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The Power of Anarchist Analysis

**How anti-authoritarian thinking makes the world
clearer.**

Nathan J. Robinson

December 5, 2019

“Question everything.” I always liked that phrase, and might have claimed to be among those who did indeed question everything. But if I am being honest, for a long time it was more like a coffee mug cliché. It didn’t mean very much. I didn’t actually question everything. At most, I questioned a thing or two here and there.

I have begun, however, to question more things. And I strongly recommend it. In fact, if you do it, if you *really* do it, some rather remarkable things might be on the horizon. The world would be a better place if we all spent a bit more time using an “anarchist analysis.”

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I first fell in love with Anarchism when I took a college class called “Red Flags, Black Flags: Marxism v. Anarchism.” I couldn’t, when I began it, have told you anything about anarchism; to the extent I understood it, it just seemed a kind of

mindless rejection of all government. The class, however, introduced me to it by way of a debate: an intra-left dispute between the anarchists and the Marxists. It is a debate that changed the way I think about everything.

First, the existence of anarchistic socialists instantly showed the idea of socialism as “state control” could not be true. In fact, economic socialism was about popular/worker/common control, and whether or not that was done through means of the state was a hot source of contention. But I liked the anarchists most because they asked penetrating and useful questions and refused to defer to authority. They warned that unless socialists had as strong a commitment to liberty as they did to equality, supposedly socialistic regimes might end up oppressing the people in the name of freeing them. Mikhail Bakunin warned that “socialism without liberty is slavery and brutality,” and “when the people are being beaten with a stick, they are not much happier if it is called ‘the People’s Stick.’” P.J. Proudhon, in a letter to Karl Marx, offered a prescient caution against left intellectuals seeing themselves as infallible proponents of new unquestionable dogmas:

Let us seek together, if you wish, the laws of society, the manner in which these laws are realized, the process by which we shall succeed in discovering them; but, for God’s sake, after having demolished all the a priori dogmatisms, do not let us in our turn dream of indoctrinating the people; do not let us fall into the contradiction of your compatriot Martin Luther, who, having overthrown Catholic theology, at once set about, with excommunication and anathema, the foundation of a Protestant theology... let us carry on a good and loyal polemic; let us give the world an example of learned and far-sighted tolerance, but let us not, merely because we are at the head of a movement, make ourselves the leaders of a new in-

tolerance, let us not pose as the apostles of a new religion, even if it be the religion of logic, the religion of reason. Let us gather together and encourage all protests, let us brand all exclusiveness, all mysticism; let us never regard a question as exhausted, and when we have used our last argument, let us begin again, if need be, with eloquence and irony. On that condition, I will gladly enter your association. Otherwise — no!

It was a warning that many of those who flew the red flag ought to have listened more closely to.

Anarchists could be quarrelsome, and often impractical—a famous anarchist slogan is “demand the impossible.” But they were also wonderfully clear-sighted: An anarchist never conspired in the delusion that a clearly oppressive society was a place of freedom. There is a wonderful scene in the film *Dr. Zhivago* where Klaus Kinski has a cameo as an anarchist imprisoned on a train carrying forced labor. Kinski’s anarchist declares himself “the only free man on the train” because he is the only one willing to call the guard a “lickspittle” and a “liar” to his face after the guard claims Kinski is there as a “voluntary” laborer.

When I read the writings of Peter Kropotkin, Alexander Berkman, Errico Malatesta, or Emma Goldman, I was impressed by their force and clarity. Goldman, in *My Disillusionment in Russia*, wrote frankly and honestly about how her hopes about the freedom to be found in the Soviet Union had been dashed during her visit to it:

I had come to Russia possessed by the hope that I should find a new-born country, with its people wholly consecrated to the great, though very difficult, task of revolutionary reconstruction. And I had fervently hoped that I might become an active

part of the inspiring work. I found reality in Russia grotesque, totally unlike the great ideal that had borne me upon the crest of high hope to the land of promise... I saw before me the Bolshevik State, formidable, crushing every constructive revolutionary effort, suppressing, debasing, and disintegrating everything.

Importantly, though, Goldman's disillusionment did not lead her to become a conservative anti-communist. She remained a revolutionary socialist, because she had a vision of socialism that was both anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian. I often think that anarchism's slogan should be "Actually, Both of Those Things Are Bad," because of its commitment to rejecting false dichotomies and declining to join one "camp" or the other.

