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# Anti-Capitalism and Libertarian Political Economy

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to describe the anti-authoritarian wing of the socialist movement. Though, at present, there is not a lively social debate in the Anglo world over the possible meanings of 'libertarian', the historical record speaks for itself.

living while others simply own, with market relations used for the distribution of goods. These social relationships are protected by the legitimised violence of the state.

But given the depth of the libertarian critique of capitalism, it raises questions about why humanity continues to reproduce such a political economy. Capitalism is legitimised and supported, in part, due to appeals to human nature. This is a way of avoiding any need to justify capitalism—if it is a part of some inner wellspring of human nature, then no alternative is possible or desirable. This idea is strengthened by the notion that alternatives would never work, or perhaps could never work well. Of course, the ways that capitalism does not serve us well are reminders that, at least under a libertarian lens, capitalism is not a system that ‘works’ in any meaningful sense. And all of these justifications for capitalism are buttressed by the notion that our democratic activity under states balances out the worst excesses of capitalism.

Libertarians have also offered their own suggestions of what a future political economy might look like (or, perhaps in some cases, advocated for the abolition of political economy). Mutualists have argued for a market form of socialism, both as a strategic orientation but also as a vision of some aspects of what a libertarian economy might look like. Collectivists, following the ideas of Bakunin, argue for the social ownership of the means of production, with access to the social product organised around a person’s labour input. Libertarian communists argue for forms of production and distribution modelled after the slogan, ‘From each according to ability. To each according to need’. This can lead to both strategic and visionary debate amongst libertarian communists, as this norm can be interpreted in disparate ways.

Today, in much of the Anglo world, it would likely seem incoherent to talk of libertarian anti-capitalism, but this is a result of historical confusion and a thin application of anti-authoritarian principles. Indeed, a thick anti-authoritarianism necessitates a critique of capitalism. As such, many people use the term ‘anarchism’

## Abstract

This chapter begins by laying out the major features of capitalism as analysed by anarchists historically, noting similarities and differences arising from the various tendencies within the libertarian milieu. Defining anarchist contributions to political economy through identification and analysis of wage labour/exploitation, private property, markets, class society, and states allows for an engagement with historical and contemporary voices within anarchism that highlights these analytical commonalities and differences. Next, the chapter examines the ideological structures and cultural mechanisms through which capitalism is naturalised and defended. Finally, this chapter will outline some anarchist objections to visionary thinking in political economy and the tendency for some in the milieu to think in pluralist terms when it comes to visionary proposals.

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‘Libertarianism’, in much of the Anglo world, has come to mean a hard right-wing position on political economy—a position that includes a rigorous defence of private property, the wage relation, and trade liberalisation through a market with relatively few restraints placed on the owners of property and capital. Interestingly, however, the term was actually ‘created by nineteenth-century European anarchists’.<sup>1</sup> As early as the mid-1800s, the French journal *Le Liberaire* was in circulation in the United States and the American anarchist, Benjamin Tucker, used the term ‘libertarian’ to describe his politics in 1897.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Oakland: AK Press, 2005), 57.

<sup>2</sup> See afaq, ‘150 Years of Libertarian’, *Anarchist Writers*, December 11, 2008. Retrieved from <http://anarchism.pageabode.com/afaq/150-years-of-libertarian>.

The term ‘libertarian’ was intended, as such, to convey a thick anti-authoritarianism. Antipathy to or even complete contempt for the state was not enough for these visionaries. Rather, if one was going to claim the mantle of opposition to authority, one must be opposed to the authoritarian relations intrinsic to capitalism. Thus, throughout this chapter, I use the term ‘libertarian’ in its original sense, as a set of thick anti-authoritarian principles that includes opposition to the state, as well as capitalism or any relation of authority and institutionalised hierarchy. Sometimes I use the term ‘anarchism’ as a synonym, as it was intended by the term’s creators. Though I do not have high hopes for reclaiming the term ‘libertarian’, perhaps this can be one more in a long line of attempts. With this in mind, I will focus on libertarian, anti-capitalist political economy.

We might begin by defining *political economy* before we look at libertarian positions on it. Political economy, historically, came to supplant ‘economy’ as sets of ideas dealing with the production, distribution, and consumption of goods. Caporaso and Levine briefly trace this history, arguing that ‘[e]conomy, taken from the Greek usage, referred to household management. It had relevance to a society in which, to an important degree, wants emerged and the things that satisfied them were produced in the household. Political economy’ however ‘referred to the management of the economic affairs of the state’. Indeed, ‘to satisfy our wants we now depend on persons not our relatives, whom we might not even know’ and ‘the boundaries of want satisfaction are now political; responsibility for the system of want satisfaction devolves onto a public authority: the head of state rather than the head of the household’.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, political economy is a type of analysis that locates economics within larger relations of power, recognising that economic processes cannot be coherently abstracted from the rest of social

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<sup>3</sup> J. A. Caporaso and D. P. Levine, *Theories of Political Economy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

the Anarkismo website, or the anarcho-syndicalist groups affiliated with the International Worker’s Association. There are also insurrectionary communist anarchists who reject the formal organisations of platformists as well as the union form espoused by anarcho-syndicalists. One website, LibCom.org, acts as a hub for libertarian communist ideas. And there are contemporary egoist and individualist communists, some post-left anarchists, and an assortment of individuals and groups who are for the abolition of political economy, but might not refer to themselves as ‘communists’ for a variety of reasons.

