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Anarchism Is a Social, not a Political Movement

Jim Macdonald

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When I ask most people how they define the word “anarchy,” they inevitably tell me that it means “chaos.”

However, anarchy doesn’t mean chaos; it literally means “without rulers.” We anarchists believe in a society without rulers, but that’s a broader idea than simply “without government.” That is because there are many ways some people rule over others than simply through presidents, prime ministers, and kings. Business owners and managers rule over their workers, and we anarchists are against that. Landlords rule over their tenants, and we anarchists are against that. Men in our world have traditionally ruled over women (whether that be husbands over wives, or just in the advantages and privileges that men have had over women), and we anarchists are against that. White people have ruled over people of color, and we anarchists are against that. Because of rules and social advantages, straight people have ruled over queer people, and we anarchists are against that. Able-bodied people have also ruled over disabled people, and we anarchists are against that. In most societies, people of particular religious beliefs have ruled

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over those with other religious beliefs, and we anarchists are also against that.

There are so many other power relationships, but I will define it in those broad terms right now.

As a result, being an anarchist is to be against hierarchies of power wherever they may be. Anarchism as a movement is anti-government, anti-nationalist, anti-capitalist, anti-property rights, anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, anti-heteronormative, anti-ableist, and anti-theocratic.

I suspect that many who read this would probably also be against many – though not all – of those things. If I had to venture a guess about society, most of us aspire not to discriminate based on gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, or religious beliefs. We clearly know of people who don't believe in or want these ideals, but I suspect most do. However, I also suspect that most people in the world are, unlike anarchists, for representative democracy, are proud of their country, support some form of capitalism, and certainly believe in a right to property.

Wherever you are on the spectrum from anarchist to whatever the opposite of anarchism is, what is important to note here is that anarchism isn't simply about being against all government. Rather, it is a critique on the nature of power relationships. We who are anarchists do not believe there is any just society structured around hierarchical relationships of power, and we have called for a social revolution to dismantle them.

How does anarchism propose to dismantle hierarchies of power and bring on a social revolution? Do anarchists imagine a rebellion of the repressed people to lead a mass uprising over the many ruling classes? Or perhaps, anarchists plan to use the existing levers of power to take power themselves and then cede it? Or maybe anarchists hope to disengage from political life altogether and convince people also to disengage, bringing about social revolution apart from society? Or maybe a particular class of the oppressed

are best positioned, such as the working class and poor, to rise up and lead us all to social revolution?

Over history, some anarchists have tried some of these approaches, and others, such as using the levers of the system, have typically been rejected. Historically, a few anarchists have tried military solutions or other forms of militancy. Others have set up radical education systems, and still others have focused on organizing the working class not simply for better conditions for workers but principally to be a catalyst of social revolution for the benefit of everyone. There is no one anarchist approach to social revolution. However, what has typically been rejected has been running for office, forming political parties, or voting. Anarchists have feared that using the levers of power will only lead to new rulers, and anarchist rulers are not anarchists at all.

When I talk about anarchism with people, one of the common responses I get is that they, she, or he does not want to talk about politics. An anarchist does not want to talk about politics, either. However, it can seem like we do because it is impossible to talk about a ruling class without critiquing the politics that creates a ruling class. And yet, when I meet those who have no interest in politics, I often admire them. I wish we all could be so lucky and privileged as to be able to ignore the question. In most of our lives, we deal with and want to deal with each other as equals worthy of the same respect. However, in a society where we are not all so privileged, we must admit that we live in a system where some rule and others do not. That is, we live in a world where politics is a reality. What makes anarchism different from other social movements that critique our society is that we do not believe in a political solution to the problem of politics.

What do I mean?

I mean that politics is essentially about power. To know how to gain power over others is to practice politics. As I have defined it, anarchism is a critique of systems of power themselves. That is, we can say that at essence, anarchism is anti-political. Yet, I admit

that we live in a political world where politics is a reality. Are anarchists also, therefore, anti-reality? Certainly, many critics have indeed argued that, but this is a fallacy.

Politics is a reality, but it does not mean that it must necessarily be real or that all of reality is politics. That is, we can also observe in our world many instances where we do not engage with each other through a power relationship. When I say “Hi” to my best friend Aly, and she says “Hi” back, are we engaging in politics? Yes, I identify as male; and she, female. I also have more money, and she has less. However, does she reply to me with a kind hello because I am empowered over her? That would be an extremely cynical understanding of the world, and I would be hard pressed to believe it. In most of life, none of us acts on the basis of any political relationships that exist in society. We know that those that do can be very dominating, whether it be a police or military force, the tax collector, one’s boss or landlord, etc. However, most of the time, whatever relationships exist, we do not act on the basis of our power. Those relationships and privileges are there, but we would be silly to the point of absurdity to think that even a fraction of what we do is because of politics.

Therefore, politics is a reality, but so are many other ways of relating to each other. Anarchism is therefore not anti-real just because it is anti-politics. What anarchists are strongly urging is that the greater the degree to which politics is in our life, the more it is keeping us from fully exercising all the other relationships that are or can be real in our society. That is, anarchism urges that if we lean into those non-political ways of relating, we will find that we can make politics irrelevant. As I noted previously, almost everyone agrees that at least in some ways we have political relationships with each other (between genders, races, etc.) that most people agree should ideally not be political relationships. Yet, the most common way that people in society have used to deal with these social issues is to engage in other political solutions, usually to change laws or to create economic incentives for change. How-

ever, what if we did not need to do these things this way at all? What if there were other ways of living and being that make politics irrelevant? Since we agree that a man and a woman can have a non-political way of relating even though we live in a world where men politically rule over women, we must admit at least that anarchism should not be dismissed out of hand for suggesting that a social revolution requires a non-political response to politics as a way to free us from it.

In this essay, I am not here to discuss how that’s supposed to come about. Ultimately, I’d love to give full expression to what that means, though I am doubtful I would most likely do that in writing. I am much more likely to express it through non-political lived experience that demonstrates anarchist ways of being. However, that is not to say that anarchism cannot be articulated. I just am not sure how much appetite I have to do it.

What I am here to do is simply argue for viewing the world through a lens that doesn’t automatically assume that there are political solutions to political problems. And because of that, I don’t want people to assume that when I talk or write about anarchism that I am writing principally about politics. Yes, it is about politics in that it is a critique of politics, but ultimately, anarchism is a social movement that aims to free us from politics. It’s about people and how they relate to each other in all ways and at all levels. It’s, yes, about dismantling the politics that keep people from free and equal relationships, but the ways to get there have nothing to do with the usual means people use. And I’d love to talk about my way of being an anarchist because I suspect it will be delightful and inspiring.

Yes, I realize we will need to discuss all we disagree about; there is much talking to do. However, if we can see through the usual tunnel vision in which we look at most social problems, perhaps there is a deluge of art and creativity to swim in as we demonstrate the social revolution envisioned by anarchism.