

No Rules, No Rulers

A Response to the Idea That Anarchy is When We Have Rules But No Rulers

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Rules and Rulers

The often-repeated cliché that anarchy represents a society with rules but no rulers is a fundamental misunderstanding of anarchy. While on first look it may seem like a nuanced distinction, the claim that rules can exist without rulers is a contradiction in terms. This fallacy fails to recognize that the very nature of rules and laws implies an expectation of obedience, which in turn necessitates a mechanism for enforcement, making the presence of a ruling body, in other words, a government, wholly inevitable. There's an inherent connection between rules and rulers that can't simply be hand-waved away.

The existence of rules can only be fully understood by exploring how rulers came to be. The introduction of private property is seen as a pivotal moment in the origin of rule. As a few individuals began to accumulate wealth under this new system, social hierarchies formed, and those at the top of this hierarchy appointed authority figures and armed them with a monopoly on violence to protect their property and enforce rules on their behalf. This wealthy minority accumulated increasing wealth by dividing the land among themselves before coercing those who once lived off the land freely into their servitude. They accomplished this by directing their governments to enact laws that criminalized living off the land without the landowner's permission, effectively compelling everyone who did not own land to work for landowners in order to survive.

This shift marked the transition from decentralized, often nomadic communal living, where no one "owned" land or controlled other people, to structured societies with powerful rulers who enforce rigid rules on the population to maintain a class of exploitable workers, reinforce private property relations, and prevent rebellion no matter how deplorable the working conditions. Regardless of the ideology these rulers concocted for their governments, they would claim the people consented to being ruled by them through "social contracts."

Anarchists contend this "consent" is always coerced, with a potent mix of violence as well as propaganda delivered through the education system, the media, manufactured cultural norms and perhaps the biggest opiate of all: The electoral system. The constant threat of deprivation of freedom hangs in the air, creating an atmosphere of anxiety that compels compliance. People who refuse to conform to the system and suffered for it — prisoners, the homeless, drug addicts — are displayed publicly for all to see, as terrifying examples of what happens to those who challenge societal norms, a lingering reminder of the consequences of dissent, reinforcing the threat that any heretic who won't follow the rules will be cast out into the cold and left to die.

The education system is designed by the ruling class to instill a fierce sense of loyalty to the state and acceptance of the status quo, where the state owns a big chunk of your labor and capital owns most of the rest. Through lesson plans that push contorted moral rules, obedience, meekness, nationalism, and the virtues of the state's particular ideology, the lower classes are conditioned to view their subservience to rule as a natural part of life.

This childhood indoctrination is further reinforced later in life by media narratives that glorify authority, encourage submission to our "betters" and vilify dissent, creating a culture where questioning the legitimacy of our rulers and their long lists of suffocating rules is seen as conspiratorial, extreme or dangerous. Something to be weeded out of us by force.

In the modern era, the illusion of choice is perpetuated through the political system, where citizens are presented with the facade of democracy. Regularly scheduled elections are framed as opportunities for the people to express their will and exercise their "freedom", yet the only

candidates who are allowed to realistically run for office are those who align with the interests of the ruling class. This creates a cycle where individuals are tricked into believing they have a stake in determining the trajectory of their lives, while in reality, their options are strictly constrained by the very structures that keep them subservient to the ruling class. The mechanisms of control ensure that the ruling class's interests are prioritized over the needs of their impoverished servants.

This ideological conditioning instills a belief in us that without rules, chaos would ensue, making compliance seem like the only rational choice. Almost from birth, endless propaganda is flung at us from every direction to convince us we need rules to be safe, to maintain order, to protect our freedoms. The propaganda in our times is so pervasive and the delivery systems so effective, that fewer and fewer people are able to envision what it means to live in a world without rule.