## Libertarian Political Economy and Anti-Capitalism

‘Libertarian’ is, at the least, a contested term. In much of the Anglo world it has come to be associated with a vicious authoritarianism that leaves capitalism unquestioned, the coercion created by need obscured, and the authoritarianism inherent in privately owned and controlled workplaces naturalised. Nevertheless, the originators of the term ‘libertarian’ intended it to describe a thick anti-authoritarianism. This necessarily put libertarian political economy firmly in the camp of anti-capitalist politics associated with global anarchism, the libertarian wing of the socialist movement.

This leaves scholars of libertarianism the task of finding some common political economic analyses in a diverse set of anti-authoritarian ideas. The libertarian critique of capitalism holds that wage labour is linked to exploitation, where owners rent workers and pay them a portion of what they produce, appropriating the rest in surplus value. This is made possible by a system of private property that allows capitalists to own productive property and homes without using or occupying that property. This leads to a class society, where some work for a

form of wage; the day it was agreed upon that man would only receive the wage he could secure to himself, the whole history of State-aided Capitalist Society was as good as written; it germinated in this principle.<sup>35</sup>

Kropotkin's view presented one way forward for a post-revolutionary society that has 'taken possession of all social wealth, having boldly proclaimed the right of all to this wealth—whatever share they may have taken in producing it will be compelled to abandon any system of wages, whether in currency or labour-notes'.<sup>36</sup> Emma Goldman also suggested a process of creating communism that precluded commercial processes:

To make this a reality will, I believe, be possible only in a society based on voluntary co-operation of productive groups, communities and societies loosely federated together, eventually developing into a free communism, actuated by a solidarity of interests. There can be no freedom in the large sense of the word, no harmonious development, so long as mercenary and commercial considerations play an important part in the determination of personal conduct.<sup>37</sup>

Kropotkin was particularly adamant about this: 'The Revolution will be communist; if not, it will be drowned in blood, and have to be begun over again'.<sup>38</sup>

Some contemporary inheritors of libertarian communism are the relatively small platformist federations, organised around

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<sup>35</sup> P. Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (Oakland: AK Press, 2008), 195.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 194–195.

<sup>37</sup> Emma Goldman, 'What I Believe', *Dwardmac.Pitzer*, July 19, 1908. Retrieved from [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/goldman/whatibelieve](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/goldman/whatibelieve)

<sup>38</sup> P. Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (Oakland: AK Press, 2008), 195.

life, particularly the state. For libertarians, as critics of all forms of hierarchy, politics and economy must be located socially along with *all* relations of inequality. As Rocker put it, 'the war against capitalism must be at the same time a war against all institutions of political power', recognising that 'exploitation has always gone hand in hand with political and social oppression'.<sup>4</sup> But since anarchists oppose state power, it could be said that they offer a *critique* of political economy.

This complicates libertarian approaches to political economy. Anarchists, for one, oppose the state, but some have argued for various forms of *governance* (most often, some form of democracy, despite widespread anarchist criticism of that position). Still others have argued that we might have the capacity to create abundance or post-scarcity, subverting any need for 'economy', as such, while some have explicitly argued for libertarian political economies, as blueprints for what a future society might look like. A political economy can also mean a certain kind of analysis of economics, the state, and other relations of power and we do certainly live in a world governed, in large part, by states managing a global economy. This allows for a diverse set of positions on how to define and analyse the existing political economic arrangements (i.e. capitalism), as well as differences on what a post-capitalist society might look like (for those libertarians who care to venture a guess).

Therefore, in this chapter, I attempt to give a broad outline of anarchist positions on political economy, starting with the way that libertarians have tended to define and critique capitalism. Next, I develop some anarchist arguments about why capitalism remains stable, despite the libertarian critique. Finally, I provide a sketch of anarchist positions on post-capitalism.

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<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (Oakland: AK Press, 2004, Orig. 1938), 11.

