

What do anarchists mean by ‘federalism’?

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The concept of federalism is one that appears time and time again in anarchist literature and in anarchist activity, yet in the present day, it is rarely elaborated upon – at least in English. You’re more likely to hear people talk about “direct democracy,” “decentralisation,” “horizontalism” and other slightly different concepts instead of “federalism” plain and simple. This article is intended to give a decent introduction to that federalism, plain and simple, whilst also elaborating a bit more on its significance.

What is federalism?

Federalism is an organisational doctrine which holds that society should be structured from the bottom-up. Momentum moves upward, from the periphery to the centre – the higher-order units are simply the direct expression of the lower-order units combining, and delegating out certain tasks like administration and co-ordination for practical reasons.

In a federation, the constituent groups are autonomous and self-determining. This means that they can associate or disassociate as they like, without any restrictions placed upon them beyond the principles and aims they all agreed to upon federating. There is no central unit that issues orders from above, as with governments or capitalist enterprises; the direction of the organisation is determined by the constituent units collaborating with each other freely. There may be higher-order committees and councils, but these have no power to direct the organisation itself, and are composed of delegates with strict, revocable mandates. Units have full freedom to secede if they wish, knowing of course that in doing so they would cease to have the benefits that federating brought them.

There is no specified decision-making method that is to be carried out internally within the constituent units or in negotiations with each other. Exactly how groups make decisions is left to the groups, figuring out what methods work best in each of their particular circumstances. The crucial element is that the right to free association is respected. For instance, some groups operate according to total consensus; decisions aren’t made until everyone agrees. Others work via a modified consensus system, where members strive to reach unanimity, but are able to reach a resolution if one or two members hold out regardless. Others may use simple majority vote, with “losing” voters not being compelled to carry out a decision they disagree with.

Finding the solution to these problems comes in finding the right combination of solidarity and autonomy – of group commitment and free association. It is silly to expect the same approach that works for an affinity group of five militants to work for a union of tens of thousands of members, so precise decisions on these matters are left to the people who know how to decide best – the relevant groups and individuals themselves.

This sort of free association is not something alien to society, and it was not developed by anarchists out of nothing; to a large extent it was a matter of libertarians discovering these methods of organisations in unions, clubs, and cultural associations, and then expanding on their significance, and pushing for their adoption in politics and in the economy.

Federalism: theirs and ours

Though we have our own particular understanding of the concept, we don’t have a monopoly over it, as should be obvious to anyone familiar with Australia’s political system. Though anar-

chists use federalism to refer to a means of organising society in a manner that is totally bottom-up, it has a wider, more common meaning among mainstream ideologues to refer to a system of organising states.

In this mainline understanding, federalism means the devolution of the majority of the state's powers to more local units. For instance, the state government of New South Wales is responsible for policing, healthcare, transport, education, and other functions within the territory of New South Wales – not the federal government. It sets its own laws, provided they do not conflict with the constitution, and other functions like rubbish collection and park management are conceived of as local and are delegated out accordingly to municipal councils.

More obvious federalist are in place in countries like the U.S.A., with its notoriously strange federal voting system; Switzerland, with its famous cantonal “direct democracy”; and India, whose constituent states have their own official languages.

Anarchists criticise this republican federalism for essentially being federalism in name only, and for restricting federalism to the field of politics, keeping it away from the immense, authoritarian centralisation that is capitalism. James Guillaume, one of Bakunin's close comrades, put it succinctly: a country like Switzerland is “simply a federative *state*, and that word alone expresses all the differences between these two systems.”¹

Guillaume notes that Swiss cantons have a certain ability to manage their own affairs, but they are not considered as “distinct individualities and absolute sovereigns”; instead, they are considered simply fractions of a whole called the Swiss nation. The autonomy of the cantons is limited legislatively by the federal constitution, which is itself not a free contract, but an imposition. The canton does not have any right to secede, and thus such a federalism is attacked as a federalism “only in the words.”

In addition, anarchists dispute the idea that federalism can exist if the individuals of each federal units are not themselves free. Writing about the United States of America pre-Civil War, Proudhon notes that it seems impossible for a slave-holding state to belong to a confederation; it seems no more sensible than the idea of an absolutist state joining: “the enslaving of one part of the nation is the very negation of the federative principle.”²

In effect, republican federalism means delegating the repressive functions of government to more local-level elites. The most basic function of government, protecting the institution of private property, the subordination of workers to capitalists, is preserved. When workers head out on an “unauthorised” strike, it's the state-level police that move in to harass and assault them, instead of the federal police; never mind the fact that the federal forces are always free to move in if things get truly out of hand. The effect is the same as a typical centralised state; it becomes simply another form of authoritarianism, and we oppose it just as we oppose any other form of government.