The ruling class is quick to threaten legal penalties, social ostracism, or economic hardship for non-compliance. By highlighting the repercussions of breaking rules, they create a climate of fear that discourages dissent and encourages conformity. This fear is reinforced through media portrayals of crime, terrorism and disorder, which suggest that rules are vital for personal safety and societal well-being. Security theater is used to create the illusion of safety and control, often involving highly visible but superficial measures that distract from the underlying issues of inequality and injustice, while simultaneously justifying increased surveillance and the erosion of civil liberties in the name of protecting the public from rule-breakers.

Social norms play a significant role in shaping behavior. The ruling class cultivates norms that promote obedience to rules, making compliance a socially accepted behavior and resistance to authority appear strange and deviant. Peer pressure can further reinforce this, as individuals may feel compelled to conform to the expectations of their social groups. The longing for acceptance and belonging compels individuals to adhere to rules, even when they harbor a deep aversion to them.

"Norms" necessitates "abnormality". The existence of a "norm" logically creates a non-norm, or a deviation. The problem isn't the deviation itself, but the negative connotation and social consequences associated with being labeled "abnormal." The word "abnormal" is often pathologizing, othering, or stigmatizing.

Rules, by their very definition, are guidelines for behavior that carry an expectation of compliance. Whether these are codified laws or more informal social norms, their efficacy depends on the consequences of non-compliance and the fear it generates. In a society, these consequences aren't simply a matter of individual preference; they are enforced. The presence of a rule, no matter how it's created, implies a system that demands compliance. It creates a system of coercive social control.

This system, whether it's a courtroom, a body of bureaucrats, a home owner's association or a council of elders in a village, is, in essence, an expression of government. The size of the body doesn't alter its function. A small council that creates and enforces rules over a neighborhood is just as much a governing body as a large parliament representing a nation-state and passing laws on all its citizens. They both rely on coercion and hierarchy.

The argument that rules can exist without rulers is as nonsensical as the idea of a court existing without a justice system. In the absence of a governing body, rules become mere suggestions, lacking any true power or authority, and thus cease to be rules. The practical reality is that any

attempt to establish and maintain a system of rules will naturally lead to the formation of a body responsible for their creation and enforcement, thereby establishing a form of governance.

The mis-characterization of anarchy as “rules without rulers” blurs the line between voluntary interaction, or anarchy, and coercive law, or archy. When people freely interact and consent to certain behaviors, they are not creating a system of rules in the governmental sense. They are establishing personal relationships and social agreements. This is a fundamental distinction: one is based on voluntary consent, while the other is based on enforced compliance. To confuse the two is to misunderstand the very foundation of anarchic principles.

The notion that anarchy is “rules without rulers” is a flawed premise that ignores the fundamental relationship between rules and the mechanisms of their enforcement. Any system that creates and enforces rules, regardless of its scale, is a form of governance. Anarchy, in all its forms, is not a system of rules but a system that rejects centralized power in favor of voluntary cooperation and individual autonomy. The very existence of rules implies a governing body, making the phrase “rules without rulers” an oxymoron that fundamentally misrepresents the core tenets of anarchism and ends up enabling authoritarian creep.

Understanding Personal Boundaries

Some individuals deliberately blur the distinction between rules and personal boundaries to persuade us of the necessity of rules, insisting that there is no difference between the two. This tactic ultimately reinforces authority and coercion, as it positions external mandates as essential for social order while undermining personal autonomy.

Rules are established by external authorities to regulate behavior, serving as a framework for societal conduct. In contrast, personal boundaries define individual limits regarding how one wants to be treated, the types of relationships they wish to engage in, and the nature of those interactions. When these two concepts are conflated, it creates a culture where compliance with external dictates is prioritized over personal autonomy. This shift fosters coercive dynamics that compromise individual needs and emotional well-being, as people may feel pressured to conform to rules that do not align with their personal values or preferences.

Moreover, this conflation can damage trust in relationships. When a person’s deeply personal preferences and inhibitions are treated as equivalent to arbitrary rules imposed by authority figures, it can lead to feelings of invalidation and resentment. In particular, individuals in anarchist spaces may feel their boundaries are disregarded when their personal limits are mischaracterized as attempts to exert control over others. This misrepresentation can create an environment where open communication and mutual respect are stifled, further eroding trust.