My appreciation of anarchism was deepened by my reading of Noam Chomsky, who identifies himself as operating within the anarchist tradition. Many anarchists are skeptical of whether Chomsky "is" an anarchist, because he endorses plenty of social democratic policies, thought you should vote for Hillary Clinton if you lived in a swing state, and is not a revolutionary. His political approach is highly pragmatic. His intellectual approach, however, is thoroughly anarchistic. He often speaks about the anarchist approach to the legitimacy of authority:

"Authority, unless justified, is inherently illegitimate and that the burden of proof is on those in authority. If this burden can't be met, the authority in question should be dismantled."

That doesn't mean that there are no legitimate authorities. But it does mean that no authority is *presumptively* legitimate. The king's orders might be good ones, but they are not good

and *therefore* helps prevent small injustices from becoming normalized and rationalized and mutating into very large ones. I would probably no longer describe my politics as anarchist. But I would say that every person should try to be an anarchist at least several times a day. It would make everything clearer and we might all be better off. In fact, who knows what we might accomplish once we see things for what they really are?

This essay is dedicated to my great anarchist comrade Oren Nimni.

For a rich and comprehensive introduction to Anarchist philosophy, read the Anarchist FAQ. For a Current Affairs podcast discussion about Anarchy, listen here.

because he is the king, and their being good does not necessarily make kings good or necessary. Your professor may be right, but they are not right because they are your professor.

Interestingly, Chomsky's anarchistic approach is one way in which his twin intellectual endeavors (linguistics and political critique) are unified. Chomsky has always brushed aside the common question: "What connects your linguistic work with your analysis of U.S. foreign policy?" by correctly pointing out that there is almost nothing in common between "understanding the deep roots of human language use" and "criticizing the United States for dropping bombs on Vietnamese people." However, one way in which these two parts of his life *are* united is that in each domain, he achieved his insights through applying the anarchistic "presumption against existing authority." His influential critique of behaviorist explanations for the development of language, and his precipitation of a "revolution" in linguistics, came from a willingness to ask simple questions that challenged conventional wisdom. Likewise, Chomsky's writings on U.S. foreign policy frequently focus on how powerful actors use euphemisms to cover up atrocities. He does not accept justifications for wars because they come from foreign policy think tanks, or because the person offering them has elite credentials and a binder in front of them labeled "evidence." He points to simple questions that do not receive satisfactory answers. (For example, why was the Vietnam War not being classified as a "U.S. invasion of Vietnam," even though that was plainly what it was? Why is an act committed by the United States never labeled terrorism even when it is identical to an act committed by one of our enemies?)

In discussing how to study human beings, Chomsky famously invoked the example of a "Martian visiting Earth." The Martian would be something of an anarchist, in that they would not have any reason to accept our justifications for things until we satisfied their questions. The Martian might notice things about us that we do not notice about ourselves,

like seeing a unified human language structure rather than a set of many different languages. The Martian might be puzzled when you tried to explain what a nation-state was and why it mattered, or why we use chromosomal sex as an important category for classifying human beings, or why we have cars. This kind of “defamiliarization”—trying to see things we take for granted as if you are seeing them for the first time—is very powerful at generating creative insights. My friend Albert Kim says he has a much better understanding of politics whenever he tries to imagine our own society as if he is a teenager reading about it in a history book, 2000 years in the future. How does, for example, the greater attention paid to Trump and Ukraine over climate change look to students two millennia from now?

The anarchist has a brain that won’t shut up. They cannot keep themselves from asking “What is this? What is it *for*? Must things be this way? Can they be different?” Children, of course, ask questions like these, and one reason I like anarchists is that they refuse to stop asking questions that we all had as children but never received satisfactory answers to. If you asked: Why are some people very rich and other people very poor, and why do the rich people not just give the poor people enough money, you were probably fed some bullshit that doesn’t really make sense. Some of us just stop asking questions eventually, but anarchists are uncommonly stubborn people who do not accommodate themselves to the society around them no matter how intense the pressure. Chomsky speaks of the “willingness to remain puzzled” and to keep asking simple questions. This can make them difficult, but it also means that they are like George Bernard Shaw’s “unreasonable man”: The reasonable person adapts themselves to the world, while the unreasonable person waits for the world to adapt itself to them.

