Anarchism and Human Nature

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Contents

> We know that we ourselves are not without faults and that the best of us would soon be corrupted by the exercise of power. We take men for what they are worth — and that is why we hate the government of man by man…
>
> Peter Kropotkin, *Anarchism* (2002: 136)

In my capacity as professor of political science I have often presented to my students the political principles of anarchism: liberty, equality, solidarity. I have explained that the goal of anarchists is the reorganization of human relationships to the exclusion of domination in every sphere of human activity: politics, economy, culture, love and sexuality, etc. I have also specified that, like any political philosophy, anarchism proposes above all a regulating ideal. There is always a gap between the idea (anarchism) and the practice (anarchy). Human beings, whether or not they are anarchists, are imperfect and can never live up to their philosophical ideals. Furthermore, human beings rarely espouse all the principles of a political ideology. Finally, the supporters of a given ideology do not always agree on the definition and ranking of their fundamental principles. Consequently, all regimes —liberal, communist, theological, monarchist, fascist, etc. — display a number of inconsistencies and imperfections when they are assessed against the political philosophies and ideologies to which they subscribe.

Too often, however, certain inconsistencies in liberal regimes are excused, whereas absolute coherence is demanded of anarchism and anarchy. Whenever I introduce the subject of anarchism to friends or colleagues, in a classroom or a public lecture, there is always someone who will point to a magazine article or TV documentary about chimpanzees, proving incontrovertibly that anarchy is impossible because hierarchy and inequality are naturally determined constants. There will always be, the argument goes, alpha males in a formal or informal position of domination due to chromosomes, hormones, differences between the sexes, and the laws of natural selection. The anarchist historian Harold Barclay (1990: 12) of the University of Alberta (Canada), attests to this elitist conviction, which in his view is widespread in universities: "[I]t has been my experience in more than 30 years of teaching anthropology that, among students, about the most firmly held myth is the one that no society can exist without government — and its corollary that every society must have a head." Concerning my own discipline, Barclay adds, "In the Universities, political 'science' departments are the chief centres for the promulgation of this myth."

In my courses I sometimes refer to the work of anthropologists (including Barclay, Pierre Clastre, and David Graeber) and historians who have studied leaderless societies, like those of the Native Peoples of North America, who governed themselves through assemblies where deliberation took place on issues of common interest. This is usually met with shrugs and comments to the effect that there were certainly individuals who were more influential than others and exercised their domination over the community, and, in any case, they were massacred by the Europeans, which proves that domination ineluctably finds a way to prevail. Another question that is almost always raised is this: How could an anarchist society respond effectively to an insane person roaming the streets with a chainsaw and looking for heads to cut off? There have to be prisons and police officers, don't there? So anarchy is impossible.

Seeing that the demand for absolute coherence does not apply to other kinds of regimes (liberalism, for instance, which is hardly free of inconsistencies), I have reached the conclusion that the rhetorical aim of such objections is to deny all possibility of reflecting on the potentials of anarchism by focussing on a single problem or by indentifying a single contradictory example.

Or, to put it more bluntly, "the use of 'human nature' as an argument against anarchism is simply superficial and, ultimately, an evasion. It is an excuse not to think" (McKay circa 2007: 3).

I have formulated two hypotheses that may explain this inability, indeed this refusal, to imagine a society without domination. The first, confirmed by an informal poll in my classes, is that the students involved were incapable of imagining a leaderless community because they had never experienced one: from family life to summer camp, to sport teams, scouts and guides, student associations, religious groups, up to and including college, they had always found themselves in hierarchically structured institutions. As the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta (2004: 17 [our translation]) has noted, "[L]ike all living creatures, humans adapt and grow accustomed to their circumstances […]. Born in chains and heir to a long tradition of slavery, humans believed, when they began to think, that slavery was the very characteristic of life, and freedom seemed impossible to them." Moreover, how can one conceive of the absence of domination and hierarchy when official history amounts to the names of a few great leaders: Alexander, Caesar, Richard the Lion Heart, Attila, Louis XIV, Christopher Columbus, Washington, Napoleon, Hitler, De Gaulle, Stalin, Mao, John F. Kennedy, Pol Pot, Barack Obama, Osama Ben Laden?