Additionally, normalizing the conflation of rules and boundaries allows for the encroachment of authority into personal lives. It becomes easier for those in power to rationalize intrusive behaviors, as they can frame their actions as necessary for maintaining order rather than recognizing the importance of individual autonomy. Understanding the distinction between rules and personal boundaries is crucial for nurturing healthy relationships and promoting individual autonomy. By doing so, we can contribute to a more equitable and compassionate society, where personal needs are respected, and individuals feel empowered to assert their boundaries without fear of judgment or coercion.

Rules are upheld by coercive authority that threatens to punish those who break them, whereas boundaries depend entirely on your personal commitment to those boundaries and rest on nothing more than a promise to yourself that you will distance yourself from those who violate them. Our boundaries are independent of external rules, and anyone suggesting otherwise is likely attempting to poison the well for reasons that can only be seen as malicious.

This also applies to those who attempt to trivialize this matter by talking about board games and sports. Instructions for gameplay mechanics are obviously not rules for social relations and the existence of entertainment products shouldn't stop us from applying a consistent anarchist critique to the system of rules and rulers.

In many anarchist spaces, individuals often attempt to establish rules to combat bigotry, such as racism, but rules can't solve racism. This course of action overlooks the deep-seated beliefs and biases individuals hold, and simply imposing rules does not change these underlying attitudes. Meaningful transformation requires a commitment to education, open dialogue, and a genuine understanding of the experiences of marginalized communities. Dissuading racism necessitates deeper engagement with the complexities of human beliefs and relationships. Given the difficulties of fostering this engagement in inclusive spaces without harming those targeted by the racism, disassociating from individuals who espouse racist views is a more pragmatic approach than constructing rules that will only result in the racists learning to skirt the rules to spread their hate more covertly. I'd encourage people to assert their personal boundaries rather than hold often futile negotiations with racists over rules. If someone wishes to challenge a racist's views, it would be more effective to do so privately, without providing a public platform for hate and giving the individual the opportunity to endlessly "ruleslawyer" and in the process undermine the integrity of the space.

The Rules-Based Order

The term "rules-based order" is often used to describe the global capitalist system we currently inhabit. It's the international framework of laws, treaties, and institutions that govern interactions between nation states and, by extension, people. From the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the agreements of the World Trade Organization, the rules-based order aims to create a stable and predictable environment where the profits of free enterprise can soar. Anarchists understand that this system depends wholly on coercion, restricting freedom and punishing dissent in order to make the ruling class richer and the poor ever-more subservient to the cruel whims of their rulers.

The rules we live under aren't just suggestions; they are dictates. They are a set of non-negotiable principles, made up by people we don't know and enforced by the state and its various apparatuses, including police, courts, and military. These rules don't care about your personal feelings or willingness to consent. If you violate the rules, the consequences are applied to you regardless of whether you agreed to accept these consequences. This is in direct opposition to the core philosophy of anarchy.

Anarchy requires freedom of association absent of coercion, and asserts that all relationships should be based on mutual consent and the right to secede. It envisions a radically different existence where relationships and agreements are based on voluntary participation and mutual respect, not on a set of externally imposed mandates that are held up with punitive penalties.

The key difference between anarchy and the rules-based order we live under lies in the concept of coercion. The rules-based order is completely dependent on coercion.

Anarchists hold that if you choose to associate with others in a community, you do so because you agree to the terms of that association, and you have the right to leave if those terms no longer work for you. Anarchistic agreements between people are not dictatorial; they are the result of ongoing, fluid communication. They are optional and can be renegotiated and withdrawn from at any moment. In an anarchy, the interactions between individuals are not governed by a set of external rules but by a continuous process of negotiation and consent. This is in stark contrast to a rule-based society, where rules are imposed on individuals without their direct, ongoing consent.