## The Libertarian Critique of Capitalism

Anarchists have a long and proud history of opposing capitalism. One would be hard-pressed to make the case that anarchism could exist without an opposition to capitalism as *foundational* to it. As a practice, an ethic and/or a theory developed in opposition to hierarchical society, libertarianism's embrace of anti-authoritarianism is fundamentally contravened by the basic elements of capitalism, private ownership protected by states and the wage relation (i.e. being able to *rent* another person and extract value from her labour). Bakunin outlines the coercion and authoritarianism intrinsic to these relationships when he writes:

And once the contract has been negotiated, the serfdom of the workers is doubly increased; or to put it better, before the contract has been negotiated, goaded by hunger, he [sic] is only potentially a serf; after it is negotiated he becomes a serf in fact. Because what merchandise has he sold to his employer? It is his labor, his personal services, the productive forces of his body, mind, and spirit that are found in him and are inseparable from his person—it is therefore himself. From then on, the employer will watch over him, either directly or by means of overseers; everyday during working hours and under controlled conditions, the employer will be the owner of his actions and movements. When he is told: 'Do this,' the worker is obligated to do it; or he is told: 'Go there,' he must go. Is this not what is called a serf?<sup>5</sup>

Here, Bakunin points out the way that liberty is reduced through need, requiring workers to sell our labour for life's

<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, 'The Capitalist System', *Anarchy Archives*, N.D. Retrieved from [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist\\_archives/bakunin/capstate.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/bakunin/capstate.html).

communism more as processes than end goals and often advocate for insurrectionary moments that would, perhaps, coalesce into revolutions. This orientation is summed up quite well by Malatesta when he said, 'the subject is not whether we accomplish Anarchism today, tomorrow, or within ten centuries, but that we walk towards Anarchism today, tomorrow, and always'.<sup>34</sup>

Libertarian communists advocate for the social ownership of productive property and distribution on the basis of need or, perhaps better stated, an end to ownership and property relations altogether (i.e. the abolition of property). This libertarian communism argues for economic visions organised around the principle 'From each according to ability, to each according to need', though the details of how to realise this objective are certainly debatable. Added to this, 'communism' (much like 'libertarian') is also a contested term with a variety of meanings, both historically and contemporarily. This makes for a category that is difficult to pin down with simple definitions, but much of the early communist anarchist theory was written in reaction to the collectivist wages system.

Communist anarchists typically argue against any form of currency or remuneration. In Kropotkin's view, the entire notion of remuneration for labour could possibly lead to the re-development of capitalism:

In fact, in a society like ours, in which the more a man [sic] works the less he is remunerated, this principle, at first sight, may appear to be a yearning for justice. But it is really only the perpetuation of past injustice. It was by virtue of this principle that wagedom began, to end in the glaring inequalities and all the abominations of present society; because, from the moment work done was appraised in currency or in any other

<sup>34</sup> E. Malatesta, 'Towards Anarchism', *Marxists*, circa 1930s. Retrieved October 7, 2017, from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/malatesta/1930s/xx/toanarchy.htm>.



done away with. The term ‘collectivism’ is still widely in use among anarchists, who often distinguish between collectivism and communist anarchism on the basis of debates over remuneration and distribution.

Contemporarily, there are few anarchists who advocate for collectivism, as such. But some of these concerns over remuneration can be seen as some anarchists advocate for participatory economics (or ‘parecon’), a non-market libertarianism developed by Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel and also advocated by Chris Spannos and the Organization for a Free Society.<sup>32</sup> Albert writes that ‘citizens should have a claim on society’s economic product that increases if they do socially valued work longer or more intensely or under worse conditions’.<sup>33</sup> This is where we might see the descendants of collectivism in some ways. However, for advocates of parecon, it is typically not seen as a transitional phase into a full communism of free consumption, but an end unto itself, which differentiates it from Bakunin’s theory.

## Communist Anarchism

Strategically, communist anarchists (sometimes referred to as anarcho-communists, anarchist-communists, or libertarian communists—with each of those terms, at times, connoting some strategic and theoretical differences) typically see a need for a revolutionary break with capitalism. Some envision, like Bakunin, this being a series of grand revolutionary events enacted by an organised working class. Others, however, see anarchism and

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, *Looking Forward: Participatory Economics for the Twenty First Century* (New York: South End Press, 1991); Chris Spannos (Ed), *Real Utopia: Participatory Society for the 21st Century* (Oakland: AK Press, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Michael Albert, ‘Porous Borders of Anarchist Vision and Strategy’, in D. Shannon, A. Nocella, J. Asimakopoulos (Eds), *The Accumulation of Freedom: Writings on Anarchist Economics* (Oakland: AK Press), 327–343.

necessities. As we enter into waged and salaried relations in order to address those needs, accordingly, liberty is quickly traded for workplace hierarchies and social management. A basic function of capitalism is to create and enforce this hierarchical, authoritarian arrangement of property through the organised violence of the state, existing, of course, alongside authoritarian ‘social dynamics which are generated, reproduced and enacted within *and* outside this apparatus’.<sup>6</sup> Capitalism is then necessarily incompatible with libertarianism—a thick anti-authoritarianism, despite some misguided rhetorical attempts to fuse the two (predominantly in the Anglo world). But there is not shared agreement among anarchists on what exactly the defining features of capitalism are. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> in order to outline anarchist political economic analyses of capitalism, one might describe capitalism in terms of the following broad features (some of which may not be exclusive to capitalism, depending on how we define it): wage labour/exploitation, private property, markets, class society, and states.

