

Anarchy Vs. Archy: No Justified Authority

Or Why Chomsky Is Wrong

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Contents

Archy: The Opposite of Anarchy	3
On "Justified Authority"	3
Expertise Vs. Force Vs. Authority	3
The Chomsky Connection	4
The EXPERTISE of the Cobbler	5
Diluting the Goals of Anarchy	6
Authority is a Moral Hierarchy	7
On Anarchist Parenting	7
Watered-Down Anarchy	8

Archy: The Opposite of Anarchy

The dictionary definition of 'archy' is any body of authoritative officials organized in nested ranks. Be it a Monarchy, an oligarchy, a republic, a feudal state or any other hierarchical society.

While anarchy is the opposition to hierarchy and authority, archy is the full embodiment of those things. While anarchy calls for the absence of rulers, archy thrives when a population serves and obeys rulers. Sometimes a few rulers (e.g. monarchies), and sometimes many (e.g. social democracies).

Hierarchies exist for rulers to maintain their social control & power over the population. This control is maintained with violent force by authorities appointed by the rulers: the army, national guard, police, courts, prisons, social workers, the media, tax collectors, etc.

Not all guidance given by one person to another constitutes hierarchy. Choosing to accept a specialist's expertise in their craft needn't create a hierarchy or make them your ruler. A roofer laying your roof or a chef cooking your meal or a surgeon repairing your heart needn't be your superior on a hierarchy simply because they are providing you with a valued service.

Similarly, an individual using force to strike a blow at the hierarchy that oppresses them does not turn the individual into an authority. Destroying archy where you see it does not create archy, it creates anarchy.

On "Justified Authority"

Once you start justifying authority and hierarchy, you effectively twist a knife in anarchy. We've all heard the phrase "all power corrupts". It's not a meme; it's the entire reason anarchy exists as a practice.

Legitimizing authority enables archy. Doesn't matter if you call yourself an anarchist while justifying hierarchies you personally approve of for whatever reason. NO authority is legitimate in anarchy. Yes, even in a parent-child relationship.

When you legitimize an authority, you're granting it power, presenting it as an institution that needs to be obeyed at all costs, and it won't stop there. It'll want more power because that's the nature of power. Always grows, never stops to examine its devastating effect on its surroundings. Power is a license to do harm. Whether it was your original intention to enable a violent force of power when you legitimized an authority is irrelevant. It will do harm and the people who signed off on legitimizing it are (or should be) culpable for that harm.

Anarchy is the opposition to authority. To pretend otherwise would be a blatant misrepresentation of what anarchy is.

Expertise Vs. Force Vs. Authority

A lot of people confuse expertise for authority and then use that confusion to insist anarchy doesn't oppose *all* authority. They say anarchy only opposes *unjustified* authority. They of course never explain who gets to determine which authority is justified... I assume that determination is made by a further authority? An authority that is also justified? And which authority justified that authority..? It's silly when anarchists try to go down this *justified authority* rabbit hole.

A carpenter might be good at making cabinets, an expert at it even, but that doesn't make them an authority. Their talent doesn't give them the right to assert authority; power over anyone. Authority is not simply an isolated instance of a person using force. Authority is a distinct ongoing social relationship between people. A coercive relationship that has been legitimized by our authoritarian hierarchical society. It's a relationship where authority figures assert power over less-powerful individuals in their care. These individuals are expected to submit to this mighty authority figure and obey their commands unwaveringly.

Imagine you're walking home at night and someone jumps out of the shadows and tries to stab you. In the resulting scuffle, you kill them in self-defense. This was a simple use of force; it does not make you an authority over the person who tried to kill you. This isolated action you took to preserve your own life does not magically imbue you with the authority to go on a killing spree.

Similarly, when a child is about to walk in front of a speeding truck and you grab their hand to stop them, you're not using authority. You're using simple force. A temporary spur-of-the-moment action to preserve life is not authority. It doesn't give you ownership over the person you're helping. Anarchy has no qualms with the isolated use of force, just the structural institution of authority.

The Chomsky Connection

Noam Chomsky frequently uses the "saving a child from being hit by a car" example to explain his concept of "justified authority". The people that repeat the 'justified authority' fallacy are usually parroting Chomsky's ill-thought-out words. He says:

"Authority, unless justified, is inherently illegitimate and the burden of proof is on those in authority."

He insists that a person's authority should be legitimized if justification is provided for it. But of course, he misses a step by neglecting to explain who gets granted the authority to judge that the authority figure's justification is legitimate...

His definition of authority is inherently flawed. If he'd just say "force" instead of authority, there wouldn't be so many confused Chomsky-acolytes out there making arbitrary justifications for all kinds of hierarchical shit and then branding that shit "anarchist" when it's anything but. I've even seen his followers using his definitions to frame so-called "Night-watchman states" as being anarchist in nature. Night-watchman states are states that only exist to provide citizens with military, police and courts. This is minarchism, not anarchism. The idea of anarchist states and anarchist prisons is obscene.

Even if we were to naively accept that minarchism were somehow desirable, it would only lead right back to full-scale statism. Legitimized power never remains still, and attempts to control its growth have forever proven futile.

