

Democracy, Anarchism, & Freedom

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“As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy.”

—Abraham Lincoln

“Democracy” and “anarchism” are broad, vague, and hotly contested terms. Even if we stick to specific definitions, there are still arguments about what these definitions mean in practice. (Lincoln’s quotation, above, seems to be about the preconditions for democracy.) This is not just a linguistic dispute. The argument is not just over “democracy” but over democracy, not just over “anarchism” but over anarchism. Still more controversial is the relationship between these two broad terms.

I will use the definition of “democracy” as “rule of the commoners”—a definition going back to classical Greece. The “commoners” were both the majority of the population and the lower classes (of free, native-born, males, in ancient Greece). By “anarchism” I mean total opposition to the state, to capitalism (but not necessarily to the market), and to all other forms of oppression. This is pretty broad, but it rules out “anarcho-capitalists,” not to mention “national anarchists” (fascists).

On the relation between anarchism and democracy, anarchists have held varying opinions (those who addressed the issue, anyway). Many reject “democracy.” Mainly they make two arguments. One is that “democracy” is the official ideology and rationalization of most capitalist states today. They do not wish to support this ideology, the main justification for the modern state. Instead, they wish to expose it and oppose it, advocating “anarchism” as the goal. (They do not necessarily deny the advantages of living under a capitalist democracy, as opposed to fascism or Stalinism, say. But they point out that even the best capitalist democracy is still really a form of rule by an elite minority of capitalists and their agents.)

The other main argument raised by these anarchists is that anarchism, by definition, rejects all forms of domination. This means domination of the many by the few, but also of the few by the many (the “commoners,” the working class, the “people”). Since “democracy” means a form of rule, then anarchists must reject it, they argue.

Anarchism is Democracy without the State

However, there are other anarchists who regard themselves as supporters of democracy. They claim that anarchism is the most extreme, radical, form of democracy. This is my view (I have written two essays on this topic; see Price 2009; 2916). I see both “democracy” and “anarchism” as requiring decision-making by the people, from the bottom-up, through cooperation, clashes of opinion, social experimentation, and group intelligence.

But “democracy” means collective decision-making. It does not apply to matters which are of individual or minority concern only, such as individual sexual orientation, religion, or artistic taste. Free choice should rule here, whatever the majority thinks.

Democratic anarchists recognize that “democracy” is used as an ideological cover for the rule of a capitalist elite (it is still the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie”). The ideal of “democracy” is contradicted by the reality of the state and capitalism. In fact, the capitalists have never lived up to their “democratic” program. This contradiction could be used to challenge the system, to expose its fraudulent claim to be “democratic,” to justify opposition to the real state. Almost no

one in the U.S. is for “anarchism” or even “socialism,” but almost everyone is “for” “democracy.” *Why not* use the ideal against the reality?

Actually the capitalists limit their claim of “democracy” to the government apparatus. They do not claim that their economy is democratic. Instead they justify their corporations (totalitarian in their internal organization) by using the rationalization of “freedom,” specifically the “free market.” Anarchists make a *revolutionary challenge to capitalism* by advocating a democratic economy. (For example, a federation of worker-run industries, consumer co-ops, and collective communes.)

Even those anarchists who reject “democracy” because of its ideological use by the capitalists usually advocate “freedom” or “liberty.” But these terms are just as much ideological watchwords of capitalist society, used constantly to justify its un-free reality. If it is all right to use “freedom” against the false proponents of freedom, then it is all right to use “democracy” against the pretended advocates of democracy.

Secondly, these anarchists deny that anarchism contradicts “democracy” in principle. They point out that virtually all the anti-“democracy” anarchists advocate “self-rule,” “self-governing,” and “self-management.” These terms are no different than “direct democracy” and “participatory democracy.”

If everyone is involved in *governing* (participatory democracy), then there is no *government*—no special institution over society which rules people. Anarchists are not against all social coordination, community decision-making, and protection of the people. They are generally for some sort of association of workplace committees and neighborhood assemblies. They are for the replacement of the police and military by an armed people (a democratic militia, so long as that is necessary). This is *the self-organization of the people*—of the former working class and oppressed population, until the heritage of class divisions and oppression has been dissolved into a united population.

In short, *what anarchists are against is not social organization but the state*. The state is a bureaucratic-military socially-alienated organization of special forces (professional politicians and armed people). It stands above and against the rest of society. Anarchists want to abolish the state. They do not believe in the possibility of a “transitional state” or a “workers’ state.” The self-organization of the people, through popular assemblies and associations, needs to be democratic (self-managing). *Anarchism is democracy without the state*. The people themselves must be able to manage all of society from below.

Does Democracy Require Domination?

Does this radical democracy still mean the coercion or domination of some people by others? Let us imagine an industrial-agricultural commune under anarchism. Some member proposes that it build a new road. People have differing opinions. A decision will have to be made; either the road will be built or it won’t (this is coercion by reality, not by the police). Suppose a majority of the assembly decides in favor of road-building. A minority disagrees. Perhaps it is outvoted (under majority rule). Or perhaps it decides to “stand aside” so as not to “block consensus” (under a consensus system).

Is the minority coerced? Its members have participated fully in the community discussions which led up to the decision. They have been free to argue for their viewpoint. They have been

able to organize themselves (in a caucus or “party”) to fight against building the road. In the end, the minority members retain full rights. They may be in the majority on the next issue. (Of course, dissatisfied members may leave the community and go elsewhere. But other communities also have to decide whether to build roads.)

The minority may be said to have been coerced on this road-building issue, but I do not see this situation as one of domination. It is not like a white majority consistently dominating its African-American minority. In a stateless system of direct democracy, all participate in decision-making, even if all individuals are not always satisfied with the outcome. In any case, the aim of anarchism is not to end absolutely all coercion, but to reduce coercion to the barest minimum possible. *Institutions of domination* must be abolished and replaced by bottom-up democratic-libertarian organization. But there will never be a perfect society. This is why I began by defining “anarchism” as a society without the state, capitalism, or other institutions of domination.

Conclusion

These issues are of vital importance under the Presidency of Donald Trump, with its right-wing direction, and the fierce fight-back against it (the “Resistance”). Supporters of Trump claim his right to attack the people and the environment due to his election—this is “democracy” they say. But his popular opponents also appeal to “democracy” in order to de-legitimize him (“Not My President!”). They note that he lost the popular vote, that there was voter suppression of People of Color, and interference in the election by the FBI and by Russian agencies. But their political strategy is still electoral, to elect Democrats. This is an excellent time for revolutionary anarchists to identify with the fight for democracy, even while rejecting the supposedly “democratic” capitalist system which brought Trump about.

There are broader questions of anarchism and democracy which I am not discussing here. How to form effective federations and networks while still rooting them in face-to-face democracy in the workplace and community? How to resolve conflicts of interest and opinion through intelligent discussion? Such issues will be dealt with pluralistically through experience and experimentation. A society based on radical democracy and freedom will not be perfect. But it will give humanity a chance to live productively, freely, and happily.

References

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