The “rules-based order” is not a system you can opt out of. You are born into a nation-state, subject to its government’s laws and its authority, whether you consent or not. The borders, the taxes, the legal system, the prisons and execution chambers... These are all non-consensual impositions. They represent a fundamental lack of freedom of association and the denial of the right to secede. You can’t simply declare yourself a sovereign individual, free from the state’s reach, without facing grave consequences including imprisonment and death.

For anarchists, the idea of a “rules-based order” is a contradiction in terms. It’s a system that, while claiming to provide social harmony, does so by destroying freedom. Actual social harmony emerges organically from free people making voluntary agreements. It is a dynamic, evolving process, not a rigid, static structure imposed from above. It is a social arrangement based on consent, not on coercion.

So-Called “Natural Law”

Natural law is the idea that there are universally binding moral rules that are believed by some to be inherent in human nature, or are derived from a divine source. These rules supposedly dictate human behavior and let us know right from wrong. This idea of moral rules baked into our DNA is highly dubious because it fundamentally relies on a hierarchical external authority, whether that be a divine being, mother nature or some other cosmic force. It assumes faith in a greater power which we must all submit to, and in reality descends from highly arbitrary cultural factors, most often Christian conservative cultural values.

Far right personalities over the years from Murray Rothbard to Ayn Rand to Adolf Hitler prized natural law and used it to justify their ideological positions. Hitler’s ideology was heavily influenced by a belief in the superiority of the Aryan race. He argued that this superiority came from natural law, suggesting that the Aryan race was inherently designed by nature to dominate others. This concept of natural law was used to rationalize the subjugation and extermination of those his government deemed “inferior”. By framing their actions as aligned with natural law, the Nazis worked to legitimize their genocidal policies.

Iain Mckay, from *The Myth of “Natural Law”*:

[Natural law] gives them the means by which to elevate their opinions, dogma and prejudices to some metaphysical level where nobody will dare to criticize it, or even think about it. It smacks of religion, where “Natural Law” has replaced God’s Law. In the latter case, it gives the priest power over the believers. In the later, the ideologist over the people he or she wants to rule.

How can you be against a “Natural Law”? Its impossible. How can you argue against Gravity? If private property, for example, is elevated to such a level, who dare argue against it? Ayn Rand listed having landlords and employers with “the laws of nature”. They are not similar: the first two are social relationships which have to be enforced by the state; the “laws of nature” (like gravity, needing food, etc) are facts which do not need to be enforced. The use of “Natural Law” is an attempt to stop thinking, to restrict analysis, to force certain aspects of society off of the political agenda by giving them a divine, everlasting quality.¹

Natural law is simply a reflection of the prevailing social, cultural, and historical norms of a given society. These rules are not predetermined by God; they are created by Man. Laws governing property, justice, and even morality are not universal or eternal. They have evolved over time and differ drastically between cultures. What one society considers a “natural” rule, another might see as a ridiculous collective delusion. By presenting these divine rules as “natural,” capitalists can disguise their social engineering and make their power grabs seem inevitable, just, logical, Godly. Anarchists see through this transparent ruse, recognizing that all rules are ultimately human creations designed to serve specific interests, namely those of the ruling class.

The modern secular humanist conception of natural law parts with the need for divine authority, but maintains the fixed, external moral code that is used to justify hierarchy. Instead of God or a king, the new sovereign becomes “human nature” as interpreted, of course, by the ruling class.

Any universal law, no matter how “natural” or “rational” it claims to be, can be used by the state and related power structures to justify domination. A secular humanist government could, for example, claim that its laws against certain behaviors like homelessness or squatting are not arbitrary but are derived from “natural law” and are thus necessary for social harmony. This creates a moral justification for its use of force against individuals who dissent or live in ways that don’t conform to the prescribed “natural” order.

The idea that there exists a universal human nature from which moral law can be derived is wildly flawed. What a secular humanist identifies as a “natural” inclination, such as the creation of nuclear families, is simply a product of a specific societal structure. By defining a fixed human nature, secular natural law limits the potential for human development and justifies the oppressive status quo.

