

Jim Shamlin
The Economic Corollaries of Anarchism
1997

Retrieved 05/28/2023 from web.archive.org

“This piece is (yet) another contribution to the most common internal debate among anarchists: the debate over which economic system is most suited to an anarchistic society. The most common complaint about the essay is that it arrives at no concrete solution, no ‘one way’ for an anarchistic economy to be run, no singular design for a system by which an anarchistic society *must* function economically. Such a ‘shortcoming’ may well be unavoidable: it would be paradoxical, perhaps even deconstructive, for a political theory that upholds the freedom of each individual to dictate a specific set of (de facto) laws by which the economic affairs of every individual should be run. It is more in the nature of anarchism to be deductive and to provide a range – i.e., to uphold the freedom of an individual to act is not to dictate specific ways in which he is permitted to act, but to circumscribe those actions which interfere with the freedom of others. Even when such circumscription is meticulous, a broad range of possibilities remains.”

theanarchistlibrary.org

The Economic Corollaries of Anarchism

Jim Shamlin

1997



Contents

INTERDEPENDENCE OF MATERIAL AND ACTION	7
Material as Prerequisite of Action	8
Material as Result of Action	11
MANIFESTATIONS OF PROPERTY	14
Person as Property	14
Object as Property	16
Space as Property	17
Idea as Property	19
MANIFESTATIONS OF OWNERSHIP	22
Universal Ownership	23
Group Ownership	25
Individual Ownership	28
ESTABLISHMENT OF OWNERSHIP	32
Contractual Acquisition	33
Gift	33
Trade	36
Production	38
Acquisition of Unclaimed Material	40

iar economic methodologies would be practicable, even simultaneously, within an anarchistic society.

Those who can legitimately call themselves “anarchists,” as opposed to the motley assemblage of those who prefer to call themselves such yet are not, genuinely agree on but one central principle: government is an unnecessary, even counterproductive force in society. Myriad bodies of theory, each unique and few compatible, have derived from that single axiom. Hence, there are many debates among those who consider themselves anarchists as to what anarchism means, and what specific derivatives it provides for the form and structure of an anarchistic society. One of the most volatile arenas of debate is economics.

It is this single field that has caused many anarchists to hyphenate themselves — anarchist-communists, anarchist-capitalists, anarchist-syndicalists, anarchist-agrarianists, and the like. Further, it is increasingly apparent as one observes the debate that many such hybrid schools of thought began first as economic systems, then later adopted anarchism: ample evidence is provided in the heated rhetoric of those who seem to want to preserve their economic system in spite of its political corollaries. It is unfortunate that many did not begin the other way around — to take anarchy as axiom, then determine its economic corollaries rather than to take as axiom an economic system and try to force it into an anarchistic mold. The former task, so widely ignored, is the aim and purpose of the present contribution.

To repeat: anarchism maintains that government is an unnecessary, even counterproductive force to civilized coexistence. What, then, does this suggest for an economic system? To provide too specific an answer, to describe in minute detail the very nuts and bolts, is already to suggest a pre-ordained economic system which would then require imposition by force. To create and promote a specific and detailed methodology is immediately to undermine one of the most important benefits of anarchism itself: the ability of individuals to do as they wish with the single limitation of respecting the right of others to do likewise. One cannot, for that reason, proclaim that things must be done by certain guidelines.

However, one *can* examine anarchism, determine what corollaries it provides, and state with reasonable confidence that certain things *may* or *may not* be done in accordance with those corollaries. Unlike the previous practice, such an examination results not in a definite, specific, and, as a matter of logical precedence, mandatory method by which things must be done, but a rather broad spectrum of possibilities, broader perhaps than even the present dissertation is able to include, within which things may be done. The difference, while subtle, is significant and necessary.

Anarchism has been defined twice already, the second significant term, “economics,” has not. Broadly defined, economics is a social philosophy that examines the distribution and use of goods and services within a society. A teleological alteration, for the sake of the present argument, is that determining the economic corollaries of anarchism involves the examination of methods and customs surrounding the distribution and use of goods and services within a society, with the goal of determining which methods and customs, from an infinite horizon of possibility, are compatible with anarchism’s most fundamental axiom, and with civilized coexistence in general.

The result of such an exploration follows.

ownership all are essential to any tolerable and sustainable economic system, and are especially important components of any economic system that proposes to benefit an anarchistic society. That is to say that in order to have freedom of action, one must possess not only the material requisite to that action, but security in that possession. Further, to peaceably coexist, one must also surrender to others the same security in their possession required by one’s own. Finally, if peaceful coexistence is to perpetuate, only those transactions and interactions that are completely voluntary may be condoned.

Because the manifestations of property are diverse and the manifestations of ownership are mutable, the spectrum of possibilities provided within the limitations of anarchism are wholly acceptable neither to anarchist-capitalists nor to anarchist-communists, which should serve as further evidence that neither was so dedicated to anarchism as they are to capitalism and communism, respectively. Neither of these opposing philosophies is completely practicable under the economic corollaries of anarchism — but more importantly, neither of them may be completely circumscribed by the economic corollaries of anarchism.