Another, more cynical, hypothesis may explain the apparent impossibility for these students of forming an idea of anarchy. After all, many of them hope their degrees will allow them to occupy leading positions in society. Moreover, the simple fact of being in college means they already have a stake in an inegalitarian society, where they are part of the elite. As Peter Kropotkin (2002: 146) observes, "[…] it must not be forgotten that men of science, too, are but human, and that most of them either belong by descent to the possessing classes and are steeped in the prejudices of their class, or else are in actual service of the government. Not out of the universities therefore does anarchism come."

Nevertheless, whether out of ignorance or interest, my students were attuned to many of the critiques of anarchism articulated by political philosophers such as Benjamin Barber (1972) and Todd May (1994) claiming that (1) anarchism's conception of human "nature" is utopian or overly optimistic and (2) anarchism must therefore be unable to conceptualize the political, which is always a matter of power, authority, and hierarchy. Such critiques occur so frequently as to warrant a response.

Human Nature: Is Anarchism Optimistic?

According to David Miller (1984: 76), the author of a general survey of anarchism, there are "two common errors" on the subject of this political philosophy: "[O]ne, that all anarchists hold the same beliefs about human nature; the other, that these beliefs are excessively optimistic, in the sense that they present human beings in far too favourable a light." In fact many anarchists who have considered the question of human nature begin their discussions with a reminder that anarchism is often criticized for putting forward an overly optimistic view of human nature. In their pamphlet "What About Human Nature?" the anarchists Ian McKay, Gary Elkin, Dave Neal and Ed Boraas (circa 2007: 2) state, "one of the greatest myths about anarchism is the idea that we think human nature is inherently good." David Hartley (1995: 146-147), for his part, in "Communitarian Anarchism and Human Nature," notes that those who disparage anarchism often suggest that anarchists defend the "naivety thesis," whereby "an anarchist society makes egoism disappear." And in her study titled *Anarchism and Education*, Judith Suissa (2010: 24) quotes Max

Beloff, for whom anarchism "is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of human nature, on the unproven supposition that given total absence of constraints, or alternatively material abundance secured by communism, human societies could exist with no coercive element at all" (see also Wolff 1996: 34).

Granted, some anarchists do indeed have an optimistic conception of human nature, but their outlook hardly represents the totality of anarchist thought. As of the end of the 19th century, anarchists debating with the advocates of social Darwinism framed arguments on biological as well as historical-anthropological grounds in order to prove with historical evidence the existence of a vast tradition of egalitarian communities where mutual aid was practiced, both among animals and human beings. Kropotkin (1924) devoted an entire chapter of *Ethics: Origin and Development* (drafted c. 1900) to "The Moral Principle in Nature," in which he discusses Darwin's theses. Contrary to the commonplace popularized interpretations of Darwinism, Kropotkin points out that in *The Descent of Man* Darwin acknowledged the innate sociability of most animals and of human beings. Other anarchists, such as anthropologist Harold Barclay (1997: 113), warn against drawing simplistic and unqualified parallels with violent and aggressive animals to justify the same sort of behaviour in humans. Yes, chimpanzees are violent and aggressive, but gorillas, bonobos, gibbons, and orang-utans are not, and some contemporary primate specialists (e.g. Frans de Waal 2005) have even concluded their studies with references to anarchism and to Kropotkin's notion of mutual aid.

David Loye, a Darwin specialist, observes that in *The Descent of Man* there are only two references to the survival of the fittest, one of which is made in the context of the recognition by Darwin that he had overstated the importance of that idea in *The Origin of Species*. By contrast, there are 24 references to mutual aid, 61 to solicitude for others and 90 to morality (Loye 2000: 5-6-). Kropotkin (1927: 41 [our translation]) quotes Darwin to the effect that "social instincts lead animals to find pleasure in the society of their companions, to feel a certain affection for them, and to be of service to them in various ways." This instinct sometimes overrides the parental instinct, as evidenced by migratory birds that abandon their young if they are too weak to undertake the long voyage. Furthermore, "a natural law exists, even among the big cats," Kropotkin (1927: 64 [our translation]) notes: animals "never kill one another" within the same species. He thus regards mutual aid as a factor in natural evolution. Among animals, mutual aid is necessary for at least three reasons: (1) to raise offspring; (2) to find food for the group; (3) for safety's sake (keeping watch, warnings). What is more, animals form groups to travel (e.g. the great migrations) or simply for the pleasure of playing together.