That can mean that anarchism becomes a selfish and individualistic creed, of course, and that strain has always run through

It is worth noting the function of privilege in all of this. One reason I am *able* to entertain wilder notions and ask more critical questions is that I am in a position that is relatively insulated from consequence. My only “boss” is the readership of *Current Affairs*. I can dissent without having to be a “dissident.” Many people must stifle their questions not because those questions go away, but because they have no choice. If a worker in an Amazon warehouse asks: “Hey, why does the *robot* get to decide whether or not to fire me?” then the robot will probably decide their “cultural compatibility score has dropped below the threshold level” or something, and they will be fired. The Jim Crow system was outrageous and unjust, but any person who spoke out would be terrorized and murdered. Plenty of people notice things wrong but cannot do or say anything about them.

This, though, is why those of us who *do* have comfort and privilege have such a responsibility to relentlessly attack unjustified authority. If we find ourselves in a position of comfort, where there is no punishment for speaking out except the mild feeling of social discomfort that comes from being laughed at and told you’re an idiot who needs to Read More Economics or whatever, then you have much less of an excuse. It’s rather gross when privileged people who do not really have anything to lose still do not take correct moral stances, when it is much easier for us than for anyone who faces real harms and threats.

It can be very satisfying to feel like “the only free person on the train,” the one who sees emperors in their full nudity. It can make you feel less insane and alienated from the world. But it can also make you an asshole, which Socrates and Kinski’s laborer both were, and prevent you from making the compromises necessary to work with and live with other people. One has to be careful. Still, I like anarchists because I feel as if they would be the ones shouting “Put down your weapons! You are free to choose!” as the soldiers came to drag them away. The anarchist will not tolerate even the pettiest of injustices,

als be the only ones who understand things. Anarchists are generally pro “decentralization”: They do not like concentrated power, and they raise important questions about how we can balance the need to accomplish things with making sure there is mass participation. (Occupy’s general assemblies with their consensus process were an example of anarchist democracy, which is beautiful and uncommonly inclusive but often maddeningly inefficient.)

Anarchist thinking will help you avoid error. It helped me in 2016, for instance. Because I have an anarchistic mindset, I wasn’t satisfied with pundits’ predictions that Donald Trump would fail, which seemed to conflict with things I knew about reality. And I didn’t understand why Democrats thought that they could nominate a candidate under active FBI investigation without that being a massive electability risk. People kept *saying* things were true, but you need to “remain puzzled” and ask whether they actually *are* true. People say Pete Buttigieg is a progressive. I, as an anarchist, decided to read his memoir to find out whether this was true. It turned out that it was not.

I am not uniquely knowledgeable about politics. Many people know many more facts than I do. What I do have is an anarchistic disposition, and this helps me notice things that are frequently missed. The anarchist thinks to themselves: “I wonder if that person is distorting the findings of the study, perhaps I had better read the primary source and find out,” because they are disinclined to be deferential. And lo and behold, the person *was* distorting the findings of the study. If you were not a radical skeptic, you would never have found out! This same tendency led me to think: This celebrated “intellectual,” Jordan Peterson—I wonder if, when I read his magnum opus, *Maps of Meaning*, I will find it is mostly nonsense. And it was. When I see celebrated intellectuals like Steven Pinker being hailed for their reasoning, it makes me *more skeptical*, so I actually go through their works carefully to judge for myself whether Bill Gates’ effusive blurbs are justified.

the tradition. But it doesn’t have to, and we can accommodate ourselves practically to reality while refusing to change our ultimate beliefs. An example of that is the anarchist lawyer. A lawyer often has to make arguments they do not really believe. For example, in one case, they will argue that instead of looking at the letter of the law, we should look at the intent of the lawmaker, because the intent of the lawmaker is more favorable to their position. Then, in the next case, they will argue that we must look at the letter of the law, not its intent, because that is more favorable to the next client. Or you might have to accept premises that you don’t really buy. If you are an immigration lawyer, you might have to say that your client’s status is protected under X part of the statute, so they should get to stay in the country, even though really you couldn’t give a fig about the authority of the statute and actually all you care about is justice, and you’d still think they ought to stay even if the statute said the exact opposite thing.

So, as a matter of practical reality, sometimes we have to defer to authority. In an academic paper, someone might find themselves writing: “Robinson (2016) in his classic paper, said that...” And they might not cite Robinson because they believe Robinson was insightful, but because they know that the Scholarly Literature finds Robinson very important and the professor will expect them to cite Robinson. It is essential, though, that we try to resist doing this, and constantly try to decide for *ourselves* whether we think Robinson was right or wrong.