Wage labour/exploitation is one of the basic constituent parts of capitalism. In order to access the social product, as illustrated by Bakunin above, workers must rent themselves out for a wage or salary. The value produced under capitalism by workers, minus whatever wage the capitalist(s) pay, is then expropriated by capitalists in the form of surplus value—this process is exploitation. Chomsky asserts that it used to be common for American workers at the turn of the century to refer to this set of relationships as

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<sup>6</sup> Uri Gordon, ‘Anarchism and Political Theory: Contemporary Problems’, *The Anarchist Library*, 2007. Retrieved from [http://theanarchistlibrary.org/HTML/Uri\\_Gordon\\_\\_Anarchism\\_and\\_Political\\_Theor](http://theanarchistlibrary.org/HTML/Uri_Gordon__Anarchism_and_Political_Theor)

<sup>7</sup> See D. Shannon, A. Nocella, and J. Asimakopoulos, ‘Anarchist Economics: A Holistic View’, in D. Shannon, A. Nocella, and J. Asimakopoulos (Eds), *The Accumulation of Freedom: Writings on Anarchist Economics* (Oakland: AK Press, 2012), 11–39 and D. Shannon, ‘Economy’, in N. Jun, L. Williams, and B. Franks (Eds), *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach* (New York: Routledge, Forthcoming).

‘wage slavery’ to point out a historical continuity between *owning* another person and what is, essentially, *renting* another person.<sup>8</sup> Not only do anarchists oppose wage labour and exploitation on the grounds that they are unfair, but these things are also against the material interests of working people and create a social relation of domination between the boss and the worker (which Bakunin so eloquently describes). Many anarchists argue that the wage labour relation is *the* defining aspect of capitalism.<sup>9</sup> Kropotkin claimed that through this process of exploitation, capitalists in his day ‘appropriate[d] two-thirds of the products of human labor ... having reduced the masses to a point at which they have not the means of subsistence for a month, or even for a week in advance’.<sup>10</sup>

This social relation (exploitation) is made possible by private property. Typically, anarchists define private property as property that allows for long-term absentee ownership. This is often juxtaposed with what is referred to as *personal property* or *possessions* or forms of ownership that are defined by *occupancy* and *use*. This leaves plenty of room for disagreement about how we draw lines around use and occupancy, but it also visibilises a social relation between persons and things that emerged from the historical context of the processes of accumulation that led to the development of capitalism. The notion that one can ‘own’ a home, or better yet, a workplace, across the ocean, without ever having to see it, occupy it, or use it, while charging rents or expropriating the value produced by workers within that location is not some eternal phenomenon. It is specific to capitalism and its development. Berkman

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<sup>8</sup> See Harry Kreisler’s interview with Chomsky here, ‘Noam Chomsky on the Original Meaning of the Word ‘Libertarian’’, *Archive*, June 2002. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/NoamChomskyOnTheOriginalMeaningOfLibertarian>.

<sup>9</sup> For some interesting contemporary comments on Proudhon’s theory of exploitation, see e.g. Shawn P. Wilbur, ‘Property and Theft: Proudhon’s Theory of Exploitation’, *Mutualism*, August 18, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.mutualism.info/2015/08/18/property-and-theft-proudhons-theory-of->

<sup>10</sup> P. Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (Oakland: AK Press, 2008), 55.

## Collectivism

Collectivism is most often associated with Bakunin, who referred to himself as a ‘collectivist’ to distinguish his theory from state-communists. While mutualism is often interpreted as a reformist and gradualist strategy that would try to *overgrow* capitalism over a long period of time, Bakunin saw a need for a revolutionary rupture with capitalism. Bakunin argued for a revolutionary movement that would expropriate property, socialising it.

Collectivism, then, begins with the assumption of social ownership of productive property. The product of labour, however, would be gathered into a communal market. Bakunin’s friend, James Guillaume, when outlining Bakunin’s vision called for a society where ‘items [...] produced by collective labor will belong to the community. And each member will receive remuneration for his [sic] labor either in the form of commodities [...] or in currency. In some communities remuneration will be in proportion to hours worked; in others payment will be measured by both the hours of work and the kind of work performed; still other systems will be experimented with to see how they work out’.<sup>30</sup> Where communities used currency, it would be used to purchase items from the collective market.

And yet Sam Dolgoff said of Guillaume that he ‘saw no difference in principle between collectivism and anti-state communism. The collectivists understood that full communism would not be immediately realizable. They were convinced that the workers themselves would gradually introduce communism as they overcame the obstacles, both psychological and economic’.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in this way, the idea of remuneration was not seen as an end in Bakunin’s collectivism, but rather a transitional phase into a system of ‘full communism’, presumably where norms of remuneration would be

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<sup>30</sup> James Guillaume, ‘1876: On Building the New Social Order’, in Sam Dolgoff (Ed), *Bakunin on Anarchy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1971), 361.