¹ “Federalism” by James Guillaume, published in *Solidarité* (1871), translated by Shawn Wilbur, available at: <https://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/bakunin-library/james-guillaume-federalism-1871/>.

² “The Federative Principle and the Necessity of Reconstituting the Party of the Revolution” by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, as published in *Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* (2011), edited by Iain McKay, by AK Press.

The significance of federalism

Guillaume's article is interesting, not simply because it distinguishes our federalism from theirs', but because he expresses some crucial concepts, and a clear influence from an old master. He states that federalism in the meaning that the Paris commune gave to it, and in the meaning Proudhon gave to it, is "above all, the negation of the nation and the state." The nation ceases to exist, and in its place is a federation of communes. The determining principle of this federation is not national unity or territorial sovereignty, but simply the mutual interest of the relevant parties, which has "no regard for the questions of nationalism and territory."

Once the state ceases to exist, there is no longer any central power that is "superior" to the groups of the federation, that imposes upon them its authority.

All that remains is "the *collective force*."

This concept, little known, is crucial to a full understanding of anarchism, at least as it was put forward by Proudhon. This concept was first elaborated on in Proudhon's first major work, the famous *What is Property?*, and it may well be his most important intellectual contribution. Collective force refers to the effect produced by individuals joining their efforts together, producing a force greater than the simple sum of their parts. In Proudhon's words, it refers to "that immense power which results from the union and harmony of workers, and the convergence and simultaneousness of their efforts."³

Collective force is deployed first in *What is Property?* as part of a critique of private property and wage-labour. Even supposing individual workers in a firm are fairly compensated for their work via wages, the *collective force* resulting from the workers labouring together is not paid; there is always a debt that remains. He uses the following example:

"A force of one thousand men working twenty days has been paid the same wages that one would be paid for working fifty-five years; but this force of one thousand has done in twenty days what a single man could not have accomplished, though he had laboured for a million centuries."

Elsewhere, he uses the example of two hundred men putting an obelisk on its base in two hours, noting that one man could not have done the same thing in two hundred days.

Proudhon later put the collective force concept into different contexts, expanding its meaning. He used it to refer to collective reason, the result of combined intellectual labour; social power, the constitution of society based on the actions of the individuals and groups that constitute it; collective being, the way in which individual freedom can only be real in light of the individual's social relationships; and as a kind of theory of alienation, whereby people mistake "effects for causes" – such as seeing a leader as a source of power instead of the people that obey him, or seeing money as a source of value in of itself instead of the collective agreement that gives money its worth.⁴

As Guillaume outlines, collective force is the result of the federation of the groups, and it acts to maintain and guarantee the federal contract. It doesn't become something superior to the federated communes, akin to what the state is, a force *over* existing society. Government dissolves, and we truly enter a state of "an-archy, absence of central authority."

³ "What is Property? – Or, an inquiry into the principle of right and of government," as published in above and by the same author.

⁴ From Iain McKay's glossary, also in the book cited above.

This is a crucial rebuttal of the persisting myth that federalism, as in libertarian organisation, is simply the realisation of individualism and disarray. This myth is kept alive by detractors of anarchism – usually Marxists, who insist that centralisation is necessary for effective co-ordination and co-operation – but also by some supporters of anarchism: namely, the individualists that regard any organisation, beyond the level of simple, informal affinity groups, as an infringement on their liberties.

Federalism is a recognition that the individual can only become free through their social relationships with others. It is on this basis alone that a meaningful socialism can be constructed. The various constituent units bond themselves together autonomously through contracts, motivated by solidarity and mutual self-interest. Liberty is not sacrificed in this process – it is assured.

Federalism: an impediment to unity?

The identification of federalism with disunity, chaos and disarray is a valuable propaganda tool for centralists of all stripes, and the accusation reveals possibly the most significant fault line that separates anarchists from other socialists. For us, the most important thing to stress is that *unity* must be distinguished from *uniformity*.

The charge that a consistent federalism would lead to a number of differences of opinion and strategy is one that is wholeheartedly accepted by anarchists. In fact, this constitutes one of the most significant reasons we support it. The circumstances in our lives vary so widely, and shift so rapidly, that mandating one fixed model of an organisation upon society would itself lead only to chaos. The dissidence that emerges naturally from different people and different groups working together for a common cause is essential for keeping organisations *alive*.