Let me give you a few examples of radical positions that the anarchist intellectual approach has brought me to.

- Democratic Workplaces — A simple question: Why do you get to vote for who your congressperson is but not for who your boss is at work? Why can Amazon workers not vote to throw Jeff Bezos out of office if they think he’s doing a bad job? The principle of democracy is that people should have a say in decisions that affect their

lives. But workplaces are intensely undemocratic places. As Elizabeth Anderson points out, politically they follow the structure of dictatorships: The people at the top tell the people what to do but cannot be removed by the people at the bottom. We accept the top-down structure as natural in the institution of the corporation when we do not accept it in the institution of government.

- Open Borders — Borders between countries do not make sense. They did not exist for most of human history. The idea that because you sprang into existence in one place, you wouldn't be allowed to go to another place, is absurd. Each person should have an equal right to move freely about the world. As a practical matter, it may be difficult to unilaterally open one's borders, but it is very clear that a borderless world is not only possible but necessary to keep the world from being absurd and irrational.
- Militaries and Nuclear Weapons — The institution of a military might be bizarre from the perspective of our Martian. It is a colossal waste of human resources that exists only because humans have not found ways to cooperate that do not involve threatening each other with death. Once again, unilateral disarmament might not be feasible. But putting uniforms on people and have them prepare to be ready to murder each other at any moment is an idea that humans should someday be laughing about as they look back over the bloody prehistory of civilization. (Civilization being a thing we may achieve someday in the future once we learn what that would actually entail.)
- Bureaucracy — Bureaucracies often survive because they are accepted. The anarchist asks: How much of this paperwork is truly necessary? Is it really necessary for this regulation to be 800 pages long?

looked around us and demanded that the world justify itself, and the world has shrugged and answered "I guess I can't."

The economist Joan Robinson reported that after she pointed out that an important part of neoclassical economic theory was incoherent, other economists admitted she was right, but simply continued as if she hadn't proven what she had proven, because it was not clear how they could do otherwise. If, in political cases, the Supreme Court decides based on their political values, as we know they do, rendering their stated reasoning specious and their opinions worthless, we might no longer respect what the court has to say. But it's still there. There are going to be cases tomorrow, too. And the justices are going to have to keep doing *something*. Social constructs are not less real for being constructs. You can point out that money has no reality apart from our belief in it, and that there is no theoretical reason why we couldn't believe in "something else" but this is a practically useless discovery on its own.

In fact, anarchistic questions are often frightening, because once we "deconstruct" various certainties, it can be unclear what to put in their place. One of the main anarchist slogans is "no gods, no masters," but having gods and masters makes it easy to avoid the problem of having to decide what to do; the decision has already been made for you. If it is not fair to have a class of capitalists and a class of laborers, then what kinds of alternative ownership structures do we need? It is because socialists struggle with those incredibly difficult questions that they are often dismissed as impractical dreamers. But note that the impossibility to precisely describe alternatives does not mean that a person is wrong: A peasant objecting to feudalism need not have come up with an "alternate" way of doing things to have a sound objection.

The anarchist tradition is also strongly democratic. If you read old anarchist books, you will find that they are accessible, because anarchists believe in the "democratization of knowledge" and are suspicious of having a small class of intellectu-

mean “you must design things that look like the things that are currently designed.” A minimalist aesthetic is enforced and nobody is allowed to produce anything that looks like it could have been erected before 1945. You only very rarely see truly interesting new experiments (like New Andean architecture in Bolivia).

- Aliens — Okay, this is just a fun one, but why is it that people don’t think more about aliens? Why *do* people who “believe in aliens” seem weird? The universe is unfathomably gigantic. To believe we are the only intelligent life in it requires thinking that we are *the most special things that have ever lived*. I think it is far more likely that we are not special enough for aliens to think worth visiting, or (and this would be quite sad) that there is plenty of intelligent life in the universe, but the realities of physics mean it is impossible for many of them to find one another.
- Academic authority — It is difficult to make an original contribution to an established field of knowledge, but you’re much more likely to do it if you start thinking like an anarchist and scrutinizing every word of every assertion in the existing literature to see if you really buy it. This is what Socrates did, in a way, and it is what made him a great philosopher. (It also made him so annoying that people murdered him.)