<sup>31</sup> Guillaume, *Ibid.*, 159.

rather than capitalists expropriating surplus value from workers, workers would keep or trade those products that they produce. This would mean that distribution in a mutualist society would be 'by work done, by *deed* rather than need. Workers would receive the full product of their labour, after paying for inputs from other co-operatives'.<sup>28</sup> This is an important distinction, particularly as anarchists who advocate for communism argue for forms of distribution by *need* and parts of the debates over anarchist ideas about post-capitalism are centred on the distribution of the things that we produce.

Perhaps some of the most visible contemporary proponents of mutualism are Kevin Carson, Shawn P. Wilbur, or groups like the Alliance of the Libertarian Left or Center for a Stateless Society.<sup>29</sup> Many of these modern mutualists, particularly those at the Center for a Stateless Society, have altered features of Proudhon's arguments in key ways, influenced by the American individualists like Benjamin Tucker and Josiah Warren. Some of the aforementioned groups see anti-statists working together across broad economic spectrums—some of whom are socialist, others who advocate forms of capitalism and could not therefore properly be called 'anarchists' or 'libertarian' (in the sense I use in this chapter). And there seems to be a split among contemporary mutualists, with people like Shawn Wilbur arguing for a return to original source materials by Proudhon (whose ideas are still being translated into English). Under this lens, mutualism is a social science rooted in reciprocity, rather than a set of prescriptive political economic ideas.

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<sup>28</sup> Anarcho, 'The Economics of Anarchy', *Anarchist Writers*, September 4, 2009. Retrieved from <http://anarchism.pageabode.com/anarcho/the-economics-of-anarchy>.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, <http://mutualist.blogspot.com/>, <http://libertarian-labyrinth.blogspot.com/>, <http://c4ss.org/>, <http://all-left.net/>.

posited that this historical development of the notion of private property robbed workers of things they collectively created:

Though the workers, as a class, have built the factories, a slice of their daily labor is taken from them for the privilege of using those factories. That's the landlord's profit. Though the workers have made the tools and the machinery, another slice of their daily labor is taken from them for the privilege of using those tools and machinery. That's the manufacturer's profit. Though the workers built the railroads and are running them, another slice of their daily labor is taken from them for the transportation of the goods they make. That's the railroad's profit. And so on, including the banker who lends the manufacturer other people's money, the wholesaler, the jobber, and other middlemen, all of whom get their slice of the worker's toil.<sup>11</sup>

Another element of capitalist society as we know it is market relations. Generally, and likely because in dominant narratives Marxian economics are juxtaposed with capitalist models, we are told that for allocation we have a choice between central planning and markets. Anarchists, however, have sometimes argued for decentralised forms of planning and some have suggested that we might have anti-capitalist, socialist markets.<sup>12</sup> This was a part of what was originally proposed by Proudhon and by workers who saw strategic advantages in cooperative enterprises—a market socialism in which self-managed worker-owned firms would exchange in a market regulated by an 'agro-industrial federation' on the basis of reciprocity.<sup>13</sup> This collective worker-ownership model would po-

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<sup>11</sup> A. Berkman, *What is Communist Anarchism?* (New York: Dover Books, 1972), 10.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, <http://mutualist.org> for some modern examples of mutualist theory.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

tentially resolve the problem of the appropriation of surplus value, allowing worker-owned firms access to the full product of their labours.

Anarchists point out that these economic arrangements lead to the development of class society. While we are often told that we are all equals under the law or that we all have equal power through voting, anarchists point out that these claims (which serve to justify and naturalise capitalist society) are absurd. Rather, we do not live in a society of equals. We live in a society of *classes*, with different material interests. The ruling class in capitalist society has an interest in maintaining capitalism while the rest of us have an interest in ending our exploitation. McKay, like many anarchists, argues for a two-class analysis with the following taxonomy:

**Working class**—those who have to work for a living but have no real control over that work or other major decisions that affect them, i.e. order-takers. This class also includes the unemployed, pensioners, etc., who have to survive on handouts from the state. They have little wealth and little (official) power. This class includes the growing service worker sector, most (if not the vast majority) of “white collar” workers as well as traditional “blue collar” workers. Most self-employed people would be included in this class, as would the bulk of peasants and artisans (where applicable). In a nutshell, the producing classes and those who either were producers or will be producers. This group makes up the vast majority of the population.

**Ruling Class**—those who control investment decisions, determine high level policy, set the agenda for capital and state. This is the elite at the top, owners or top managers of large companies, multinationals and banks (i.e. the capitalists), owners of large amounts of land (i.e. landlords or the aristocracy, if applicable),

for any number of mixes of these arrangements or, at times, take on anti-state political economic ideas outside of the anarchist tradition. Typically, the three major proposals are referred to as mutualism, collectivism, and (anarchist) communism.

