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Principles and Polarities

Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade

November 1994

There are an awful lot of aims claimed for anarchism today, not only the destruction of the State and other institutions of authority, but the entire gamut of radical concerns: capital, environmental danger, unjust discrimination, gendered inequality, racial prejudice, imperialism and the rest. All these concerns are valid, although not to the extent that some might assert. There is however a distinct danger that the anarchist tendency will be overwhelmed with what are for anarchism, in the final analysis, secondary concerns. The real goal of anarchism is not to deal piecemeal with a laundry list of cultural iniquities but rather to secure personal sovereignty, dignity and security for all people by destroying the basic patterns of power and authority which deny these things. Certainly anarchists should work individually and with others to overcome the many particular injustices in the world, but this does not make such efforts *anarchistic* struggles. Without some unifying understanding of what the essence of anarchism really is—that it is neither pseudo-marxism, rightist elitism nor a punk fashion statement—there is little chance that we will ever register even as much as a pin-prick on the body politic.

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The basis of anarchism is human freedom, but freedom isn't a discrete entity. Rather it is a pattern of effects that carries a heavy load of contradictions, even in the life of each individual. It becomes infinitely more complex for a society of individuals. Freedom may be best seen as a negative and positive polarity, where the negative pole is the absence of restriction, and the positive pole the possession of capacity. The former primarily values the ability to act freely and the latter the capacity for equitable achievement. Both are traditional anarchist concerns, even though they conflict with one another. While neither position ostensibly denies the rights of other people, the chance-taking doers may achieve an inordinate share of resources through luck, skill or strength while the security-minded achievers may want to redress such inequalities in achievement by forcibly limiting some people's negative freedom or impounding the resources of some to redistribute them to others. An *involuntary* "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" approach is logically inconsistent with anarchistic independence, yet so is a dismissive, unfeeling "I'm all right, Jack, I've got mine" attitude! It would be wrong for anarchism to sanction the perpetual extortion of redistribution (i.e., forcible taxation) once historical inequities have been addressed. But on the other hand, can it morally sanction the suffering of some while others flourish? What is necessary is that a balance be achieved which would emphasize the liberty of negative freedom while recognizing the moral strictures of positive freedom.

The need therefore is to arrive at a variety of anarchistic positions staked out on the various polarities of political concern rather than to ossify into rigid and exclusionary dogmas. The authoritarian-libertarian polarity is the most relevant to anarchism. The threat to freedom comes not only from the authoritarian nature of the State but also from that of the corporate world and various coercive social and cultural influences.

Countering these repressive forces is where the anarchist effort is most vital for the future of freedom and human dignity. The anarchist position must therefore lie close to the libertarian pole while avoiding the extreme, where selfishness and amorality deny the importance of social cooperation. On the other hand, the individualist-collective polarity, which has long been a familiar basis of political debate, is of minor importance to real anarchism. Anarchists have spent a lot of time and effort asserting that only the communist, or syndicalist, or individualist, posture is valid, as if it matters in the greater scheme of anarchism. In actuality, each might be valid depending on the circumstances. The real debate is whether any particular *non-coercive* response is suitable to the situation and agreeable to the people involved. Another spectrum to be addressed is the rational-emotive polarity. Anarchism grew out of the rationalism of the Enlightenment, but has come to recognize the value of the subjective and passionate side of the human character as well. The extremes, cold inhumane “reason” or mindless, dangerous “passion,” are inimical to freedom; but the central spectrum, incorporating some of each side, is not. The personal-communal property polarity, widely misunderstood and oversimplified, is another area which needs addressing. Forbidding people the right to individually possess and therefore control their own basic needs of food, clothing, shelter and association may produce equality, but it will also encourage the tyranny of the majority, and result in the dependence of the individual on the group. It is one thing to forbid unfair advantage and monopoly; it is quite another to deny the individual the security of equitable usufruct and personal possession. As Proudhon *also* said, “Property is Liberty.”

Anarchistic theory should offer ranges of acceptable approaches between parameters beyond which a position would not be anarchistic rather than dictate fixed responses. No single system suits everyone and every situation, whether it is feminism, egalitarianism or whatever. We need to allow

for varied and pragmatic responses to different situations and needs, while maintaining a clear anarchistic perspective. If we try to limit too greatly or expand too widely what we will accept as anarchistic, or deny legitimacy to any truly libertarian response, we will insure the perpetual marginalization and impotency of the world's best defense against the rising tide of coercion, invasion and destruction of personal sovereignty and economic security.