

Do we need or want any form of government?

A.

Contents

TO BE GOVERNED	3
TO BE GOVERNED IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC	4
TO BE GOVERNED IN HOBBS' LEVIATHAN	4
TO BE GOVERNED BY A DEMOCRACY	5
TO BE GOVERNED IN GREAT BRITAIN	6
TO BE GOVERNED BY THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT	6
ANARCHISM	7

Political philosophers have examined what kind of government is, in their opinion, the best kind. In voluminous writings justifying various forms of government they either ignore or quickly dispense with the more fundamental question: **DO WE NEED OR WANT ANY FORM OF GOVERNMENT?**

What is it to be governed? And what is the alternative?

TO BE GOVERNED

To be governed is to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, regulated, enrolled, indoctrinated, censored, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom nor the virtue to do so. To be GOVERNED is to be at every operation, at every transaction noted, registered, counted, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, prevented, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished. It is, under pretext of public utility, and in the name of the general interest, to be placed under contribution, drilled, fleeced, exploited, monopolized, extorted from, squeezed, hoaxed, robbed; then, at the slightest resistance, the first word of complaint, to be repressed, fined, vilified, harassed, hunted down, abused, clubbed, disarmed, bound, choked, imprisoned, judged, condemned, shot, deported, sacrificed, sold, betrayed; and to crown it all, mocked, ridiculed, derided, outraged, dishonoured. That is government; that is its justice, that is its morality.¹

If Proudhon's description of government sounds too rhetorical or too politically prejudiced, turn to the Oxford English Dictionary for a definition of government: it says that to govern is to rule, conduct, regulate, command, curb, control, sway, influence and determine. These are the same as verbs which Proudhon uses, but they are in the active tense - the tense of the 'doer'. Most of us receive government in the tense of the 'done to'.

Why should we be ruled, conducted, regulated, commanded, curbed, controlled, swayed, influenced and determined by others?

The function of government is supposedly the control of the less enlightened by the more enlightened. Is there really one group of people more enlightened than the rest - or do they have different, rather than better, ideas? By whose standards are they judged to be more enlightened? And if there is a more enlightened group, why should they dictate to others rather than share their enlightenment with them?

Why divide men into two classes, one of which is to think and reason for the whole, and the other to take the conclusions of their superiors on trust? This distinction is not founded in the nature of things; there is no such difference between man and man as it thinks proper to suppose. The reasons that should convince us that virtue is better than vice are neither complicated nor abstruse; and the less they be tampered with by the injudicious interference of political institutions, the more they will come home to the understanding and approve themselves to the judgement of every man.²

¹ P.J. Proudhon, in Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* p. 11

² William Godwin, in Woodcock's *Anarchism* p. 76

Goldwin hints that what government does is to obscure rather than to elucidate. It deliberately keeps the majority of people in the dark in order that the few can get their own way (to power, wealth, and so on) with a minimum of opposition. Is government not an enlightened guide but a Department of Stealth and Total Obscurity?

Let us look at what it means to be governed by some of the systems of government advocated by political philosophers.

TO BE GOVERNED IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC

To be governed by the system of Plato's Republic would entail being subject to a ruling class of Guardians or Philosopher Rulers. Plato divides people into those who have an economic function and those who have a ruling or military function. The economic class may live in a capitalist structure, but the Guardians live communally with no private property and no nuclear family, in order to prevent private interest superseding the common interest in the Guardian class. The Guardians have all political power and no economic function. Plato has separated reason (the Guardians) and spirit (their Auxiliaries) from appetite (most of the people, who have an economic role). The Guardians would be thoroughly educated - but they would have no practical understanding of the people they were ruling as they would be living totally different lives. This system begs Godwin's question: why divide people into two classes...?

Plato draws the analogy between the soul and the state. If the soul and the state are each composed of reason, spirit and appetite, does it make sense to then suggest that people should stop being a balance of all three components and take up a role as either reason/Guardian, spirit/Auxiliary or appetite/economic function? This may theoretically lead to a balanced state, but how can this lead to a balanced individual?