## Mutualism

Proudhon was an advocate of a form of market socialism that many people refer to as ‘mutualism’.<sup>27</sup> Mutualism, according to this view, is an anti-capitalist model that sees mutual banks and credit associations as a way to socialise productive property and allow for a form of dual power for workers, particularly through the use of low-interest loans, charging only the necessary interest to pay for administration. Using these loans, workers could buy and cooperatively own their means of production. Proudhon argued for mutualism not only as a post-capitalist vision but also as a strategic orientation stressing the need to build alternative economic relationships in the here and now that would eventually replace capitalism.

As Proudhon sketched it out, wage labour and landlordism would be abolished in a reciprocal arrangement of society. Ownership claims would be based on occupancy and use. Therefore, all workers would have access to their own means of production—most organising into cooperative, non-hierarchical firms. These self-managed firms would exchange in a market, regulated by a grand agro-industrial federation. Many mutualists have argued that these firms would function in ways similar to worker cooperatives contemporarily, but without some of the pressures of operating in the context of a capitalist and statist society. Further,

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<sup>27</sup> For a contrary read of Proudhon’s mutualism, as an ‘anarchist encounter’ rather than a set of political economic ideas, see Shawn P. Wilbur, ‘The Anatomy of the Encounter’, *Libertarian Labyrinth*, September 7, 2013. Retrieved from <http://libertarian-labyrinth.blogspot.com/2013/09/the-anatomy-of-encounter.html>

(and strategic) differences. Similarly, there have been (and are) anarchists who advocate for specific proposals, but see a need for a commitment to pluralism in terms of vision. One of the best examples of this can be found in Malatesta, who advocated for anarchist-communism, yet stated:

One may, therefore, prefer communism, or individualism, or collectivism, or any other system, and work by example and propaganda for the achievement of one's personal preferences, but one must beware, at the risk of certain disaster, of supposing that one's system is the only, and infallible, one, good for all men [sic], everywhere and for all times, and that its success must be assured at all costs, by means other than those which depend on persuasion, which spring from the evidence of facts.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Price argues that 'it may be most productive to think in terms of an experimental, pluralist, and decentralized society, in which different parts face the problems caused by the transition out of capitalism and deal with them in different ways'.<sup>26</sup> Undoubtedly, these pluralist positions are also reflective of anarchist suspicion of visionary arguments and blueprints for a future society.

Nonetheless, one can identify strands of post-capitalist thinking by anarchists. These various positions can easily be found among contemporary anarchists, though often using different terms (and sometimes, advanced by thinkers who are not anarchists). This method of adoption might itself be reflective of anarchist pluralism, where contemporary anarchists often argue

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<sup>25</sup> Vernon Richards (Ed), *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* (London: Freedom Press, 1984), 28–29.

<sup>26</sup> W. Price, 'The Anarchist Method: An Experimental Approach to Post-Capitalist Economies', in D. Shannon, A. Nocella, and J. Asimakopoulos (Eds), *The Accumulation of Freedom: Writings on Anarchist Economics* (Oakland: AK Press, 2012), 323.

top-level state officials, politicians, and so forth. They have real power within the economy and/or state, and so control society. In a nutshell, the owners of power (whether political, social or economic) or the master class.<sup>14</sup>

However, not everyone fits neatly into these broad categories. And some radicals, anarchists included, argue for the existence of a third class. Some refer to this as 'the middle class', 'the coordinator class', 'the techno-managerial class', and so on. This is typically used to highlight the existence of people with a high degree of social power—often directly over working people—such as high-paid lawyers, tenured professors at elite institutions, and so on. This class is sometimes conceived as having their own sets of material interests, in opposition to the ruling class and the working class, and sometimes conceived as having similar interests as workers, but being placed above them in capitalist society due to their social power.

We might juxtapose this anarchist class analysis with sociological analyses of class that often split society into a lower (or 'under') class, working class, lower middle class, upper middle class, and upper class. These popular sociological analyses are typically rooted in a Weberian analysis of power and one can certainly point to structural advantages that some workers have over others, cultural differences, and the like.<sup>15</sup> However, in terms of *ruling* and *owning* society, this kind of broad-range sociological analysis of class can serve to mystify more than explain. Even a better-paid worker with more prestige than her counterparts, in some cases even in the same workplace, is still exploited and controlled by her boss at the end of the day.

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<sup>14</sup> Iain McKay, *An Anarchist FAQ: Volume 1* (Oakland: AK Press, 2008), 185.

<sup>15</sup> For example, differences in income; cultural tastes in music, art, food, and so on; in some cases access to empowering work or forms of managerial power.