Libertarian socialism manifests itself as not simply as a revolt against authoritarian political and economic structures, but as a revolt against the absolutism that lies at their root. In justifying the right of the units of a federation to secede, even after they agreed to federate, Bakunin states that “no perpetual obligation can be countenanced by human justice, which is the only one that can claim any authority among us,” and that without the right to free assembly and free secession, “confederation would be nothing more than centralisation in disguise.”⁵

The diversity that results from a federation is not considered to be a flaw, but a feature. Again, we return to Bakunin for an eloquent justification:

“I will never tire of repeating it: Uniformity is death. Diversity is life. The disciplinary unity that can only be established in any social milieu to the detriment of spontaneous creativity and life, kills nations. The living, truly powerful unity, the unity we all want, is that which liberty creates in the very heart of the free and diverse manifestations

⁵ “An Internationalist Federalism” by Mikhail Bakunin, as published in *No Gods No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (2005), edited by Daniel Guérin, translated by Paul Sharkey and published by AK Press. This text, which originates as an address to the League of Peace of Freedom, is significant in Bakunin’s history as it marks a key stage in the development of his thought. The League, a liberal-humanitarian group, was not receptive to his attempt to merge pacifist concerns with the concerns of workers. The failure of his project within the league signalled his shift to believing that only the proletariat acting as an independent force could bring about the required radical social changes. Accordingly, he spent the rest of his active life dedicated to the International Workingmen’s Association, abandoning bourgeois politics for good.

*of life, expressing itself through struggle: it is the balancing and harmonisation of all living forces.”*⁶

Elsewhere, he makes a similar point: “Uniformity is not unity at all; it is the abstraction of it, its *caput mortuum*,⁷ its death. Unity is only real and living amid the greatest diversity.”⁸ For Bakunin in particular, the imposition of a particular doctrine or form by a higher council on a federation would turn that federation into a unitary church and that council into a “collective Pope,” who would speak *ex cathedra*, its commands becoming law.⁹

For a final blast, we can call upon Proudhon:

*“You, who cannot conceive of unity without a whole apparatus of legislators, prosecutors, attorneys-general, custom house officers, policemen, you have never known what real unity is! What you call unity and centralisation is nothing but perpetual chaos, serving as a basis for endless tyranny; it is the advancing of the chaotic condition of social forces as an argument for despotism – a despotism which is really the cause of the chaos.”*¹⁰

From citizens to producers

Federalism is the most crucial component in the cohesion of the workers’ movement that will abolish private property and government, and construct a free socialism in its place. Whereas the past society organises itself by divisions of nations, according to the needs of politics, the new society will organise itself by federations of industrial groups, according to the needs of production.¹¹ In the words of Émile Pouget: “from now on, the *producer* looms before the existing society which recognises only the *citizen*.”¹²

I will end this article with another quote from Proudhon. In my view, it accurately summarises the mission of anarchism, and the crucial role of federalism within it:

*“It is industrial organisation that we will put in place of government.
In place of laws, we will put contracts.—No more laws voted by a majority, nor even unanimously; each citizen, each commune or corporation, makes its own.
In place of political powers, we will put economic forces.
In place of the ancient classes of nobles, burghers, and peasants, or of bourgeoisie and*

⁶ From Bakunin’s letter to Ceretti, dated 13–27 March 1871, translated by Shawn Wilbur and accessible here: <https://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/bakunin-library/bakunin-on-life-harmony-and-struggle-1872/>

⁷ Latin for “dead head,” meaning “worthless remains.”

⁸ From Bakunin’s letter to the newspaper Gazzettino Rosa, dated 23 December 1871, as cited on pg. 140 of Wolfgang Eckhardt’s *The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs. Marx in the International Workingmen’s Association*, published in 2016 by PM Press.

⁹ It is difficult to underestimate the significance of opposition to religion in the development of anarchism.

¹⁰ From “The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century,” found in MacKay’s anthology cited above.

¹¹ From part two, section ‘I’ of “The Principles and Organisation of the International Revolutionary Society,” authored by Bakunin, published in 1866, translated by Shawn Wilbur and accessible at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160707152937/http://library.libertarian-labyrinth.org/items/show/2671>

¹² From “Direct Action” by Émile Pouget, published 1910, translated and published by the Kate Sharpley Library, accessible at: <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/vhhngg>

proletariat, we will put the general titles and special departments of industry: Agriculture, Manufacture, Commerce, etc.

In place of public force, we will put collective force.

In place of standing armies, we will put industrial associations.

In place of police, we will put identity of interests.

In place of political centralisation, we will put economic centralisation.”¹³

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¹³ Again, from “The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century,” found in MacKay’s anthology cited earlier.

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