Also, the notion of totally separate classes which do not interbreed creates a situation familiar to the Aryan philosophy of different races having different functions and different values. The horrific outcome of that kind of philosophy was realized in the slaughter of the Jews in Hitler's Germany. So to be governed in Plato's Republic is to live a totally different and separate life from the people who have political power over you.

TO BE GOVERNED IN HOBBS' LEVIATHAN

Hobbes' political philosophy rests on two assumptions: that the state of nature (i.e. people without government) is a state of war, and that everybody wants to avoid death. He moves through four abstractions - the State of Nature, the Right of Nature, the Law of Nature and the Social Contract - to reach his conclusion that the only way for people to avoid death and provide a safe and comfortable way of life for themselves was for them to acknowledge a perpetual sovereign power, against which each of them was powerless.

To be governed in Hobbes' system is to accept the power of a person or group over you because you fear that, without them keeping order, you could not survive.

The problem with both the Platonic and the Hobbesian solution is that in the interests of authority the majority of people lose their autonomy. Proponents of social contract theories such as that of Rousseau say that the solution to the conflict between authority and autonomy lies in democracy. What does it mean, to be governed by a democracy?

TO BE GOVERNED BY A DEMOCRACY

The theory of democracy is that everybody participates in government. By being both the makers and the obeyers of the law they can combine the benefits of authority with the freedoms of autonomy. The government is the executor of the people's will. In 'The Social Contract' Rousseau says:

...every person, while uniting himself with all, ... obeys only himself and remains free as before.

How does this turn out in practice?

In a unanimous direct democracy - a democracy in which every law which is passed and every decision which is made is decided upon by every person in the society to whom it will apply - it would be true to say that every person unites with all and still only obeys himself. This would be possible only in very small communities of like-minded people - possibly in kibbutzim. However, it is difficult to see what the meaning of authority is in such a situation - if people are obeying themselves then they are being autonomous, and if their opinions coincide and they all act together, they are still being autonomous. To call coinciding autonomy 'authority' is a dubious verbal solution - the notion of authority is redundant in a situation where each person obeys their own decision.

As societies are usually too big for unanimous direct democracy the more prevalent form of democracy is a representative democracy. There are various forms of representative democracy, but most of them are neither truly representative nor truly democratic.

Representative democracy entails people choosing from a limited number of candidates the one whose general political platform is nearest to their own. All the issues that the 'representative' will be deciding on will not be known at the times of the election, and of those that are known there is unlikely to be a representative for every view - let alone for every combination of views:

Suppose, for example, that in an American election there are four main issues: a farm bill, medical care for the aged, the extension of the draft, and civil rights. Simplifying the real world considerably, we can suppose that there are three alternative courses of action seriously being considered on the first issue, four on the second, two on the third, and three on the last. These are then $3 \times 4 \times 2 \times 3 = 72$ possible stands which a man might take on these four issues.³

Therefore, if in this hypothetical situation there were fewer than seventy-two different candidates then this 'representative democracy' does not preserve the autonomy of a unanimous direct democracy.

Unanimous direct democracy relies on everybody agreeing about everything. This is very rare. As soon as people disagree the notion of majority rule is introduced - everybody should abide by the decision of the majority. Under the majority rule the majority retain their autonomy and the minority (which may be as many as 49%) have to submit to authority. If the minority submit to authority then they lose their autonomy, and if they retain their autonomy by not co-operating with the government then they deny the authority of that government.

If people agree to majority rule they agree to be bound by laws which they do not will, and therefore they agree to voluntary slavery.

³ Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* p. 33

TO BE GOVERNED IN GREAT BRITAIN

In this country once every four or five years people vote in a general election. They usually vote for one of three main political platforms, which are unlikely to coincide exactly with the views many people hold. The choice is narrow - it is between three variations of a mixed economy. There is no radically different alternative within the parliamentary system. Frequently people vote not for what they consider to be the right sort of government, but for what appears to be the least worst choice. Voting is affected by which they think is the least worst for them personally; which they think is the least worst for the nation as a whole; and which they think has a chance of winning - there is a long history of people not voting for the middle party because they think it has no chance of winning. The decision is restricted still further by the information the parties choose to market - often with the aid of an advertising agency. Politics is packaged like soap powder - each year two million pounds of taxpayers' money goes to advertising companies. Recently the conservative party was proposing to spend a million pounds on anti-C.N.D. advertising. Politics is big business - and people's decisions are bound to be influenced by those in control of the business.

To be governed in a so-called democracy such as ours is to be sold the illusion that people are participating in decision-making, whilst in reality a small hierarchical group of capitalists and politicians are in control.

TO BE GOVERNED BY THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT

Revolutionary socialists and Marxists of various kinds believe that capitalism and its accompanying structure, the class-based state, must be overthrown for the majority of people (the working class) to be liberated. They propose to abolish the state by first capturing it and using to destroy capitalism. When the workers have seized control of the state machinery there will be a period which Lenin calls the dictatorship of the proletariat. This will be a reorganizing period, after which the state structure will no longer be needed and will wither away.

However, the state is a tool of the oppressor. Why should people use the oppressor's tool? Why should they abolish class society from above, rather than from below? The tool of government is modelled to implement the government of the many by the few - once a revolutionary party has seized that tool is it not in danger of losing its identity as part of the many and becoming the governing few?

The State organization, having always been, both in ancient and modern history (Macedonian empire, Roman empire, modern European states grown up on the ruins of autonomous cities), the instrument for establishing monopolies in favour of the ruling minorities, cannot be made to work for the destruction of these monopolies. The anarchists consider, therefore, that to hand over to the state all the main sources of economic life - the land, the mines, the railways, banking, insurance, and so on - as also the management of all the main branches of industry, in addition to all the functions already accumulated in its hands (education, State-supports religions, defense of the territory, etc), would mean to create a new instrument of tyranny.⁴

In an approximate sense such was the fate of the Russian revolution of 1917.

⁴ Peter Kropotkin, *Anarchism in The Essential Kropotkin* p. 109

So to be governed by the dictatorship of the proletariat is to allow the power which has been wrested from one small group of people to be entrusted in theory to the whole of the working class, but in practice only to another small group.

From Plato's Guardians to Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat, to be governed means for the majority of people to be subject to the control of a minority. To be governed means to lose your autonomy and be subject to an authority with which you may or may not agree. It might mean that you are watched, inspected, spied upon, directed in Great Britain.....in El Salvador it means that you are imprisoned, judged, condemned, shot.

So why do people *want* a government? Many, like Hobbes, believe that it is the only way to avoid chaos - they think that people are naturally selfish and chaotic and prone to kill each other. Is this true?

And why do people think they *need* a government? Is it not because they are so used to having one that they cannot imagine life without one?

Is it that they have lived so long in spite of their bonds that they think they live because of them?

ANARCHISM

Anarchism is the alternative to being governed. Anarchism means, simply, absence of government.

The word 'anarchy' held connotations of chaos, disorder and conflict due to the Hobbesian notion that without government people would be chaotic.

In the English and French revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the term 'anarchist' was used as an insult, to suggest that revolutionaries wanted anarchy in the sense of chaos. Then from 1840 onwards, following P. J. Proudhon, people started calling themselves anarchists, believing that the absence of government need not mean chaos and confusion but could actually be much better for society than the presence of government.

Anarchism is a development of liberalism and socialism. The liberal tradition is concerned with the achievement of freedom, the socialist tradition is concerned with the achievement of equality: anarchism maintains that both must be attained together. Freedom without equality leaves the poor weak and less free than the rich and strong, whilst equality without freedom makes us all slaves together. Freedom without equality is not really freedom, and equality without freedom is not really equality. Anarchism arose from the contradiction between liberalism and socialism.