In addition, many anthropologists and historians remind us that for the greater part of history humanity has lived in communities unfamiliar with private property and functioning without either leaders or hierarchies (at least among males and at times regardless of sex): Pygmies, the Tiv of Nigeria, the Santals of eastern India, and the Inuit. It appears that some of these peoples lived without a state for tens of thousands of years. Even in a context of extreme material poverty (e.g. the Inuit) the principle of "every man for himself" has not prevailed. In short, a non-hierarchical (hence egalitarian) society is not a utopian dream but an integral and very significant part of human experience.

The tendency of some anarchists to emphasize a distinct aptitude for mutual aid among living creatures, including human beings, no doubt explains why other anarchists blame anarchism for proposing an idealist and overly optimistic conception of human nature. James Joll (1980: 13), a historian of anarchism, in fact asserts that "anarchism presupposes the natural goodness of

man." The contemporary theorist of anarchism, Todd May (1994: 62-63), wonders why we should believe that the abolition of power would produce a better society: "This question goes to the heart of anarchist thought [… and] the answer has always been the same: the human essence is a good essence," one that is stifled by power relations. According to May, anarchism "is imbued with imbued with a type of essentialism or naturalism that forms the foundation of its thought. People are naturally good […]". However, in his view anarchist thought could survive, at least as a major critique of inegalitarian relations of power, by adopting a less optimistic conception of human nature (May 1994: 65).

Human Nature And The Political As A Wish To Dominate

Anarchism is also taken to task for forgetting that the political intrinsically involves relationships of power and the will to dominate. If follows from this critique, that can overlap the critique of optimism, that no human community can prevent the emergence and ascendancy of leaders, even when its social-political organization is theoretically egalitarian. Ambitious individual always manage more or less insidiously to impose their will, either formally or informally, on the other members of the community because of their personality or their skills.

This viewpoint comes in two forms: the first is mainly sociological while the other is grounded primarily in biology. The sociological approach maintains that any community includes a certain number of individuals who are at once, ambitious, cunning, and charismatic and who eventually succeed in decisively influencing collective decisions to a greater or lesser extent. This is what the sociologist Robert Michels has called the "iron law of oligarchy", by which he means the ineluctable phenomenon of the constitution of a hierarchy or an elite in any human group endeavouring to organize itself (with regard to social movements, see Diani 2003). His renowned study of the German social-democratic parties of the early 20th century even includes a chapter on anarchist organizations, in which he identifies leaders. Finally, an early 20th century psychologist who wrote a book denouncing the anarchists, declares, "it is by the wish of one to rise about the other, to acquire or produce that which can provide a benefit, that humanity attests to its vitality […] in sum to all our progress" (Gouzer circa 1920: 27-28).

The biological approach expresses a form of social Darwinism, revamped during the 1960s by socio-biologists such as Konrad Lorenz (Nobel laureate in 1973) and Edward O. Wilson, who won the Pulitzer Prize and made newspaper and magazine headlines when he published *On Human Nature*. His ideas, now upheld by "evolutionary psychology," appeal to common sense and are illustrated by reports on chimpanzee alpha males. According to Wilson, human beings are naturally aggressive for reasons of natural adaptation and tend to organize themselves hierarchically in order to increase their chances of surviving and to maximize the spread of their genetic heritage.