Anarchism is very powerful as an analytical tool, but less so as a guide for action. So we have discovered that major arguments for private property are fallacious, or we have discovered that militaries are the absurd result of a failure to solve what should be quite basic problems of cooperation. We have

- Property — Private property is a peculiar construct. What does it consist of? What does it mean for a thing to be “mine”? In terms of law, it means that I have the right to exclude other people from using it by force, and that if they attempt to do certain things to it, I can stop them. Proudhon pointed out that the origin of these rights was very mysterious. If we start out with a world owned by all, how do people develop the right to carve off bits of it and exclude others from using them?
- Religious Authority — I do not mean to disparage all religion or religious belief here, but the most powerful revolutions in human thought have often come from those willing to question religious *authority*: declining to accept the explanations offered to them by clergy. Today, many children in the United States still grow up in fervently Christian communities that tell them obvious lies about the world, but it is difficult to be a dissident against your parents, pastor, and even friends.
- Scientism — In correctly rejecting the absolute authority of religious texts and asserting a belief in the independence of mind, some atheists themselves forget the importance of questioning. People like Sam Harris, for instance, speak in the name of a thing they called Reason, but because they are not anarchistic enough, because they do not scrutinize those who profess a love for science with the same intensity that they scrutinize the religious, they end up being unreasonable in the name of Reason, and practicing “scientism” (a thing that looks like science and uses its rhetoric) rather than actual science.
- The Law — I majored in political philosophy, and I did so in part because I was fascinated by simple questions like: Why should people obey our laws? It turns out that

many of the simple answers to questions like this do not really hold up under scrutiny. Take the Constitution: It is not a democratically legitimate document. The majority of the country (women, black people, Native people) was excluded from participating in the drafting and ratification. It fails the tests that we would use to determine whether laws have moral authority. And yet we ask people to respect its authority, and the Supreme Court overturns *democratically legitimate* laws that are inconsistent with this democratically illegitimate document.

- Gender and Racial Hierarchy — Feminism is born from rational thinking, from refusing to defer to social tradition and prejudice and demanding answers for why things are the way they are. People like Ben Shapiro are not anarchists: They accept simplistic conceptions of what gender is and do not interrogate them or try to formulate better and more sensible concepts. Likewise with racism: Shapiro does not pause to ask himself why he finds black names funny, and Charles Murray does not scrutinize his own preference for European culture. Both science and the study of history are enriched by feminism and anti-racism, which correct for the bias that comes from certain perspectives and voices being excluded from mainstream analysis and therefore leading to falsehoods being accepted as truth.
- Animals — Many of us engage in a glaring act of moral inconsistency: If someone mutilated a live dog in front of us, we would consider that person psychopathic, yet we accept the mass industrialized killing of intelligent creatures for food as somehow not being psychopathic. Once you start to think about it, and realize just how much harm is inflicted on (and will keep being inflicted on) creatures other than ourselves, who cannot speak,

cannot vote, and do not own property, it becomes clear that animal welfare has to be at the forefront of our moral priorities.

- Prisons — Prisons are peculiar. Instead of solving the social problem of victimization, we decide to lock anyone who violates the law in a box for a period of time. Locking people in a squalid cage would seem like an inherently inhumane and senseless thing to do and yet it is the go-to solution, and the freest country in the world also imprisons the most people. Let us all agree that prison abolition, at least in the long term, is the only sensible position, and that the only debate worth having is how quickly we can get there.
- Private Schools — Many people say they believe in “equal opportunity.” But they do not take this seriously. Why are there private schools? Private schools exist so that some children can get an unfair advantage over other children. Their very existence makes equal opportunity impossible. One need not even believe in the supposedly more radical concept of “equal outcome” to realize that private schools are incompatible with a fair society.
- Contemporary Architecture — It’s funny, it seems like this should be a comparatively uncontroversial one, but I get the most hate mail when I write about architecture, which only encourages me (as a stubborn anarchist) to be more provocative. To me, it is obvious that something has gone deeply and troublingly wrong with built spaces. They are not just undemocratic but they also do not provide feelings of aesthetic bliss. Architectural consensus is actually more rigid than the consensus you’ll find almost anywhere else. If you try building something like this or this or this you will be laughed at. There is a dogma that buildings must look “like their time,” which is used to