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What Trump Doesn't Understand About Anarchists

Sophie Hayssen

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At the peak intensity of nationwide protests against police violence, social media was flooded with videos of officers beating and driving cars into protesters. News outlets questioned whether “outside agitators” had infiltrated the demonstrations and circulated images of defaced and looted storefronts, sparking debate about what was deemed “acceptable” protest behavior. In the midst of all of this, there seemed to be one word on many pundits’ and politicians’ lips: anarchy.

President Donald Trump and his administration, in particular, have been preoccupied with labeling protesters as “anarchists.” “These are anarchists. These are not protesters,” Trump said in July amid the ongoing protests in Portland. During a June 29 press conference, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany proclaimed, “Law and order are the building blocks to the American Dream, but if anarchy prevails, this dream comes crumbling down,” before proudly announcing that the administration had arrested “over 100 anarchists for rioting and destruction of federal property.”

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The portrayal of anarchists by the president and right-wing media outlets as Molotov cocktail-throwing, black-clad agitators, is not only incorrect, but dangerous. It allows Trump to seize on false narratives like “Portland is burning,” depicting the city as full of violence and engulfed in chaos, giving himself an excuse to do things like send federal agents to use tear gas against peaceful protesters. He then uses these narratives to commend himself as the “law and order” president and try to boost his reelection chances.

“On the national scale, anarchism has become this scapegoat for a way to talk about violence in a way that obscures the violence of the state,” Theresa Warburton, associate professor of English and affiliate faculty of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Western Washington University, told Refinery29. “That threat is so real to the legitimacy of the state that they need to create this narrative of violent anarchists that are dangerous to the community that then the state can protect everyday citizens from. In reality, what we’re seeing with the defund police movement is that when people aren’t stuck in that threat that the state is manufacturing and hear the ideas, a lot of people are like, ‘Oh yeah, that makes sense.’”

Trump & co.’s vilification of anarchists also completely misses the point of what anarchism actually is: a philosophy that is deeply concerned with oppression, its origins, and how to best achieve liberation, and that envisions a society based on cooperation as opposed to competition. With the multiple tragedies of the past year, which have highlighted the ways in which the U.S. government and capitalist economy privilege the powerful, anarchism has arguably never been more necessary than at the current moment. Trump’s woeful mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic; the many police killings of Black people including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade; police violence against protesters — all of these stories draw attention to the staggering scope of the state’s power and call into question what the purpose of this power is. All of this is to say: Anarchism is deeply relevant right now.

It should come as no surprise that anarchist groups are stepping up for Black Lives Matter given their broadly overlapping values. “I think the horizontal organizing mode of Black Lives Matter resonates for many anarchists because of the challenge to state power that is core to the exposure of government-authorized police killings of Black people, as well as the fact that Black Lives Matter is not an ‘organization,’ but is a highly organized social movement comprised of chapters across the United States and beyond,” J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, a Native Hawaiian professor of American Studies at Wesleyan University, told Refinery29.

When it comes to the police, anarchist groups argue that reform inadequately addresses the issue of brutality. The Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Council (MACC), an anarchist group whose guiding principles are “horizontalism, anti-oppression, mutual aid, direct democracy, and direct action,” praises the alternative campaign #8toAbolition, which it argues reflects “a step in the direction of an abolitionist vision, in which the carceral state, and all states, are obsolete.”

Since the Black Lives Matter protests began in May, MACC has played an active role in NYC demonstrations. Their jail and court support group provides essential assistance when protesters are arrested and forced to navigate a complex, dehumanizing legal system. MACC member Marisa Holmes told Refinery29 that their court support “entails calling the precincts and booking locations, finding where you are and if you’re ‘on the docket’ for arraignment, showing up to be there when the charges are read, providing bail if you need it, having food and other essentials ready, and just giving you a big hug.”

MACC’s work is representative of the values anarchism is grounded in, which include community and cooperation, rather than a hierarchy. One of the ways in which these are practiced is mutual aid, a term that was coined in 1902 by anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin as a rebuttal to Social Darwinism. The principles of mutual aid can be found in recent Black Lives Matter protests

through calls to support community bail funds and donate masks, food, and other supplies to protesters.

“Capitalism needs oppressive hierarchies based around class, race, gender, dis/ability, and more embedded within it to maintain itself,” William C. Anderson, writer, activist, and co-author of *As Black As Resistance*, told Refinery29. “We want to see a world free from this sort of brutality. Anarchists reject the oppression and exploitation that is intrinsic to the capitalistic terror we live under. Anarchists reject the oppressive nature of states as well.”

On the spectrum of left-wing thought, anarchism is distinct from communism and socialism in its total rejection of the state. However, these philosophies aren’t mutually exclusive. Some anarchists, for instance, define themselves as anarcho-communists, who want to abolish the state and put the means of production in the hands of the people. The full list of anarchist schools of thought is long, but includes anarcho-syndicalism, anarcho-feminism, green anarchism, Black anarchism, and individualist anarchism, which is similar to libertarianism. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, early anarcho-feminists issued scathing critiques of marriage long before second-wave feminism and sought to reimagine partnership in a way that prioritized love over economic arrangements.

The first person to identify themselves as an anarchist philosophically was likely Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in 1840, although anarchism’s central ideas predate him. Proudhon saw the “government of man by man” as oppressive and envisioned a society with the foundational values of “equality, law, independence, and proportionality.” Anarchism, which comes from the ancient Greek word *anarchos*, meaning “without rulers,” has since expanded beyond Proudhon’s vision to include a total opposition to all forms of domination and a belief that society should run via voluntary cooperation as opposed to coercion.

Although it has a long and rich history, Anderson explained that misunderstanding of anarchism has persisted for much of its

existence. “Anarchists like Kropotkin have spoken to anarchism as a term and people associating it with violence. Black anarchist Kuwasi Balagoon said we shouldn’t ‘permit people of other ideologies to define Anarchy.’ Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin has warned us, too, that anarchists will face attacks from the right and the left ‘because anarchists hold that all authority and coercion must be struggled against,’” he said.

He concluded, “So a lot of this is a willful distortion to keep people from understanding what’s at the core of many anarchists’ desires for a better world.”