The freedom to act, with the sole limitation of respecting the corresponding freedom of others to act, naturally provides for the freedom to derive methods and customs, with the sole limitation of respecting the corresponding freedom of others to derive their own methods and customs. The incompatibility of many economic systems with anarchism is in their blatant disregard of that principle — and yet, the permutation of any economic system, such that it coincides with that principle, would make it compatible with anarchism.

In sum, the economic corollaries of anarchism do not provide a singular answer, do not mandate a specific methodology for economic conduct within a society. They do, however, serve to illuminate known foibles with existing schools of economic theory and suggest methods by which, with subtle alteration, many famil-

nation. There is no need for government to act as a repository for unclaimed material — spaces and objects that exist in an unclaimed state pose no danger to society. Finally, and most importantly, there is no need for government to “create” unclaimed material — such practices have historically been more in the nature of theft or extortion than anything that resembles creation. An anarchistic economy has far more rational and far more ethical methods by which unclaimed material may be claimed.

It stands to note that the latter of these methods, production and the acquisition of unclaimed material, have no effect on society whatsoever. To make alterations to one’s own property clearly affects only one’s own property; and while it may be argued that claiming an unclaimed material closes the opportunity for others to claim it, it should immediately be clear that if another party had an actual and legitimate intention to claim an unclaimed resource, it simply would not remain unclaimed. In the former method, contractual acquisition, the voluntary cooperation of all the individuals involved in any transaction or transference is required. Afterthoughts aside, contractual transference of ownership is the product of cooperation rather than conflict.

It is for these reasons, the self-contained nature of the action, and the necessity voluntary cooperation of all parties involved, that qualify them as valid methods of acquiring the ownership of property in an anarchistic society. Permutations and combinations of these methods are entirely possible, within the bounds of voluntary cooperation, which remains the sole criterion for determining what actions are appropriate to civilization in general.

Among various specific tenets, this exploration demonstrates that, because of the interdependence of material and action, it is clear that precise definition of ownership, respect of ownership, and adherence to the voluntary criterion of any transference of

INTERDEPENDENCE OF MATERIAL AND ACTION

It is often the complaint of newcomers to the forum of anarchistic debate that there is too much focus on economic issues, too little on what they consider to be “actual” political ones — to paraphrase, too much focus on material instead of action. It causes one to wonder exactly what such individuals wish to debate. There is no such phenomenon as an action that occurs independent of material, for material and action are inseparable: the actual world is a material place, filled with material objects and citizens who, themselves, are material. Anything that happens, any action that is discussed, takes place in the material world — the alternative would be to debate and to ponder a wholly imaginary environment in which nothing exists, but in which actions take place. Such an environment presents an intriguing philosophical bauble of the sort Borges examines in his “metaphysical” fiction stories, or a grammatical experiment in which one tries to compose an essay composed entirely of sentences with neither subject nor object. In sum, action independent of either actor or object is a mere fancy that is unlikely to result in any productive thought that may be applied to actual, material reality.

Material must be considered carefully and thoroughly, as its impact upon political issues is great. Every action has a material component: materials are necessary in order to perform actions, and actions are often done for the sake of creating or obtaining materials. It is, for these reasons, an inevitable aspect of any political discussion. Further, once the interdependence of material and ac-

tion are considered, the concept of “property” and its importance to political theory become clear and unmistakable.

Material as Prerequisite of Action

Every action has a material requisite. That is to say that, in order to have the freedom to do something, one must possess the materials with which to do it. One cannot claim the right to speak in a forum unless one has a forum in which to speak, and one cannot claim the right to bake bread while possessing neither the grain from which it will be made nor an oven in which to bake it. Arguments to the contrary reduce themselves to nonsense with predictable celerity.

Because every action has a material requisite, it is then reasoned, by some anarchists, that freedom of action can be most universally achieved by universal access to material. This is a simple but alluring trick of logic that has beguiled surprisingly many minds. Fortunately, its foible is rather plain: universal access to the material requisites of action *would*, indeed, provide universal freedom of action — but material is *not* universal.

In the strictest sense, every object is unique, and just as two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time, it is often impossible for two individuals to have access to — or, more specifically, use of — the same object at the same time. A stretch of road may not be used, at once, for a parade and a drag race, and a piece china may not, at once, serve as a platter for one man while it is being shattered by another. It is thus impossible to provide universal access to some material requisites. Granted, some materials are similar enough to be grouped into commodities that can be considered as more or less uniform, so that while two men cannot instantaneously use the same bit of porcelain, the entire commodity of porcelain may be divided equally among all men, so that each

ther, through technology and ingenuity, recycling and salvage are more common practices, and discarded property may well be seen to have value to those who can make use of it.

The act of claiming unclaimed materials requires no force of government — if an item is, indeed, unclaimed, there is no force to protect it, thus the person seeking to claim it would require no force to claim it, as there is no-one against who to deploy such force. Granted, such instances have the potential for conflict when two or more individuals attempt to claim an unclaimed material simultaneously, when someone attempts to claim material that is presently held as property by another party, or when someone falsely asserts that the “unclaimed” material taken by another party was theirs. Even in such instances, these conflicts are among individual parties — they neither affect all of society nor does their resolution require involvement on the societal level.