Sociologists and political scientists like Raymond Aron and Maurice Duverger also affirm that politics and biology are linked. Duverger (1964: 32) states, for example, "politics has a biological basis." He adds , "The study of animal societies shows the development of phenomena of authority and the organization of power, which bear comparison to analogous phenomena in human societies. Politics appeared on earth before human beings." Raymond Aron (1962: 340) goes even further, claiming that, "whether animal or human, combativeness does indeed have properly biological roots," and that "each human individual is genetically endowed with a degree

of aggressiveness." In 1998, Francis Fukuyama opened an article dealing with the influence of women in the political life of the United States by talking about "chimpanzee politics".

Is There A Human Nature?

Rather than grappling with the rhetorical debate on the subject of human nature, perhaps anarchists should simply ignore this notion. Doing so would make all the more sense for anarchists because the rhetoric of human nature has often served to justify unjust systems of domination and exploitation, such as slavery in the United States in the 19th century (Kropotkin 1998: 83-84). In this connection, the anarchists McKay, Elkin, Neal and Boraas (circa 2007: 1) observe, "what is considered 'human nature' can change with changing social circumstances. For example, slavery was considered part of 'human nature' and 'normal' for thousands of years. Homosexuality was considered perfectly normal by ancient Greeks yet thousands of years later the Christian church denounced it as unnatural." For his part, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (2008), in his evocatively titled book, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature: With Reflections on the Long History of Hierarchy, Equality and the Sublimation of Anarchy in the West, and Comparative Notes on Other Conceptions of the Human Condition*, explains that the representation of human nature as individualist and egotistical can be attributed to modern Western liberalism. In his view, virtually all other cultures and civilizations conceive of human nature as above all communitarian and inclined to solidarity, and regard an individualist and egotistical personality as both pathological and dangerous.

Consequently, the anarchist feminist Susan Brown (1993: 153) suggests that the idea of "human nature" be quite simply dispensed with because it is incompatible with properly understood anarchism: "The positing of a fixed, co-operative human nature presents certain problems for anarchism as it contradicts anarchism's commitment to free will and the existentially free individual. Anarchism does not have to posit a fixed human nature." She adds, "the notion of human nature must be abandoned entirely. This strategy is necessary, as human nature and human freedom are irreconcilable" (Brown 1993: 62).

Peter Marshall (1989: 138), a historian of anarchism, seems to agree with Brown: "It is my view that we should abandon the use of the term 'human nature' since it implies that there is a fixed essence within us [...]. Sweeping assertions about human nature are notoriously suspect." However, he goes on to write, "As for the controversy about whether we are 'naturally' good or bad, selfish or benevolent, gentle or aggressive, I consider the search for one irreducible quality to be as absurd and reductionist as looking for a human essence. We have innate tendencies for both types of behaviour; it is our circumstances which encourage or check them" (P. Marshall 1989: 142). Finally, Judith Suissa (2010: 25) sees "the concept of human nature [as] inherently problematic," yet she insists that "what is important in the present context is the methodological role which the concept of human nature has played within philosophical position," concluding that "the notion of a common human nature can be a useful conceptual tool [...] in philosophically evaluating particular normative positions." Thus, instead of rejecting holus bolus the very notion of "human nature," some anarchists try to ponder it precisely on the basis of anarchist principles in order to demonstrate that anarchism is not incompatible with human nature.

Human Nature: Two Contradictory Forces

Although some anarchists certainly do have an optimistic view of human nature, anarchist thought cannot be reduced to this position. For other anarchists — the subject of what follows — human beings do not act in accordance with a single principle but are moved, rather, by two contradictory and opposite forces. Hence the most famous anarchists of the 19th century — Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin — "acknowledged human nature to be innately twofold, involving both an essentially egoistical potential and a sociable, or altruistic potential" (Suissa 2010: 25; see also Hartley 1995: 145). Closer to home, there are anarchists who consider that, "[i]f by human nature it is meant 'what humans do,' it is obvious that human nature is contradictory — love, hate, compassion and heartlessness, peace and violence, and so on." (McKay and als. circa 2007: 1).