Chomsky is never a good source for what anarchy means. He's made a career of watering down anarchy to better appeal to a white middle-class North American audience, even going as far as to state that government isn't inherently bad and that it can be somehow "reformed" with what he calls "real democracy" and "social control over investment". Far too many anarchists look to Chomsky as an authority on anarchy, when he's clearly a minarchist.

He also likens anarchy to the enlightenment and classical liberalism in his talks and writings, which is a very Western-centric thing to do, especially since the enlightenment oversaw the divvying up of Africa by European imperialists and other horrifically racist and genocidal acts. So it's probably not a good idea to associate anarchy with that authoritarian chapter of history... While it's true that the political movement that first branded itself as anarchism originated in Europe, anarchy thrived unnamed in every corner of the world before and after The Enlightenment, long before European philosophers began to pine for a return to it.

I don't consider Chomsky to be an anarchist (because he's demonstrably not one), so his definitions aren't that important to me. But unfortunately they're important to a lot of minarchists and liberals that call themselves anarchists, and they keep repeating his flawed definitions to newcomers, creating further confusion that reverberates for years.

The EXPERTISE of the Cobbler

The likely source for Chomsky's confusion over the anarchist definition of authority is the originator of collectivist anarchism, Mikhail Bakunin. In his rough and unfinished text "What is Authority" (1870), he spoke of "the authority of the cobbler":

"Does it follow that I drive back every authority? The thought would never occur to me. When it is a question of boots, I refer the matter to the authority of the cobbler; when it is a question of houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or engineer. For each special area of knowledge I speak to the appropriate expert. But I allow neither the cobbler nor the architect nor the scientist to impose upon me. [...] But I recognize no infallible authority, even in quite exceptional questions [...] So there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination." -Bakunin

"Voluntary authority and subordination" is essentially what every liberal insists they stand for. They claim capitalism is a voluntary contract between people. They say workers voluntarily choose to be subordinate to their bosses or the state in exchange for wages or security. Anarchists need to reject Bakunin's language if we're to differentiate ourselves from these authoritarian ideologies and truly take a stand against authority.

With that text, Bakunin was trying to articulate the difference between expertise and authority, but did it in a confusing and roundabout way that has enabled generations of minarchists to mistakenly identify as anarchists and promote a broken definition of anarchy. Expertise isn't hierarchical unless the expert is deliberately enshrined with authority. Being good at something needn't give you the right to use your craft to rule people.

The guy made a poorly-worded argument 150 years ago, when the European anarchist movement was still in its infancy and the terminology was still being developed. It was a small part of a rough draft that he never completed, and it is often quoted without any context by people who obviously haven't read the whole text or the associated works that he wrote around the same time.

We obviously don't need to hold up everything every anarchist ever wrote as some kind of immovable anarchist canon. We don't cling to Bakunin's rampant antisemitism, so why cling to his half-baked bootmaker blunder?

Diluting the Goals of Anarchy

The oft-cited example of saving someone from being struck by a car simply has nothing to do with authority. It's a fundamental misrepresentation of the anarchist concept of authority, and I hope this piece will help shift the discourse away from it. Every fucked up political ideology out there, from monarchy to neoliberalism to fascism, claims to be for justified-authority and against unjustified-authority. We know it's horseshit when liberals deem bombing school buses in Syria or Iraq a "justifiable" action to "protect freedom" or "acceptable collateral damage", so why would we adopt their dangerous doublespeak to define anarchy? As soon as you start making allowances for authority, you've stopped advocating for anarchy.

Pushing "justified authority" as Chomsky keeps attempting to do is a pointless exercise that only confuses the uninformed and gives us scores of middle class baby-anarchists who come in not understanding the basic underpinnings of anarchy. They then use that misunderstanding to equate anarchy with all kinds of authoritarian shit, even including states. It makes the line that separates liberalism from anarchy increasingly thin. And quite frankly, it breeds shit anarchists.

I'll finish this chapter by quoting an "anarchist" on a popular anarchist forum who is a perfect example of what I'm talking about:

"I feel it's necessary to have authorities that can perpetuate and protect certain things - for example, I think an unrevocable societal constitution that every autonomous community should follow is a good thing - and that there should also be codified laws - with the aim to protect individual liberty."

"Resultantly, I feel like there should be authorities as there are now that ensure that those laws - such as the right to education to a good standard, or that housing or medical training or care should be of a certain standard, or the right to process through a justice system. Necessarily these authorities should have the ability to change situations where these laws/rights are breached. As an extension, I also find myself believing in a well-trained voluntary police force that can undertake these duties (though one of course that is as directly democratic as possible and revocable and responsible in the anarchist tradition)."

"In this way I find myself drawn more to a desire for a "state" of federated anarchistic communities that function as an anarchist society might although within a greater framework of a limited system that wields authority."

A constitution that everyone has to follow, a "democratic" police force, a state, a system that wields authority. None of this is any different than the liberal status quo. This person has no understanding of anarchy and yet feels the need to identify as an anarchist because they would prefer liberal society be more democratic..? It's nonsensical. And yet the post was well-regarded by other "anarchists" who replied in agreement, with two of them even citing Rojava as an "anarchist state" that matched up to these stated ideals.

