

What is an Anarchist? Am I an Anarchist?

Where are the Limits of Anarchism?

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“Anarchism” is a very broad and uncertain term. Probably most of the public think that anarchists are for breaking windows and blowing things up, unaware that many anarchists are absolute pacifists. Meanwhile, those who identify themselves as anarchists sometimes define anarchism as their particular school of thought. They regard other anarchists as not really anarchists at all.

Taking me as an example: In my years of trying to work out a particular anarchist perspective, I have repeatedly been told that I am no sort of anarchist or that what I advocate is not genuine anarchism.

1. Most recently I have been informed that what I advocate is not anarchism, because I am for democracy. I have called anarchism “extreme democracy”, or “democracy without the state.” Others have informed me that “an-archy” means “no rule” while “demo-cracy” means “rule of the people;” therefore they are supposedly incompatible. And anyway, isn’t “democracy” the ideological cover for U.S. imperialism?
2. I have been called a “Marxist,” because I think that there are aspects of Marx’s Marxism which can be useful for anarchists—in particular, Marx’s political economy. (It is also noted that before I was an anarchist I had been a Marxist, of an unorthodox, dissenting, Trotskyist variety.)
3. I have been denounced for accepting technology and civilization, which are regarded as inherently oppressive and statist, and therefore un-anarchist.
4. I believe that revolutionary anarchists who agree with each other should voluntarily organize themselves into democratic federations. This would make them more effective in participating in broader movements and organizations, such as unions, community groups, and other associations. This is sometimes called “neo-platformism” or “especificismo” or “dual-organizationalism.” But this view has been denounced as equivalent to Leninist vanguardism, and definitely un-anarchist.

I am not including every topic on which I have had disagreements with other anarchists. For example, I have had polemics with anarchists who advocate a gradualist, non-revolutionary, approach to achieving our common goal. None of them have challenged my right to call myself an anarchist, nor have I challenged them. For example, I reviewed the book *Black Flame*, which gave an overview of revolutionary class struggle anarchism. I wrote that it was an exceptional book—*except* for its denial that those who shared the goals of anarchism, but did not accept revolution or class struggle, were really anarchists. While I agreed with the book’s class perspective, I thought this denial of others’ anarchist bona fides was sectarian and narrow-minded (see Price 2009a).

In responding to challenges to my anarchism, I must admit to ambivalence. I am proud to be part of a tradition of struggle against capitalism and the state and all oppression. I am proud to “stand on the shoulders of giants” (which hopefully permits us to see further than they did). I am glad that I do not have to reinvent the wheel in terms of radical theory or practice.

At the same time, I do not much care about labels. I do not care whether I am genuinely an orthodox anarchist. I do not know what an “orthodox anarchist” would look like. I would be just as happy calling myself a “revolutionary libertarian socialist” or “anti-authoritarian socialist.”

This goes two ways. It is why I see no point in denying that, say, “anarchist-primitivists” are anarchists; instead I prefer to argue that they are wrong about their goals and their strategy. There are, however, some limits to my pluralistic tolerance: I do not accept as anarchists people who are against the state but for capitalism (self-labeled “anarcho-capitalists”). And I certainly do not accept fascists as anarchists (so-called “national anarchists”)!

In Defense of Democratic Anarchism

It is true that imperialist-capitalist states use “democracy” as ideological cover. They use a good concept—self-rule by the people—to rationalize their authoritarian, exploitative system. But there are limits: they do not claim that their economic system is democratic! To demand that the capitalist economy be turned into a democratically self-managed system is a direct challenge to capitalism!

Anarchists who reject “democracy” almost always call for self-management, self-rule, or self-government—all terms which mean the same as “democracy.” And they always use terms like “liberty” or “freedom,” which are also widely used by the capitalist states as ideological cover, just as much as “democracy.”

Democratic anarchists advocate decentralized, face-to-face, direct democracy, in the community, in the neighborhood, in the socialized workplace, in the consumer association, with communities and workplaces affiliated through federations and networks. As for “rule,” when everyone governs then there is no “government.” *When everyone participates in decision-making, at every level, and in every way, then there is no state.* The state is a bureaucratic-military institution which stands over the rest of society. Radical democracy is the abolition of the state and the self-organization of the people—which is anarchism.

Some collective decisions have to be made (should the community build a road; should the workshop work four or five days a week). How will they be made? Surely by mutual discussion, with everyone participating, and then deciding through some sort of democratic procedure. What else? A minority may be dissatisfied with the outcome of any particular discussion of an issue (true whether they use majority votes or consensus). But minority members will have fully participated in the preceding discussion. They will have a chance to be in the majority on the next issue.

Some anarchists have preferred not to use the term “democracy.” Others have used it, from the very beginning. Proudhon wrote, “We want the mines, canals, railways handed over to democratically organized workers’ associations...vast federations of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic and social Republic.” (quoted in McKay 2014; 8). The first revolutionary anarchist association was organized by Bakunin and his comrades under the name of the Alliance for Socialist Democracy. More recently, anarchists who used “democracy” positively included Paul Goodman, Noam Chomsky, Murray Bookchin, Cindy Milstein, Lucien van der Walt, and David Graeber. I have gone into the relationship between anarchism and democracy in more detail elsewhere (Price 2009b; 2016a).