Finally, libertarians point out that the social relations in capitalist society are protected and maintained by states. As Malatesta notes, we are taught that the state is ‘the representative ... of the general interest: it is the expression of the rights of all, construed as a limit upon the rights of each’ and that states are ‘moral ... endowed with certain attributes of reason, justice’.<sup>16</sup> Anarchists point out that actually the state protects property relations, allowing for the existence of private property. A workplace can be owned and maintained and the workers exploited only through the organisation of violence to stop them from simply taking the workplace and running it themselves. While in contemporary capitalism, ownership has become more convoluted and diffused throughout society than during Malatesta’s time, it is still the state and its organised, legitimated violence that allows for the continued existence of private property. Emma Goldman succinctly explained this libertarian analysis of the state and why anti-authoritarians must reject statism when she wrote, ‘I believe government, organized authority, or the State is necessary *only* to maintain or protect property and monopoly. It has proven efficient in that function only. As a promoter of individual liberty, human well-being and social harmony, which alone constitute real order, government stands condemned by all the great men [sic] of the world’.<sup>17</sup>

Again, this is an attempt to break down capitalism to its basic and constituent elements: wage labour/exploitation, private property, markets, class society, and states. But this short descriptive analysis misses much. One might consider, for example, value production as central to capitalism, money or some other circulating medium of exchange, pricing mechanisms, and other possible essentials. Examining its fundamental constitution is important be-

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<sup>16</sup> Errico Malatesta, ‘Anarchy’, in Daniel Guérin (Ed), *No Gods No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2005), 356.

<sup>17</sup> E. Goldman, ‘What I Believe’, *The Anarchist Library*, July 19, 1908. Retrieved from <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/emma-goldman-what-i-believe>.

Stirner, who inspired Renzo Novatore, Emma Goldman, and many others.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, many anarchists are suspicious of visionary arguments and blueprints for the future, seeing anarchism as a conscious creation of the dispossessed and not a future that can be written within the context of the present. As Emma Goldman put it:

Anarchism is not, as some may suppose, a theory of the future to be realized through divine inspiration. It is a living force in the affairs of our life, constantly creating new conditions. The methods of Anarchism therefore do not comprise an iron-clad program to be carried out under all circumstances. Methods must grow out of the economic needs of each place and clime, and of the intellectual and temperamental requirements of the individual.<sup>24</sup>

Following this, some anarchists would eschew labels and ‘hyphenations’ like ‘anarchist-communism’, preferring to refer to their desires simply as ‘anarchy’. Still others assume that visionary arguments are authoritarian, a method of conceiving a new society without the participation of those people who (will) compose it. In this way, the idea of a positive and visionary politics can be read as vanguardist and presumptive.

There is also a strong tradition of revolutionary pluralism in anarchism. Some libertarians advocate for an ‘anarchism-without-adjectives’, perhaps most famously advanced by thinkers such as Voltairine de Cleyre, to indicate a tolerance for many visionary

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<sup>23</sup> See especially Max Stirner, ‘The Ego and His Own’, *The Anarchist Library*, 1845. Retrieved from <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/max-stirner-the-ego-and-his-own>.

<sup>24</sup> Emma Goldman, ‘Anarchism: What it Really Stands For’, *Dwardmac.Pitzer*, N.D. Retrieved from [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/goldman/aando/anarchism.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/goldman/aando/anarchism.html).

and gentler capitalism. And the age of austerity<sup>22</sup> demonstrates just how lasting those reforms and regulations are. States can dismantle any reform or regulation they set in place at any moment. When the capacity for capital accumulation is in question, even erstwhile ‘socialist’ parties use the capitalist state to bring workers to heel.

Libertarianism—with its historical thick anti-authoritarianism—is a diverse body of anti-capitalist ideas. Libertarians tend to define capitalism by its major features, perhaps most commonly wage labour, private property, markets, class society, and states. But the deep critique offered by libertarian political economy of capitalism raises some questions about why we continue to reproduce it. In part, capital reproduces itself through ideological filtering mechanisms that serve to justify it, explain it away, or in some cases avoid critical scrutiny at all. But what positive visions have anarchists offered to replace capitalism as an organising principle?

## **Libertarian Political Economy/Anti-Capitalism/Post-Capitalism**

It is no simple task to pen a section on anarchist ideas about what a post-capitalist society might look like for a number of reasons. For one, many anarchists reject visionary or generative thinking, preferring instead a politics of negation. This is particularly true of anarchist tendencies inspired by nihilism. Anarchy, conceived under these terms, is not so much about creating an anti-capitalist society, but resisting society as such, a line of tension that runs across a wide variety of anarchist egoist, nihilist, and individualist thinking, perhaps, in many ways, exemplified by Max

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<sup>22</sup> D. Shannon (Ed), *The End of the World As We Know It? Crisis, Resistance, and the Age of Austerity* (Oakland: AK Press, 2014).

cause capitalism is a resilient system, often changing forms in order to co-opt struggles against it. In what is perhaps one of its most insidious characteristics, capital’s drive for accumulation has, at times, meant creating commodities out of rebellion, generating release valves for struggles against its inexorable search for growth and profit and its commodification of human life and desire. Understanding these constitutive elements, then, is an absolute necessity for those who wish to undo capitalism.