An "anarchist state". An "anarchist state"...

Authority is a Moral Hierarchy

A hierarchy is an artificial construct that depends on the principle of authority. Authority is the socially-enforced rule that the ruler in a hierarchical relationship gives commands and the subordinate obeys under threat of (socially legitimized) violence. If I offered my boss a meal, or saved them from drowning, I wouldn't be exercising authority over them. That action alone doesn't create a hierarchy. But just by being my boss, they are constantly exercising authority over me and I'm constantly their subordinate. I am ruled by them. I am constrained; controlled by the boss-worker hierarchy, by my boss's constant assertion of authority over me.

Authority is a deliberate social construct that divides people into either rulers or obeyers; using violence and the notion of "morality" to maintain this coercive system. Talking back to your boss, refusing their authority: That's a big "moral" no no. Society uses this coercive conditioning to uphold the oppressive dynamic and to keep you controlled and obedient. The system will not tolerate any real dissent against its law. Instead it will condition you to realign your perceptions until you finally accept its law as normal.

Proponents of "free-market" capitalism promote supposedly "voluntary" hierarchies (such as the relationship between owners and workers). This is merely an excuse for normalizing structural violence against the less-powerful, a process that is legitimized by appealing to authority. These hierarchies aren't voluntary in any quantifiable way, since we'd be punished by society in various ways if we chose to ignore them (say, by refusing to work or by killing our bosses and taking the true value of our labor). "Justifiable hierarchy" / "legitimate authority" is an eerily similar concept as "voluntary" labor under capitalism.

On Anarchist Parenting

Authority is a structurally violent institution. It has nothing to do with the act of rendering aid to a child; feeding them or preventing them from falling into a pool and drowning. A parent-child relationship needn't be a hierarchy unless you go out of your way to construct it as such.

Parenting is only hierarchical when parents choose to force authority on their child. An anarchist parent would use child-rearing methods that treat the child as an autonomous individual and not as a subordinate to their authoritarian demands. Anarchist parents see themselves as caretakers, not authorities, and legitimizing parental authority with the excuse of "justifiable hierarchy" is a scapegoat. It's not justified. Using violent coercion to control children is not anarchy. Parents don't need to be tyrants to raise children.

Countless anarchist communities throughout history, including the modern-day Hadza in the Great Rift Valley of East Africa have shown us that the parent-child relationship doesn't need to be the violent dictatorship it has become in capitalist-industrial society.

Yet a lot of "anarcho-minarchists", for lack of a better term, insist on seeing the "ownership" authoritarian society grants them over their children as a "justified hierarchy". It's such an odd argument. If they're okay with applying authoritarianism to their own children, they'd obviously be fine with using it to dominate strangers too. It's baffling to see people claim the domination of children is compatible with anarchy just because it's something they choose to engage in.

”Civilized” people make the mistake of constructing dangerous, unhealthy and authoritarian environments for us to live in that completely ignore the burning desire every child has for freedom, play, exploration and learning through first-hand experience.

We force children into metal carriages that take them to school-buildings where strangers are paid to dictate rigid lesson plans to them for years. Children spend their entire childhoods being moved from room to room, forcibly trained to function under the system as obedient civilized workers. Most children aren’t even allowed to play outdoors because the dangers of industrial civilization are so frightening to their parents.

Industrial civilization is simply unfit to nurture human life. The perverse ways we structure our societies around danger, authority, fear, coercion, punishment, conformity and obedience isn’t something that should be forced on children, or anyone. As anarchists, we should be tearing down these authoritarian structures instead of making excuses to maintain them. Children don’t need authority, they need anarchy.

Watered-Down Anarchy

Certain people attach themselves to the flawed collectivist-anarchist definition of authority and then decide they can justify all sorts of hierarchies with it. That revisionism then enters the wider anarchist sphere and is seldom analyzed for its deficiencies since so many collectivist ”anarchists” are really minarchists in disguise. Minarchists see no real problem with authority so long as it benefits them materially. Sadly, these minarchists largely control the discourse in many anarchist spaces where the idea of true anarchy is simply unfathomable. Most people born and raised under authoritarian systems have tremendous trouble parting with the faux security-blanket that a lifetime of archy has imbibed them with. Then the absurd idea of ”good hierarchy” becomes normalized in these spaces and is used to keep anarchy from forming.

Anarchists need to make a strong distinction between the words ”authority”, ”force” and ”expertise” so language misunderstandings don’t lead to minarchism suppressing anarchy.

”Justifiable authority” is one of several fundamental misunderstandings of anarchy that need to be thrown out before further diluting our (really very easily defined) objectives. We tend to overthink things and that leads to mountains of round-about revisionist theory that only detracts from anarchy and leaves people confused about what even our most basic objectives are.

Every genocidal dictator considered the hierarchies they upheld to be justifiable. Anarchists know better. Anarchy is, was and always will be the outright rejection of all archy.

When you compromise and make excuses to construct hierarchies; what you’re doing is no longer anarchy.

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