

Anarchism vs. Right-Wing 'Anti-Statism'

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It is currently fashionable to claim to hate the government. One could say it is the general, default position of most you talk to. But it is not clear why this is so. While you might think a popular hatred of government would mean the ranks of anarchists are swelling, it actually isn't the case.

Anarchist Rhetoric Gone Mainstream

Over the past two decades something interesting has occurred that the anarchist movement has yet to adequately address. Rhetoric is coming from the mouths of politicians that a hundred years ago (if not more recently) would have branded them as “anarchists” or as seditious traitors. Though the politicians employing this type of rhetoric are most consistently Republicans, “big government liberals” in the Democratic Party have also been drawn to this style of speaking.

The idea they are voicing is a simple one: government is bad. The bigger it is, the worse it gets. The smaller we make it, the better for all. We don't want government butting into our affairs, and we don't want government regulating us right and left. And, unlike anarchists who in the 19th century were saying essentially the same thing, the politicians who endorse this view are not slaughtered en masse by the National Guard, or framed up on anti-patriotic conspiracy charges, but are instead elected into that institution they claim to hate — the government.

Many are the politicians — sitting in the halls of congress and living a life unknown to many working Americans — that claim to hate government. They paint opponents as “big government insiders,” and vow to get in office to fight for you, the commoner, who has a distrust of all those cheating politicians and of government in general. A huge amount of politicians ride into office on campaigns with such themes as “eliminating government” or at least “shrinking” it. “He wants to increase the size and the scope of the federal government,” George W. Bush said about Al Gore during his campaign for President in the 2000 election. Vice President Al Gore countered, “I'm for a smaller, smarter government that serves people better, but offers real change.”

If both sides are honest and are in fact committed to shrinking government, then this must mean we are tremendously close to living in a truly free, stateless society where there is no government at all, right?

Well, no. In fact, just the opposite is occurring.

Selective Shrinking, Selective Expansion

Politicians on the Right have co-opted a very long tradition of anti-government sentiment and are using it, ironically, to boost themselves into power and eliminate areas of government that benefit the poor. This is occurring while they actually increase government in such areas as military spending, prison spending, corporate welfare, the size of police forces, and the like. In the twisted Ideology of the Right, hating that most dastardly of all enemies, the Federal Government, means hating, in reality, only certain, selective portions of it: the parts that interfere with the untrammelled operations of private corporate power, the parts that provide respite from wage slavery (such as Social Security or unemployment insurance), the parts that help underprivileged kids go to college, etc. This is what “big government” is to them. “Big government” somehow does not include subsidies to the military industrial complex, subsidies to the prison industry,

bailouts to troubled mega-corporations, the banking industry, or any of these things. These are conspicuously off the radar screen of anyone who rails about the evils of “big government.”

Now, historically, when anarchists spoke of eliminating government, it was not a ploy to get into government and perpetuate the evil of it, as it seems to be with our tough-talking Republicans. Hating government meant hating tyranny and hating the authority of any other human to be able to tell you what to do. Anarchists literally got killed for thinking this way. “Hating government” now, however, seems to be code for hating things like affirmative action or Medicaid. It doesn’t seem to mean hating police officers, hating war, or hating a defense budget that gets 50% of every tax dollar. Somehow this extremely substantial part of government is let off the hook (and is in many cases venerated). This is what constitutes “hating government” in this era of doublethink — not hating government really, but in fact loving its most brutal and violent side in the form of the military and the police, the courts and the prisons, and disliking anything that has to do with social spending.

Hate The Government, Love Your Country

“I hate the government, but I love my country,” is a sentiment you will hear a lot amongst the Right these days. The idea seems to be that the government up in Washington has become overrun with a politically correct, neo-Socialist cabal that wants to punish the white man for his natural success, and reward the failures of ethnic minorities, gays, radical feminists, etc., through increased taxation upon him. This has led to many “militias” being established by bitter people who feel that the USA is dangerously off course, that it is no longer a land of the free and the brave, but is in fact a virtual slave state at the beck and call of the United Nations, wealthy Jews, rich politicians (usually Democrat), and the like.