As for the 19th century anarchist Charlotte Wilson (2005: 128), she holds that human beings are traversed by two "social instincts," that is, an instinct for domination and an egalitarian social instinct seeking for individual and collective "self-affirmation." These two instincts, or principles, operate throughout human reasoning and emotions and are expressed in the form of individual and collective wills. Through domination we seek to impose our wishes on others. Through self-affirmation we strive to live according to our wishes on the basis of cooperation with those who act upon wishes compatible with or similar to our own. In both cases the central question is that of power. When we lean toward the principle of domination we strive to exert "power over" others, that is, to dominate them. When we lean toward the principle of self-affirmation we strive to exercise our "power to" propose or accomplish an individual or collective action.

The will to dominate is manifested in a community's hierarchical organization and social relations, inasmuch as this entails positions of leadership endowed with coercive powers in the various spheres of human activity. In the words of Errico Malatesta (2004: 24-25), "the principle of authority" refers to the ability of certain individuals "to use social forces — that is, the physical, intellectual, and economic powers of all — to oblige everyone to do what *they* want."

On the other hand, the wish for self-affirmation is manifested in the measures a community's consciously applies in order to minimize the expression of the will to dominate in its structures and social relations. To this end, the group needs to have the power to resist individuals driven by the ambition to dominate. Anarchy is therefore expressed through the desire for self-affirmation, whenever a force contests and opposes the will to dominate and succeeds momentarily and more or less perfectly in creating a space of freedom, equality and solidarity.

Structuralist Thought

Since every individual harbours both of the humours discussed above, no one is good or bad. A person's political position and social class as well as the society's particular organization strongly affect the ratio between the two humours in that person's life with respect to social relationships with members of the same or other classes, that is, with those who are above and below him or her in the social hierarchy. As underscored by Kropotkin (2002: 136), "We know that we ourselves are not without faults and that the best of us would soon be corrupted by the exercise of power." Judith Suissa (2010: 28) furthermore notes that Kropotkin "acknowledg[es] human nature to be essentially contextualist, in the sense that they [i.e., anarchists] regard it as determined not by

any human essence but by social and cultural context." Consequently, "[a]narchists argue that hierarchical organisations bring out the worst in human nature" (McKay and als. circa 2007: 5).

The aim of anarchists is precisely to create and maintain social relationships and organizations that promote individual and collective autonomy, because human beings are greatly influenced by the social structure in which they find themselves. That structure, as well as the individual's place and function within it determine to what extent the wish to dominate or to be autonomous is expressed or held in check. Here is how Kropotkin (2002: 135) responds to the detractors of anarchism who claim that anarchists have an idealistic and overly optimistic view of human nature: "Far from living in a world of visions and imagining men better than they are, we see them as they are; and that is why we affirm that the best of men is made essentially bad by the exercise of authority." Kropotkin (2002: 135) goes on to assail these "utopians of authority," who, blind to the paradox, state at the same time that authority is needed because human being are dangerous, without realizing that the most dangerous human being of all is the individual in a position of authority. Kropotkin (2002: 135) then mocks the "pretty government and paternal utopia" in which "[t]he employer would never be the tyrant of the worker; he would be the father! […] and never would a public prosecutor ask for the head of the accused for the unique pleasure of showing off his oratorical talent." In an article published in *Freedom* in 1888 under the title "Are we good enough?" Kropotkin (1998: 81-82) explains that liberalism would be the perfect system if human beings were good, because the private ownership of capital would be no danger. The capitalist would hasten to share his profits with the workers, and the best-remunerated workers with those suffering from occasional causes. If men were provident they would not produce velvet and articles of luxury while food is wanted in cottages; they would not build palaces as long as there are slums.

Returning to the anarchists, Kropotkin concludes (2002: 136), "We have not two measures for the virtues of the governed and those of the governors; we know that we ourselves are not without faults and that the best of use would soon be corrupted by the exercise of power. We take men for what they are worth,—and that is why we hate the government of man by man."