Anarchism's Use of Marxism

(2) In his bitterest polemics against Marx, during the split in the First International, Bakunin insisted that Marx had made major contributions. In particular, Bakunin praised historical materialism, and Marx's political economics, written in *Capital*. Over the years, many other anarchists have expressed similar agreement with Marx's critique of political economy and with other aspects of his theories—even while rejecting Marx's politics. Anarchists agree with Marx's goal of the abolition of capitalism, the end of the state, and the creation of a classless, stateless, society. Revolutionary anarchists agree with Marx about the need for a working class revolution, in alliance with all those oppressed and exploited. In my opinion, Marx's political economy is extremely useful in dealing with the economic, political, and ecological crises which the world is now going through.

However, like other anarchists, I reject Marx's program of a transitional "workers' state" or "dictatorship of the proletariat." I reject Marx's strategy of building workers' parties to run in elections or to take state power in some other way. I reject Marx's economic program of national ownership of industry by the state. I condemn all the states established by Marxists; I regard them all as state capitalist. (This includes the one-party police state established by Lenin and Trotsky, which the Trotskyists still endorse.) Despite the scientific and humanistic aspects of Marx's vision, Marxism repeatedly led to disaster: social-democratic support for their imperialist states, and then to mass-murdering Stalinist totalitarianism—and finally to the collapse of these regimes back to traditional capitalism. These results are rooted—I believe—in Marx's authoritarianism, his centralism, and his teleological determinism.

Given these views, I do not see why I should be regarded as a Marxist. I am an anarchist who has been influenced by Marxism. (Personally, before I was an unconventional Marxist—and then a revolutionary anarchist—I was first an anarchist-pacifist. No one is born quoting Kropotkin.) Anarchism and Marxism is further discussed in Price (2015; 2013).

An Anarchist View of Technology

(3) My views on technology have been attacked by people who do not bother to understand them. In particular by primitivists and anti-civilizationists (whose theories were mostly originated by libertarian Marxists, ironically). It is true that I do not reject all technology or want to go back to hunter-gatherer society, as these people do. However, long ago I learned from Paul Goodman, Ralph Borsodi, and Lewis Mumford, among other decentralists, to have a flexible and humanistic approach to technology (as has since been taught by E.F. Schumacher of the "small-is-beautiful" trend).

After a revolution, we would start with the existing machinery and knowledge, as developed by capitalism and the state. But working people would re-organize and re-build the machinery and communities, as well as the process of production, sexual and romantic relations, political and other social interactions, etc. Technology would be re-created and rearranged to permit democratic management by the workers, the development of human creative potential, and ecological balance. Similar views have become more widespread with the fear of climate change and the growth of eco-socialism (see Price 2016b).

Neo-Platformism and Anarchist Self-Organization

(4) Liberals organize themselves to spread their ideas through writings, speech, and action. So do conservatives, Marxists, Pentecostal Christians, and fascists. It makes sense for anarchists to also organize themselves in order to spread their ideas through writings, speech, and action. Anarchists seek to counter the liberals, conservatives, Marxists, Pentecostal Christians, and fascists. But a voluntary federation of revolutionary anarchists is not a “party” (vanguard or otherwise). It does not seek to take power for itself, to get elected to rule the state or to overthrow the existing state and create a new state. An anarchist organization is part of the self-organization of the people and seeks to be part of the workers in their self-mobilization.

From the beginning of the anarchist movement, there were those who advocated such self-organization. As mentioned, Bakunin and his comrades organized the Alliance for Socialist Democracy, to spread anarchist ideas inside and outside the First International (to Marx’s outrage). Errico Malatesta criticized the anarcho-sindicalists of his time for only building militant labor unions without also building anarchist groupings to work inside and outside the unions. Makhno led the Ukrainian Insurgent Army against both the Bolsheviks’ army and the White counter-revolutionary armies. Together with other exiles from Russia and Ukraine, he decided that the anarchists had lost to the Leninists because they had not been organized enough. He and his comrades worked out the “Draft Platform” which called for an organization of revolutionary anarchists. Similarly, the anarchists in Spain, after World War I, were worried that their labor union federation (the CNT) would be taken over by either the Communists or by reformists. So they organized themselves into a federation of anarchists, the FAI, inside the broad union federation.

Many anarchists today do not want any sort of organization beyond a local group or perhaps a journal. But I agree with those who seek to build a significant anarchist federation which is capable of affecting the course of the popular struggle for a better world (see Price 2006).

Is There an Orthodox Anarchism?

While there may be an “orthodox Marxism,” there is no “orthodox anarchism.” As far as I am concerned, anyone whose aim is for a society without states, capitalism, or other oppressions—who wants a classless, stateless, cooperative association of freely-organized and self-managed associations, is an anarchist. Anarchists can and do have a wide range of opinions on how to reach such a society and how to organize it in detail. These opinions should be honestly discussed, not covered over or shut up through name-calling or red-baiting.

One thing which has attracted me to anarchism is its openness to various influences. As I have argued, anarchism has been affected by the democratic-liberal tradition as well as Marxism, and also the non-socialist decentralist tradition. Personally my views have also been influenced by Dewey’s instrumental philosophy, radical psychoanalysis, feminism, Zen, Malcolm X’s thinking, and eco-socialist concepts. I hope this has enriched my anarchism.

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