The goal of the right wing militias and those who have similar ideas is not to abolish authority, the tyranny of capital, or any other oppressive form, but rather to simply get the USA back on the “right track.” The American system is not fundamentally flawed, they say — it is just that those at the helm of the ship right now are steering it in an unpatriotic direction. Hating the government as it exists now, then, is the best way to express one’s true patriotism.

In a 1995 interview conducted not too long after the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City, MIT Professor Noam Chomsky summed up the situation in these words:

“[T]ake the angry white males who are maybe joining what they mistakenly call militias, [but which are actually] paramilitary forces. These people are angry. Most of them are high school graduates. They’re people whose incomes have dropped maybe 20% over the last fifteen years or so. They can no longer do what they think is the right thing for them to do, provide for their families. Maybe their wives have to go out and work. And maybe they make more money than they do. Maybe the kids are running crazy because no one’s paying any attention to them. Their lives are falling apart. They’re angry. Who are they supposed to blame? You’re not supposed to blame the Fortune 500, because they’re invisible. They have been taught for 50 years now ... that all there is around is the government. If there’s anything going wrong, it’s the government’s fault. The government is somehow something that is independent of external powers. So if your life is falling apart, blame the government.”

“There’s a reason why attention is focused on the government as the source of problems. It has a defect. It’s potentially democratic. Private corporations are not potentially democratic... [The militia movement] is not the kind of populism that says, ‘Fine, let’s take over the government and use it as an instrument to undermine and destroy private power, which has no right to exist.’ Nobody is saying that. All that you’re hearing is that there’s something bad about government, so let’s blow up the federal building.”

Politicians advance their pro-corporate agenda by consciously manipulating the popular discontent with the state of things. Public anger can be channeled into a hatred of “big government programs” that big business wants to see dismantled anyway. For example, private insurance corporations would gladly step in and take over and administer the Social Security system. It was not until workers began dying from starvation and holding mass riots that anything like Social Security ever got established, and ever since then it has been mercilessly targeted by corporations who see it as a barrier to their ability to expand markets. In the logic of people on the Right whose campaigns are funded by big insurance companies, Social Security is a “big government program.” So, hey, if you hate the government, elect me, and I’ll eliminate government — I’ll hand it over to private power. This is, in effect, all that anti-government sentiment means to the Right — handing government functions over to democratically unaccountable private tyrannies. This isn’t eliminating government, however. It is merely changing its nature.

Now, if a hatred of government were really a hatred of government, one would expect to see police forces slashed, jails and prisons torn down, laws that provide for the establishment of corporations eliminated, and other things. This never occurs, because this is actually the part of the State the “anti-government” Right wants strengthened. As of the year 2000, more than 2 million Americans are in jail. At least 6.5 million are under some form of correctional supervision nationwide. This means 1 out of every 32 citizens are under some form of direct government supervision. And this means that the State is present in our daily lives to a degree unknown to any previous generation. Where are the anti-government populists who will rail against this? Answer: They are busy writing legislation to get “tough on crime” and make sure even more prisons are built, even more drugs are outlawed, even more money is given to law enforcement to increase the power of the State, and worse. No one seems to see the irony here. Far from wanting to eliminate the government, the Right wants to increase the powers of the State and roll back whatever civil liberties we may have remaining, and to abolish any sort of social safety nets that previous generations of workers fought to achieve.

Writer Tim Wise commented, “Amazing isn’t it, that the same folks who view government so cynically when it comes to taxes, mail delivery, road construction, education, or health care, and insist the state is incapable of addressing these issues with equanimity and fairness, somehow find it possible to believe this same state can dispense justice, and even the ultimate punishment [of death], without a hint of impropriety, bias, or error.”

The ultimate goal of the Right is a strong police state. A merciless and unforgiving state that punishes swiftly and surely. A State that rewards patriotism and nationalism and punishes failure and disobedience. This isn’t eliminating the State. This is making the State ever more powerful.