Anarchy insists on the absolute freedom and autonomy of the individual. The natural law conception flies in the face of this freedom by asserting that there are pre-determined moral boundaries that cannot be crossed. It tells people what they “ought” to do and orders them to ignore their own self-will and their own ethical code in order to serve an externally-imposed set of moral rules. If harming those who oppress us is always morally wrong, as the manufacturers of natural law would of course insist, how will we ever free ourselves from the clutches of oppression?

Iain McKay:

Natural Law, far from the being the supporter of individual freedom, is one of its greatest enemies. By placing individual rights within “Man’s” “Nature”, it creates

¹ McKay, Iain. The Myth of “Natural Law” <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/iain-macsaorsa-the-myth-of-natural-law>

an unchanging set of dogmas. Do we really know enough about humanity to dictate “Natural” and universal Laws, applicable forever? Is this not a denial of critical thinking and so individual freedom?

Anarchists believe we should be free to make our own choices, to design our own values, to set our own inhibitions. This process is dynamic and decentralized, in direct opposition to the static, top-down nature of natural law.

It would be ill-advised for anarchists to believe that we’re all governed by an intrinsic, pre-existing, non-negotiable moral code. An otherworldly entity guiding all our actions and interactions. The moment you accept that a “natural” rule exists, you’re accepting a power structure designed by someone else out of their own self-interest. This imaginary divine “lawgiver” that imposes its will on humanity is an obvious form of domination and best left to the devout candle worshippers among us.

Lazy Teachers Make Lazy Students

When newcomers are introduced to anarchist spaces, they are often taught a simplified and ultimately damaging version of the philosophy by people who insist they’d be scared off by the truth. These people present anarchy as a set of rules for social interaction as a way to ease them into things. This tactic is not only counterproductive but actively harmful to the movement, and I’d argue the people doing it don’t actually want to foster anarchy, but dumb it down to appeal to a broad audience and sap it of all meaning in the process.

Teaching new people that anarchy is simply a different set of rules that supposedly protects them from harm is the worst possible way to communicate our principles. It leads these baby anarchists to internalize the concept of authority, assuming that it can exist harmoniously with an anarchist worldview.

This is a fundamental contradiction. Anarchy, at its core, is the rejection of all authority: That no one has the right to rule over another, and that all interactions should be based on free and voluntary association.

When newcomers are told, “Here are the rules of this anarchist space,” they are being taught that authority is a necessary component of social organization, even in a supposedly anti-authoritarian environment. This deeply flawed messaging can take years, if not a lifetime, for them to unlearn. Many will never avail themselves of these misunderstandings. They’ll go on to call themselves anarchists while practicing various forms of rulership and informing hundreds of other people they come into contact with that anarchy has rules which must be followed or else.

This method of education: To treat people who are accustomed to the rules-based order with baby gloves, to avoid frightening them with the truth that anarchy is hard-earned and rejects all their rules-based assumptions, does not help anarchy; it sabotages it. It fills anarchist spaces with people who fundamentally misunderstand the core tenets of the philosophy. Instead of fostering a culture of mutual respect and self-governance, it promotes a new kind of rulership wrapped in identity politics.

Anarchist spaces, which should be models of voluntary cooperation, become micro-governments with their own sets of “correct” behaviors and “acceptable” interactions. The newcomers, having been taught that rules are the basis of social interaction, simply switch their

allegiance from one set of authorities to another. This is precisely what anarchists are fighting against! By promoting a rule-based system, these spaces become a breeding ground for the very things we seek to dismantle: hierarchies and coercive power structures.

Lying to newcomers about the nature of anarchy does a disservice to both the student and the long history of anarchy as a philosophy and social movement. It spits on the graves of all of anarchy's dead warriors. People who lived and died fighting for liberation. It is a tactic more aligned with cults and authoritarian regimes than anarchy.

Anarchy Isn't a Cult or a Communist Party

Cults and authoritarian groups like communist parties often use simplified, dogmatic teachings to indoctrinate new members, preventing them from critically engaging with the core principles, which are hidden out of sight for people low on the hierarchy.