## **Then Why Capitalism?**

Of course, if capitalism is authoritarian, exploitative, if it robs the majority of the fruits of their labour, allows a minority to rule, and distorts social life surrendering desire to the need for capital accumulation, this raises the question of why humans continue to reproduce it. In a more fundamental sense, it raises what might be the most poignant question in social science, perhaps even social life: Why do people obey? In large part, capitalism reproduces itself through the participation of people in its social relations, like any institutional arrangement. Libertarians can often be found advocating for mass refusals and the withdrawal of our participation in this social reproduction—sometimes in the form of general strikes; sometimes, as in the case of the illegalists, in the form of direct expropriations; sometimes in the form of occupations and the taking of space; and still other times in advocating for creating alternatives to capitalist relations in the here and now. But the advocacy of these kinds of practices highlights the question: If it is in our interests to abolish capitalism, why (and how) is capitalism continually reproduced in our social lives and why do we not abolish those social relations and begin writing a new future today?

Some of the possible answers to that question are contained within popular understandings of economics. Capitalism is justified by ideological assumptions about ‘human nature’, what is

‘pragmatic’, and just how wonderful and benevolent democracy can be. Given that mass media are either owned and operated by capitalists or the state, our popular forms of entertainment are most often commodities produced under (and by) capital; our compulsory educational systems are run by the state and so on; it might not be a surprise just how popular those kinds of ideological assumptions are.

For example, capitalism is often justified by a belief that it is ‘human nature’ to be greedy, to want to accumulate wealth at the expense of others, to desire power over other people, and the like. Yet, for most of human history, people lived in hunter-gatherer societies without any concept of private property, in collectivities that based their lives on personal possessions and forms of common, social resources (nothing that could properly be called *property*). Given that long history, how could it be ‘human nature’ to want to dominate, to own, to compete for resources? These ideas of ‘human nature’ are common among people the world over. This belief has been under sustained critique by libertarians, prompting Emma Goldman to declare, ‘Poor human nature, what horrible crimes have been committed in thy name! Every fool, from king to policeman, from the flatheaded parson to the visionless dabbler in science, presumes to speak authoritatively of human nature. The greater the mental charlatan, the more definite his [sic] insistence on the wickedness and weaknesses of human nature. Yet, how can anyone speak of it today, with every soul in a prison, with every heart fettered, wounded, and maimed?’<sup>18</sup> Her larger point was that those things that we refer to as ‘human nature’ are projections of our dominant institutions into our very *selves*. Thus, capitalism is not some naturally occurring system. It is a system that is constructed and one that can be dispensed with.

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<sup>18</sup> Emma Goldman, ‘Anarchism: What it Really Stands For’, *Dwardmac.Pitzer*, N.D. Retrieved from [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_archives/goldman/aando/anarchism.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_archives/goldman/aando/anarchism.html).

Similarly, economists often object to anarchist alternatives to capitalism as utopian (in the pejorative sense of the term) or not being pragmatic. They argue instead that alternatives to capitalism would never ‘work’. First, this ignores the vast majority of the history of human social organisation, which presumably ‘worked’ (i.e. we are still here and while people sometimes struggled in the past, clearly people have also thrived without capitalism).<sup>19</sup> This also ignores human experiences and experiments outside of capitalist relations that exist within capitalist society<sup>20</sup> or in revolutionary situations.<sup>21</sup> But more egregiously, it assumes that capitalism, even by its own ideological standards, is a system that ‘works’. Given massive poverty, privation, and hunger; the routine destruction of landbases and the despoiling of the natural environment; massive worldwide wars; periodic crises such as the 2008 financial collapse—given that a tiny elite owns massive amounts of resources (multiple homes, dozens of luxury cars, servants and coteries, and the like) while most of us struggle to survive—can we really say this is a system that ‘works’?

It is also often suggested that under democracy checks and balances are present in the form of state regulation of the economy that can address some of the failures of capitalism. But even a cursory look at recent history should demonstrate how absurd these deeply held beliefs about democracy are. Perhaps the best examples are when Leftist governments are voted into power. In much of Europe, we have a long history of socialist parties legislating regulatory mechanisms into the economy in order to create a kinder

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<sup>19</sup> For an interesting anthropological look at this question, see Marshall Sahlins, ‘The Original Affluent Society’, *Eco-action*, N.D. Retrieved from <http://www.eco-action.org/dt/affluent.html>.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (London: Freedom Press, 2001, Orig. 1973); Peter Gelderloos, *Anarchy Works* (San Francisco: Ardent Press, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> See especially Diego Abad de Santillán, ‘After the Revolution’, *Libcom*, N.D. Retrieved from <https://libcom.org/history/after-revolution-economic-reconstruction-spain-die>