The Apolitical, ‘Sick-of-it-All’ Voter Who Votes for the Right

It is hard to observe the profuse cynicism regarding the government, the immediate skepticism regarding the integrity and sincerity of politicians, and then watch people head to the polls to vote for them time and again, and not think something is terribly amiss. It seems people claim to hate the government as part of their public front of being irascible, skeptical, iconoclastic thinkers. No one wants to feel like they are being “duped” by politicians, apparently, so they claim that they distrust government officials as a matter of necessity. They don’t, however, want to do much with their distrust in reality other than trudge back to the ballot box every two or four years and repeat the same staid ritual of plugging in their choice for one ruler or the next. And it seems in practice that those who are the most vocally cynical of Washington are in fact the ones who vote for the most reactionary and extremist right wing candidates.

British fantasy and science fiction author Michael Moorcock commented on this phenomenon: “My experience of science fiction fans at the conventions which are held annually in a number of countries (mainly the US and England) had taught me that those who attended were reactionary (claiming to be ‘apolitical’ but somehow always happy to vote Tory and believe Colin Jordan to ‘have a point’).” The Right has somehow managed to convince people that if you hate politicians, you should vote for them. Somehow politicians on the Right are not seen by many as “politicians” in the sense that “politician” signifies someone who is by nature a fast-talking crook. No, politicians on the Right are exempt from a critique of government or politicians in general. Voting for them is not voting for a “politician” or for “government.”

The Democratic Party, traditionally seen as the party of big government programs and of “tax and spend liberals,” was compelled by the prevalence of anti-government sentiment in the 90s to remake its image. And under “New Democrats” like President Bill Clinton they swung to the right in adopting the same sort of anti-government rhetoric while continuing to increase prison populations, military spending, overseas intervention, and actually build up State power. Nevertheless, in a 1996 speech to Ohio Democrats, Clinton could boast, “I want a government that is smaller and less bureaucratic. We have given you the smallest government, not the other party ... in thirty years, and the biggest reduction in regulations.”

The Sham of Right Wing ‘Anti-Statism’

It is clear that people are angry and dissatisfied with the way society operates. The Right has simply succeeded in capturing this anger, reflected it in their speeches, and has capitalized on it to boost themselves into office. ‘Okay,’ they say to their constituents, ‘we are in office now, and, yes, we will eliminate government since it is an evil thing you have elected us to combat. First up, we’ll hand over increasing chunks of the school system to private corporations.’ This is what ‘eliminating’ government amounts to — placing it into the hands of CEOs and wealthy investors who can run it how they see fit, effectively removing it from the arena of potential democratic accountability. In the meantime, the actual power of the State is increased as the prisons swell and as the law clamps down harder on petty criminals. With social safety nets eroding and millions more falling into poverty, an expansion of the prison system should be expected, as some method of dealing with all these ‘superfluous’ people has to be found. And the prisons can be privatized, too.

Anarchists oppose the State because it is one of the principle expressions of authority of man over man. Property in the means of production and in the means of subsistence is likewise another authoritarian institution. States exist to protect these institutions and thus they largely serve as a defense mechanism for the rich against the poor. This does not mean workers might not become so unruly as to force some form of seemingly charitable concession from the State (like, say, OSHA), but in the end such concessions are employed to defuse outright revolutionary fervor. A wealthy man who owns vast amounts of land and who hates paying property taxes, and, due to his soreness, comes to have an intense dislike of the government, is not an anarchist. An anarchist is someone who recognizes that if it were not for the State such a man would not be able to exclusively own land to begin with, and would not be afforded legal protection (at public expense) for keeping it. He thus would not be able to exercise despotic rights over a given territory.

So it is that anarchists ultimately agree with the classical liberal thinker Adam Smith — ironically held to be a great classical exponent of laissez faire capitalism — when he says that ‘Civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all.’ The right-wing ‘anti-statists’ who might otherwise venerate Smith cannot bring themselves to admit this fact. While seeking to enable private power to run government institutions more openly, they do not undermine the State’s power but merely make sure it fulfills its classical role.

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