The big difference between anarchism and either liberalism or socialism is that both liberals and socialists depend on the idea of government. Anarchism maintains that freedom and equality cannot be achieved within a system of government because government is, by definition, the control of people by an authoritarian structure.

There is a common assumption that without government modern civilization would crumble. Many people assume that anarchism is a kind of disorganized spontaneity.

This is the reverse of the truth. Anarchists actually want much more organization, though organization without authority. The prejudice about anarchism derives from

a prejudice about organization; people cannot see that organization does not depend on authority, that it actually works best *without* authority.⁵

When compulsion is replaced by consent there will be a need for more organization than ever before - more discussion and more planning - because there will be so many people involved in the decision-making process. Organization will take up more time, but the result will be closer to the feelings and needs of the people concerned.

Anarchism will lead to more complex organization, but it will do away with bureaucracy. Rather than being the bureaucratic instrument of one group imposing upon another, organization will be the interchange of ideas between everybody who is involved in what is being organized.

Anarchists believe that people are not necessarily competitive beings, but are capable of working together for the common good:

The principle of EACH FOR HIMSELF, which is the war of all against all, arose in the course of history to complicate, to sidetrack and paralyse the will of all against nature for the greatest wellbeing of mankind which can be completely successful only when based on the principle of ALL FOR ONE AND ONE FOR ALL.⁶

Working together in co-operation rather than being coerced into doing things would make work and every other aspect of life more meaningful and more enjoyable for every individual.

Anarchism combines the notion of solidarity with the notion of each person having control over their own life. People would have a clear understanding of what they are doing, and only do what they want to do and what they think is right, rather than be swept along blindly as they have been in the past.

Until now all human history has been only a perpetual and bloody immolation of millions of poor human beings in honor of some pitiless abstraction - God, country, power of state, national honor, historical rights, judicial rights, political liberty, public welfare.⁷

Like Marx, anarchists believe that people have been alienated by wage labour and used as pawns by the church and politicians as well as capitalists.

One of the most famous phrases of anarchist literature is Proudhon's "PROPERTY IS THEFT". This sentiment was not new - it had been part of the Diggers' outcry in the seventeenth century:

The sin of property we do disdain,
No man has any right to buy and sell the earth for private gain,
By theft and murder they took the land,
Now everywhere the walls spring up at their command.

Proudhon and the Diggers before him believed that an individual has a right to occupancy in the products of their own labour, but no further - and also that nobody has the right to misuse

⁵ Nicholas Walter, *About Anarchism* p. 7

⁶ Errico Malatesta, *Anarchy* p. 29

⁷ Michael Bakunin, *God and the State* p. 59

either their own or anybody else's products, either by expropriating, destroying or forcing them to produce something which their rightful possessors do not like or want. Thus property under capitalism is theft, because workers are stripped of the products of their labour.

To achieve anarchism the people must seize control of the means of production by social revolution - and, rather than handing them over to a socialist state, they must destroy the state apparatus and reorganize production on the basis of common ownership.

Anarcho-syndicalists base their case purely in the workplace. The French word 'syndicalism' simply means trade unionism. Anarcho-syndicalists today work within the trade union movement and aim to undo the hierarchies which have evolved within trade unions and make every individual member equally important and equally active - thus preparing the ground for an anarchist workers' revolution.

The argument against syndicalism is that, like Marxism, it sees everything in terms of the workplace and class struggle - whereas many people do not have jobs and there are many other crucial struggles such as the women's struggle and the struggles of racial minorities within a country.

Many anarchists involve themselves in a broad spectrum of struggles other than trade unionism - such as anti-militarism, racial and sexual equality, and civil liberties in general.

Some methods of political struggle with which anarchists are particularly identified are propaganda by deed, civil disobedience and direct action.

Propaganda by deed means demonstrations and uprisings which are symbolic actions designed to win useful publicity. After a wave of violent acts by individual anarchists during the 1890s this method became identified with violence, but there is no reason why it should be. Anarchism is often associated in people's minds with violence, but very few anarchists are committed to violent deeds and some anarchists are pacifists. The percentage of anarchists who have used violent means is no more than that of other political groups.