Similarly, when certain people who inhabit anarchist spaces present their ideology as a simple rule-book aiming to keep special identity groups "safe", to lavish them with gifts (after the prophesized great event or revolution) and hide the true nature of the philosophy, they prevent newcomers from grappling with the complexities and responsibilities of actual liberation and promote a cult-like mentality in order to grow their social group and give themselves more power over new recruits.

People told everything will be provided to them if they just have faith in the cause, fall in line with the rules, chant the slogans (Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism!! Wooo!!!) and follow orders will never develop the self-sufficiency and critical thinking skills that anarchy actually requires.

Cults and authoritarian political organizations use a range of psychological and social manipulation tactics to recruit, indoctrinate, and control their members. These methods are designed to erode a person's capacity for independent thinking and sense of self, replacing it with the group's collective ideology and identity.

It's highly important to understand these coercive cult-tactics so you can identify them and spot the people in anarchist spaces who work to utilize them, either because they're authoritarian entryists themselves, or because they're unknowingly parroting what they've been taught by other entryists.

Cult recruiters target vulnerable members of society: Isolated people struggling to fit in and to meet the impossible pressures of modern life: Much like the people attracted to anarchy. They promise to give them a sense of purpose and belonging. The cult presents itself as the perfect solution to all their problems, offering a strong community and a spiritual leader (or party chair-person) who seems to understand them completely.

Love bombing is a common recruitment tactic used by cults and authoritarian political groups alike, where a new person is overwhelmed with excessive affection, attention, and compliments from cult members. They are made to feel special, validated, and like they have finally found their "family." This creates an intense emotional bond and a sense of obligation to the group, making the individual more susceptible to manipulation later on, and more likely to forgive and even enable the abuses of other members.

Once a person is drawn in, cults work to isolate them from their former support systems like friends and family. They may frame these loved ones as "negative", "toxic", "reactionary",

“counter-revolutionary” or “unenlightened” to discourage contact. This isolation makes the individual more dependent on the cult for all their social and emotional needs, making it harder for them to leave.

The organization then controls what members are allowed to see, hear, and think. They may restrict access to outside media, books, or information that contradicts the group’s beliefs, insisting these sources of information are reactionary, bigoted, individualist, lifestyleist, blasphemous, etc. This is often paired with an insular environment, like a communal living situation, where the leader or group can closely monitor and regulate every aspect of a member’s life.

Cults use repetitive and ritualistic activities like chanting, singing, repeating of ideological phrases or long, intense meetings to induce a trance-like state that makes members more susceptible to suggestion. They also introduce their own unique language and jargon to further separate members from the outside world. Any questions or criticisms of the leader or the group’s ideology are met with punishment, such as public shaming or ostracism, which reinforces conformity and discourages independent thought.

These tactics are incredibly transparent to anyone who has finely tuned critical thinking skills, which is why cults and Marxist offshoots work so hard to uphold rules that penalize independent thought or straying from the assigned reading materials.

A genuine anarchist education program would focus on fostering an environment that encourages students to cultivate critical thinking skills rooted in their own values. Rather than imposing rigid rules or doctrines, the program would empower learners to explore and articulate their ideas, promoting a sense of autonomy and self-direction. Students would be encouraged to apply these critical thinking skills to various anarchistic projects, engaging in collaborative discussions and hands-on activities that reflect their interests and ideals. This approach not only nurtures individual growth but also fosters a sense of connection and shared purpose, allowing students to envision and create alternatives to traditional structures of authority. This would encourage newcomers to question everything, including the idea of imposed rules.

By teaching students of anarchy to internalize authority, even in a subtle way, we betray the very spirit of anarchy. We teach them to be docile followers of rules rather than creators of vigorous anarchy. We strangle any potential baby anarchists have in the cradle before it can flourish.

Ultimately, the path to making anarchy is not paved with rules, entryism, lies, punishment and cult tactics, but with brutal, unapologetic honesty. To teach new people that they must accept a group’s rules and conform to their demands in order to do anarchy is to sell them a false promise and to perpetuate the very systems of control we are trying to dismantle.

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