportation, if someone were to attempt to deprive me of it, few, aside from the most squeamish pacifists would deny that I have the right to defend it against the incursions of a thief. Surely, the level of violence I should employ is debatable. Is defending the car worth breaking bones, inflicting lacerations, or even death itself upon the aggressor? Most would likely agree that the level of violence I employ should probably correspond in proportion to the level of violence the thief is willing to use in order to dispossess me of my car. But few people will argue it’s unethical to employ violence against someone who is trying to dispossess me of a thing I need for survival. We would then likely conclude that some amount of background violence in society is acceptable.

If the state is anything, it’s an exclusive clique that has the ability to enforce its own will over a given territory and by extension over the individuals living within that territory. The violence of the state exists whether or not you consent to it, and that combination of violence and elitism is precisely what defines the state. The state in other words is a monopoly on violence that is held over a population in a given territory by an exclusive clique.

And finally, if anarchism is anything it is the opposition to that monopoly on violence called the state, it is the opposition to authority. As Proudhon said in *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*: “*The fundamental, decisive idea of this Revolution is it not this: NO MORE AUTHORITY.*” It then follows that to rid ourselves of the authority of the state, we must rid ourselves of the monopoly on violence. And to rid ourselves of the monopoly of violence we must necessarily limit the violence of property to the absolute minimum so that the state does not arise again.

On that note I propose that we stop beating around the bush. Let’s stop using the word property and instead substitute it with its true definition, violence. Property inherently implies the threat of violence. If you take my thing, or invade my place, some amount of violence will be inflicted against you by me, my neighbor, or the state if it exists. Property can never be divorced from violence. The more property one has spread out over an area the more violence one will have to use to enforce that property. An individual cannot physically defend a large area without the assistance of others. That means they will have to employ enforcers of some kind to do it for them. This can be done indirectly through taxes with a police force, or directly by paying a private security firm, it does not matter.

This begs the question, how can an anarchist who by definition is against the monopoly on violence held by the State support a monopoly on violence held by the individual? Again, what is the state other than an exclusive group of individuals that hold a monopoly on violence over other individuals? If the state is defined by its monopoly on violence, and a single individual or a corporation holds that same monopoly, then it in turn becomes indistinguishable from the state. It is the same thing regardless of its label.

That is why anarchists cannot logically support the existence of absentee property and simultaneously claim to be adherents of the non-aggression principle. Absentee property in effect allows one person or a small group to hold a monopoly on violence over another person or group of people. It allows the reach of the individual to extend far beyond the tips of their fingers, and onto the fingers of armies of jack-booted thugs wielding truncheons, guns and tasers. If the state were to be abolished tomorrow and replaced by a direct regime of infinitely acquirable absentee property as self-described libertarian capitalists would see fit, all that would do in practice is create a slew of private security police states owned by the richest among us. One state would be replaced by many.

On the other hand, it is entirely consistent with the internal logic of anarchism for an individual to use violence to enforce their possession over a single house in which they reside, or the objects within it on grounds of occupation. It is also consistent for a community to use violence to defend their right to collective land occupation, as was the case when the Neo-Zapatistas resisted an attempted land enclosure in nineteen ninety-four. The former is a very small monopoly on violence that would not exceed more than a few acres or be held over others, the latter is a similar scenario but applied to a group of individuals instead of a single individual. Again, let us refer to Benjamin R. Tucker:

Whoever invades, individual or state, governs and is an Archist; and that whoever defends against invasion, individual or voluntary association, opposes government and is an Anarchist. Now, a voluntary association doing equity would not be an invader, but a defender against Invasion, and might include in its defensive operations the protection of the occupiers of land.

– “Land Occupancy and its Conditions”

Neither of the above scenarios I mentioned involve the violence of an individual or group of armed invaders sent to enforce the extraction of wealth at the behest of a landlord. In these scenarios violence is only used to ensure the continued right of occupation of the individual or group residing within the territory in question, but it is not used to prevent an individual or group from establishing residence in a hitherto empty house or piece of territory. Violence in these scenarios is restricted to the defense against extraction and dispossession instead of enforcing them. Thus, it is not of a statist, or “archist” character.

But what about when an individual holds a monopoly on violence over an entire neighborhood and thus the people living in it? What about an entire city? Or an entire country? If that is the case they are a state, this fact is unavoidable. It does not matter if this vast stretch of land was acquired via a fat roll of cash or the rolling treads of a tank column. The omnipresent threat of violence against the dispossessed is the same.

Think about this the next time you ponder a landlord’s ownership claim over a tenant’s home. Ask yourself, what is the true nature of the relationship between the two people once they are stripped of their respective titles? The tenant pays for the maintenance of the property through their rent, and in addition at least a portion of the landlord’s income. If this payment is not made on time, then violence will be used as a punishment for nonpayment. Is that not the relationship of invader and defender with the landlord occupying the former role and the tenant the latter? Perhaps you will realize that the landlord exacts their payment in the same way a state does when it comes to collect taxes or the same way a mafia soldier does when they come demanding protection money.

Anarchists then are against any system which uses violence as a tool of invasion and economic extraction, and not merely for the defense of the things a person needs to sustain their daily life, their place of residency, certain movable objects, or the lives of those they care about. We reject the idea that people should employ violence to hold land, housing and the means of production hostage from those who actually use the things. We abhor the violence of dispossession and exploitation and find that the only type of violence that is truly compatible with the non-aggression principle, non-coercion principle, non-invasion principle, or whatever you choose to call it is that which defends against exploitation and dispossession.

The theory is quite simple, if you are a resident or worker of a particular place, it is de facto within your possession. If you are a worker at a particular business, it is de facto within your possession. We recognize the right to employ defensive violence required to maintain these daily possessions on the grounds that they are continually used. In practice this limits the level of background violence in society to the absolute minimum amount possible and thus prevents the growth of a new state. In a regime such as this, cops will no longer beat workers on strike, they will no longer destroy homeless camps, they will no longer come with guns to evict pregnant mothers who cannot pay their rent. This kind of invasive violence will cease to exist.

If anarchism will exist at all, it will exist as a regime that is either entirely devoid of the violent enforcement of the individual’s grasp of things, in which all is shared by all, or a regime in which the violent enforcement of the individual’s grasp on things is strictly limited to mutual defense of the things they depend on for their daily lives and nothing more. Anything else is by definition a form of statism.

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