Civil disobedience is a particular kind of propaganda by deed which involves the open and deliberate breaking of a law in order to gain publicity.

Direct action used to mean the opposite of parliamentary action. In the context of the unions it means what is now more often called "industrial" action. The point is that the action is applied directly by the people involved in a situation, rather than indirectly by representatives. The aim is to win some measure of success rather than mere publicity.

So anarchism is not merely a political philosophy but a practical alternative to government which people can start to implement now.

Many anarchists get annoyed with philosophical anarchists who believe that anarchism is a nice ideal but not really achievable and are therefore happy to talk and write about anarchism but not work towards it. How do we know what is achievable until we start to work towards it?

As Marx said,

Philosophers have only INTERPRETED the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.⁸

One reason why some people believe that an anarchist society is not achievable is that they believe in something which they call "human nature". They say, "Human nature is acquisitive," and "Human nature is competitive." But nobody can really *know* these things. All we know is

⁸ Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

what people are like in the society in which we see them - and in an acquisitive and competitive society people are, on the whole, acquisitive and competitive. There are empirical reasons for this. It does not prove that people will always be like this.

Many of people's beliefs are forced on them by the ideology of the ruling class. Why else would they fight and die for what Bakunin calls "pitiless abstractions"? Why else would the oppressed people of one country fight the oppressed people of another country, instead of them all fighting their oppressors?

We do not know of any such thing as "human nature". It is used like Hobbes' "state of nature" - a fictional device dressed up as history and used to endorse the status quo. It is interesting that the status quo is usually endorsed by saying that things could be much worse without the present system, rather than saying that the present system is a good thing.

Some people say that an anarchist society would be unstable. Would it? And if it were, would that necessarily be a bad thing? What does instability mean?

Kropotkin sees the flexibility of an anarchist society as an advantage rather than a problem:

...such a society would represent nothing immutable. On the contrary - as is seen in organic life at large - harmony would (it is contended) result from an ever-changing adjustment and readjustment of equilibrium between the multitudes of forces and influences, and this adjustment would be the easier to obtain as none of the forces would enjoy a special protection from the state.⁹

When there is no longer government, irrelevant traditions which have become fossilized in our way of life will be dispensed with. Instead of an anomalous jumble of past and present we shall have a society which is a true reflection of the people in it at any particular time.

Critics of anarchism often ask, "What about law and order?" They are concerned that without "law and order" everything would go wrong. But what is this law and order that they talk so highly of? It is the laws of the ruling class, imposed by the police to defend the status quo. These laws frequently do not have a value in themselves, but are modelled to defend the ruling class and most particularly to defend its property from those who think it should be distributed more fairly. As the Diggers said,

They make their laws to chain us well...

And these laws can be altered when they no longer suit the ruling class. In February this year the law was altered concerning Greenham Common - the deeds of the land were revoked in an attempt to stop the women's protest against cruise missiles. A similar incident occurred to stop the Diggers in the seventeenth century when common land was enclosed.

People also ask: "What about exchange?" and many other important questions about how an anarchist society will run. The only answer is that nobody knows. The whole point about an anarchist society is that it will be what its members want it to be. So nobody can prescribe what it will be like. It will evolve from the contributions of all its members.

Anarchism is the most radical political philosophy. It is easier to say what it will not be than what it will be - it will not be a system with a government, but what it will be will be determined by the people who make it.

⁹ Peter Kropotkin, *Anarchism in The Essential Kropotkin* p. 108

It is a philosophy which combines autonomy and solidarity by putting faith in people rather than institutions.

Anarchism is often described as destructive. It is destructive only of government, bureaucracy, classes, class-based laws, bourgeois ideology, property stolen from the wage-slave - i.e. it is destructive of capitalism and the state apparatus - which *must* be destroyed before people can be free and equal.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



A.
Do we need or want any form of government?
1983

A pamphlet.

theanarchistlibrary.org