Anarchism is therefore compatible with a pessimistic conception of human nature: human beings are fundamentally corruptible and power corrupts. It is precisely because human beings are not good by nature that hierarchical structures cause moral and political disasters: abuse of power by people in positions of authority, non-accountability of individuals in subordinate positions who go so far as to imprison, torture, and kill others simply because they were ordered to do so by a hierarchical superior. Hence, in the words of Louise Michel (n.d.: 412), a French anarchist involved in the Paris Commune of 1871, "power makes people ferocious, selfish, and cruel, while servitude degrades them." Of course, a few individuals in positions of authority could act for the good of the dominated out of a sense of solidarity and justice, but they would never represent any more than exceptions, because the problem is structural before being an individual or moral one. An individual in a position of authority within a hierarchical structure very easily becomes conceited, pretentious, arrogant, irresponsible, authoritarian and corrupt. The very fact of holding a position of power almost automatically skews an individual's moral judgments about the world and himself. The problem is structural because it is related to the political function that people exercise, so they are tempted to abuse their authority. Adopting this structuralist approach, the late 19th century anarchist Élisée Reclus (2001: 30) asserts, "the grandees have more opportunities than others to exploit their situation," and adds, "Once a man is invested with any sort of authority—priestly, military, administrative, or financial—he naturally tends to

use, without restraint" (2001: 149). Hierarchies also have a corrupting influence on individuals in subordinate positions who lie and prevaricate because they fear those who dominate them or wish to please them so as to avoid punishment or gain some benefit. Moreover, (political) domination is intrinsically tied to the (economic) exploitation of another's work, which produces goods and services for those who dominate.

The contemporary anarchist writer and activist John Clark (1978: 10) observes that anarchists have drawn the conclusion that political structures must be horizontal, egalitarian and consensual precisely because human beings are not naturally good and because they tend to be bad as soon as they manage to slip into a position of power. Under the influence of the structures in which they live and act, individuals have the potential to be just to the extent the structures are just.

Conclusion: Avenues Toward An Anarchist Philosophy Of History

Clearly, the structuralist conception discussed above can give rise to some pessimism among anarchists, the very ones who are chastised for being too optimistic about human nature. Because if the hierarchical structure ultimately determines which humour is expressed, how can we extricate ourselves from an authoritarian structure? Actually, a hierarchical structure causes a reaction (a revolt) based on the principle of or the desire for autonomy, which can surface at any hierarchical level that is subaltern to a higher level (Scott 1992). The preceding discussion on the anarchist conception of human nature therefore makes it possible to identify avenues for the development of an anarchist philosophy of history, whose focus would be the opposition between the principle of domination and the principle of autonomy. To think from a historical perspective would therefore involve tracking through the past the question of power, which can manifest itself as a "power over" (domination) or a "power to" do something for and by oneself (autonomy), individually and collectively.

Seen in this light, history is not a linear process that ultimately leads to anarchy (Adams 2011), but rather a series of situations and events where two principles enter into conflict, thereby shaping social organization. But as this opposition is perpetual, among both individuals and communities, history is not a dialectical process. The opposition cannot be resolved in a system of pacified synthesis, where conflict would no longer exist between the wish for domination and the wish for autonomy. Although Robert Michels "iron law of oligarchy" is quite well known amongst political scientists, the last words of his book, *Political Parties*, deal with a perpetual struggle between aristocratic and democratic forces :

The democratic currents of history resemble successive waves. They break ever on the same shoal. They are ever renewed. This enduring spectacle is simultaneously encouraging and depressing. When democracies have gained a certain stage of development, they undergo a gradual transformation, adopting the aristocratic spirit, and in many cases also the aristocratic forms, against which at the outset they struggled so fiercely. Now new accusers arise to denounce the traitors; after an era of glorious combats and of inglorious power, they end by fusing with the old dominant class; whereupon once more they are in their turn attacked by fresh opponents who appeal to the name of democracy. It is probable that this cruel game will continue without end (Michels 2001: 245-246).

In the same spirit, Kropotkin (2009: 95) explains the inevitability of a perpetual conflict between domination and autonomy in the following terms: "[T]hroughout the history of our civilization, two traditions, two opposing tendencies have existed: [...] the authoritarian tradition and the libertarian tradition." He adds, "these two currents [are] always alive, always struggling within the human race." One could hardly describe such as conception of human nature as naïve or optimistic.

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