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Anarchism Without Adjectives

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February 2nd, 2015

Schematic designs for a new society seem to be really popular among self-described anarchists of all stripes. On the Right, we have Rothbard's model for an entire society modelled whole-cloth on a "libertarian law code" deduced from axioms like self-ownership and the non-aggression principle. Within the historic anarchist movement of the Left, we have uniform templates like syndicalism or Kropotkinist communism. And the same tendency can be found among quasi-anarchistic libertarian socialist models like De Leonism and the World Socialist Movement; the latter assumes the creation of a communist society by persuading all the countries in the world to vote in their precise model of social organization through the political process, within a short time frame. And if all this isn't bad enough there's Parecon, for god's sake.

The "anarchism without adjectives" position was a reaction to this kind of doctrinaire model-building, and the resulting conflicts between the proponents of various totalizing blueprints for society — most notably the late-19th century conflict between individualists, represented by Ben-

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jamin Tucker, and communists, represented by Johann Most. Although the term was first used by a couple of Spanish anarchists, Ricardo Mella and Fernando Terrida del Marmol (whom Voltairine de Cleyre met in London in 1897). Errico Malatesta and Max Nettlau adopted the position, and de Cleyre and Dyer Lum became its most visible American proponents. The basic idea was that anarchists should stop feuding over the specific economic model of a future anarchist society, and leave that for people to work out for themselves as they saw fit. Economic ideas like Proudhon's mutualism, Tucker's individualist free enterprise and Kropotkin's communism were complementary, and in a post-state society a hundred flowers would bloom from one locality, one social grouping, to the next.

David Graeber has argued for something like this. He expresses skepticism that anything like anarcho-capitalism could exist for very long on a significant scale, with a large number of people willingly working as wage laborers for a minority, so long as access to the means of production is relatively easy and there are no cops to exclude people from vacant land. After all, Robinson Crusoe's "master" relationship over Friday depended on him having already "appropriated" the entire island and having a gun. But so long as economic arrangements are a matter of negotiation between equals, and nobody's in a position to call in men with guns to enforce their will on others, he's happy to just wait and see what happens.

So what can we say about the general outlines of a stateless society? First, it will emerge as a result of the ongoing exhaustion, hollowing out and retreat of large hierarchical institutions like state, corporation, large bureaucratic university, etc. It will generally be based on some kind of horizontalism (prefigured by movements like the Arab Spring, M15 and Occupy) combined with self-managed local institutions. Second, its building blocks will be the counter-institutions cropping up everywhere even now to fill the void left as state and corporation erode:

Community gardens, permaculture, squats, hackerspaces, alternative currency systems, commons-based peer production, the sharing economy, and in general all forms of social organization based on voluntary cooperation and new ultra-efficient technologies of small-scale production. And third, to the extent that it reflects any common ideology at all, it will be an attachment to values like personal autonomy, freedom, cooperation and social solidarity. But the specifics will be worked out in a thousand particular ways, far too diverse to be encompassed by any verbal model like “communism” or “markets” (in the sense of the cash nexus).

I expect a wide variation in small-scale institutions, both within and between communities: workers’ collectives, business firms, cooperatives, p2p networks, etc. Multi-family social units like squats, cohousing projects and extended family compounds may take practice autarkic communism internally and take advantage of small-scale machinery to meet most of their needs through direct production, while obtaining the rest through exchange on the market. Property rules in land and enterprise ownership will vary from one community to the next.

Even if we stipulate starting from basic assumptions like the broadest understanding of self-ownership and the nonaggression principle (not that even a majority of the anarchist movement actually comes from the philosophical tradition which regards these as words to conjure with), that means very little in terms of the practical rules that can be deduced from them. There is simply no way, starting from basic axioms like self-ownership and nonaggression, to deduce any particular rules that are both obvious and necessary on issues like (for example) whether I have the right to intervene to stop an animal being tortured by its “owner,” or what the specific rules should be for squatters’ rights and constructive abandonment of a property long left idle.

Even the definition of physical aggression against an individual is, to a large extent, culturally defined. The surrounding

environment impinges on the physical body in a million different ways, and the boundary between those that are considered aggressive and those not (like photons or sound waves that physically affect the sensory organs and subsequently the nervous system and internal mental state) is somewhat arbitrary. The same is true for varying cultural definitions of the boundary between person and environment, and how much of the surrounding physical environment not actually part of the human body can be regarded as an extension of the self or an envelope of “personal space.” Bear in mind that common law definitions of assault assume such a spatial envelope, and include actions short of physically touching another person’s body with one’s own.

Any post-state society will include both individuals and communities adhering to many conflicting ideas of just what “freedom,” “autonomy” and “rights” entail. Whatever “law code” communities operate by will be worked out, not as obvious logical deductions from axioms, but through constant interaction between individuals and groups asserting their different understandings of what rights and freedom entail. And it will be worked out after the fact of such conflicts, through the practical negotiations of the mediating and adjudicating bodies within communities.

In other words, we need to spend less time like Thomas More drafting out all the details of a future libertarian utopia, right down to the food and architecture, and spend more time talking to our neighbors and figuring out ways of cooperating and getting along without the state telling us what to do.