

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Anarchism is about individuals

Donald Rooum

Donald Rooum
Anarchism is about individuals
1986

Retrieved on 2024-06-21 from
<https://files.libcom.org/files/freedom-centenary.pdf>
From the 1986 centenary issue of *Freedom*, pp. 56–57

theanarchistlibrary.org

1986

Contents

The purpose of human society	6
--	---

are coerced. A man pointing a gun at me cannot watch me for ever; if I continue to obey him when he is asleep, it must be because I think the relationship inevitable or normal, or because I acknowledge a duty to obey. Given a climate of opinion in which selfishness is praiseworthy, where it is always right and proper to say 'I won't', it would be more difficult than it is now to set up a coercive institution. Casual, momentary coercion would admittedly be less easy to prevent.

'Is it possible to have a human society with no coercion whatever? Surely, in the most voluntary society imaginable, it would be necessary to restrain the occasional maniac?'

I do not know and it is not important. We do not have to deal with the problems of an ideal society. We live here and now, and it is quite obvious that society here and now is a lot more restrictive of individual choices than society should be.

social upheaval, opponents of coercion can set up relatively less coercive organisations, such as the worker-controlled workshops which flourished (until they were overrun by conquerors) in revolutionary Spain. In more stable times, simple opposition and argument can produce small changes, which in turn change the perception of what is normal, providing a base for further changes.

Of course there are many opinions about the purpose of human society, and not all social pressures are in the direction of widening choice. Social upheaval in revolutionary Iran led to religious tyranny, and the thirty years in Britain which saw the widening of choice for some categories of individuals also saw a vast increase in the number of people in prison. The first stage in any anarchist programme is to convince as many people as possible, as much as they will be convinced, that individuals ought to work for their individual purposes, and nobody should be forced. 'Without compulsion, how would the necessary work get done?' (in the 1950s the usual form of this question was 'Who will clean the sewers?', but people have become less nervous of shit during the last thirty years.)

Much work is done without compulsion anyway, such as digging gardens and organizing clubs. Much of the work which people would be punished for not doing also offers positive rewards, like 'job satisfaction' or a sense of achievement. Nobody works for nothing, but it may reasonably be contended that individuals who are not coerced will work for positive rewards. Some long for public acclaim; in a coercive society, they climb as high as they can in the hierarchy; in a free society, they might choose to clean the sewers.

'Would a coercion-free society allow people to invade the freedom of other people? If so it would not be coercion-free for long; if not it would not be quite coercion-free, because to stop someone from coercing others is to coerce them.'

For a coercive relationship to be widespread and lasting, there must be a measure of acceptance on the part of those who

There is no such thing as human society.

A lot of muddled thinking rests on the error that because 'society' is a useful noun, it must refer to a thing. It is one of those nouns like 'journey' and 'tennis', which refers not to a thing but to a relationship between things. The statement 'human society exists' is simply a less cumbersome way of saying 'human individuals relate to each other in certain complicated ways'. The question, 'what is the purpose of human society?' means the same as, 'why do human individuals associate in the way they do?'.

Human craving for society is irrational.

The old social contract philosophers listed what they took to be the advantages of society, and wrote as if individuals deliberately adopted society for the sake of these advantages, as if society in general were an invention, like a trade union or a cycling club. We know from experience it is not like that at all. Human individuals who go for long without company experience a particular emotional distress called loneliness. Frustrated in more complex social needs they feel such distresses as humiliation and lack of job-satisfaction. Human eagerness for society is no more rational than the eagerness of a sheep to be in a flock, although it is less simple.

Human society did not start for any discernible purpose.

The emotional depth of the human need for society suggests that it is genetically inherited, and probably provides some selective advantage to individuals, or provided selective advantage to an ancestor.

There is nothing planned about genetic inheritance. Biologists sometimes make statements like 'the giraffe evolved a long neck so that it could browse higher up the trees', but they are not intended to be taken literally. There is no such animal as the giraffe; there are only individual giraffes. And there is no 'so that' about evolution; what happened in the case of giraffe's necks, according to the natural selection theory, is that those individuals which just happened to have longer necks

just happened to be alive at a time when the available food just happened to be high, and so just happened to survive and breed as their relatives starved. The idea is gaining ground that natural selection alone cannot account for the whole of evolutionary change, but the other mechanisms proposed are equally unplanned.

Indiscernible extramundane purpose cannot be excluded. Perhaps the Creator had human society or giraffe's necks in mind when the laws of physics were created at the beginning of time. For all we can discern, however, human society began by accident.

Opinions about the purpose of human society abound, but they are not factual opinions. They are ethical opinions. They cannot be confirmed or refuted by reference to facts, and they do not even need to be internally consistent. They can be argued, but for argument to succeed there must probably be a measure of assent to start with.

The purpose of human society

Anarchism is founded on the opinion that the purpose of human society is to extend the range of individual choices.

It seems indisputable that human society does in fact extend the range of individual choices. To take a simple example: an isolated individual cannot choose to shift a weight that takes two people to shift it; whereas an individual in society can make that choice, if only there is another individual who wants the same weight shifted. By being in society, each individual can use the strength of the other. This is called co-operation.

Not all human relationships, however, are co-operative. Some are coercive; that is to say, individuals are compelled by threats from other people to do what they would rather not do. This may extend the range of choices of whoever is doing

the threatening, but it restricts the choices of the individual being threatened, and so runs counter to what anarchists see as the purpose of human society.

For historical reasons, anarchist writers have often tended to concentrate on the threat of penury held over the poor by the rich, but this never made other types of coercion more acceptable. The threats may be of death, torture, spanking, imprisonment, ostracism, impoverishment, bad weather, bad luck, or punishment after death. Anarchists oppose the lot.

It follows from the total opposition to coercion that the final end of anarchism is a society totally without coercion. Such a free society may be seen, however, rather as a logical extension of anarchism than as a policy objective. What anarchists are after here and now is as little coercion as possible. The important aim is to make *progress towards* the free society (or when times are bad, to slow down progress in the opposite direction).

There are those who claim that they share the desire of the anarchists for a society where all relationships are voluntary, but have a different strategy for getting there. Their programme begins by concentrating all the instruments of coercion in the hands of persons of goodwill (ie themselves), who can then exercise their power to prevent others from behaving coercively, and educate the populace to have no relationships except co-operative ones. When this stage is reached, wrote one advocate of this programme, 'the state is not abolished, it withers away'. The programme was predicted by anarchists, and seems since to have been shown by experience, to result in more coercion, not less. Opposition to the ruling men of goodwill is ruthlessly stamped on, no less than unauthorised coercion. The persons of goodwill get into the habit of commanding, everyone gets into the habit of reluctant obedience, and a narrower range of individual choice comes to be accepted as normal.

Simple opposition, on the other hand, can produce discernible progress towards a less coercive society. In times of