Historically, it has not been the demands of citizens that has involved government in defining or determining the ownership of unclaimed property; it has been government itself that has taken the initiative to seize such opportunities on its own: it has created “unclaimed property” by wresting it from its owners, such as it did with the western frontier, to dispose of at its own discretion; it has assumed precedence in claiming unclaimed property, such that anything not specifically owned by individual citizens, by its own criteria, immediately becomes the property of the state; and it has made itself first heir in the death of any individual or dissolution of any organization, such that it is the first vulture to land over a corpse, claiming the largest share and leaving the orts for those who are designated by custom as transferees of the original property. None of these “functions” are desirable, or even ethical by any rational standard.

There is no need for a state to define unclaimed material — the fact that no-one claims it makes such material unclaimed. There is no need for government to determine the ownership of such material — the individual who claims it has made that determi-

and otherwise hamper, hinder, or forbid and individual from acting freely upon his own property.

To specifically address the dysfunctions of third-party interference in acts of production would be redundant: every action involved in production entails the freedom of an individual to act upon his own property, the conditions by which a second party may use or act upon material which is another person's property, and the mutual and voluntary requisites of any act of trade, each of which are discussed at length in other sections of this essay. Any third-party interference in production is in violation of one or more of those component phenomena, and is counterproductive and fundamentally unethical for the same component reasons.

As explained in those passages, anarchism abides every component of production. Hence, there can be no reason that anarchism should oppose those same components when manifested in an act of production — and further, just as force of government is unwelcome and improper in each component of production, so is it unwelcome and improper in production itself.

Acquisition of Unclaimed Material

While most material is presently owned, there yet remains a relatively small amount of unclaimed material, which includes material that has never been claimed, material that has been disclaimed or discarded by its previous owner, and material that has not been specifically reassigned upon the death or dissolution of its owner. An individual may acquire such material as property simply by claiming it. Opportunities to claim unclaimed materials are rarer in some ways than they were in generations past, but are, in other ways, more common: land, for example, no longer exists in unclaimed acres (though some could well argue that it never was), but many intangible properties such as broadcast frequencies, Internet domains, and the like, yet remain largely unclaimed. Fur-

may use his “share” as he sees fit. This, of course, gives rise to three other problems:

First, how can universal access be provided the next day, or perhaps the next, when some have chosen courses of action that destroy material requisites, yet demand to be re-supplied those same materials so that they might destroy them again? Of course, “destroy” may be too harsh a term, too suggestive of meaningless vandalism. Some objects are “destroyed” as a natural consequence of their use. Food, for example, can conscientiously be consumed but once, and once consumed is gone.

Second, how is this redistribution to be accomplished? To periodically take account of all material of any given commodity, gather it, parcel it out equally, and then redistribute it, especially on a national scale, is a monstrous undertaking — which is part of the reason that large, complex, and rather belligerent governmental structures quickly arise in nations in which the enforcement of material equality takes precedence over liberty. Such practices are so oppressive, and the means by which they are carried out so militant, that egalitarianism and liberty are widely accepted as simultaneously impracticable.

Third, commodities are limited. This fact is often overlooked by those who have the good fortune of living in wealthier nations, in which there seems to be plenty of everything to go around — but in time, even the richest nation would run short, such that there is not enough to go around anymore. (Granted, the fact that more of a given commodity may be produced is presently being ignored — it will be addressed later — but even so, it is not always possible for production to satisfy demand.) In such instances, and in every instance in which a material requisite is unique, it is impossible for all to enjoy the same access, and if even two individuals expect to have a “right” to a material of which there is enough to satisfy only one, conflict is inevitable — hence the need for an external referee to settle such disputes, hence government.

For these reasons, among others, it simply is not possible for all individuals to have equal privileges of access to all materials — and any attempt to accomplish such absurdity in a political system will, as it has throughout history, result not in anarchy, but in a large, complex, and oppressive governmental structure.

One of the foremost paradigms of freedom is “my freedom to swing my fist ends at the tip of your nose.” To accept such a statement as reasonable is already to acknowledge the necessity of ownership to action — “my fist” and “your nose” both describing materials each party *owns*. And notice that the boundary between them, the perimeter that must be respected lest conflict ensue, is quite clearly defined.

More importantly, however, is the fact that ownership is *inevitable*. Linguistic sophistry and rhetorical sleight-of-hand aside, the individual who makes use of a material, or who holds the authority to grant permission to another for its use, is the de facto owner of that material, even if this assumed ownership is only temporary. In this way, nothing is “public” or “community-owned.” There is always an individual or an organization that grants or denies permissions, in exactly the same way that an individual who is clearly an owner does — and that individual or organization is, in fact, its owner.

Thus, all material which is currently considered “public” is actually owned. This is most obvious when the material is a space. In an earlier example, there was a street on which one group wishes to hold a parade and another group wishes to drag race. Were this a “public” street or “community” avenue, there would be an official or a board who would grant permission for one or the other to use the space at that given time. In practice, this is no different than if the street were privately owned. Such is the case in any nation, and at any time.

Theories that promulgate the concept of “non-ownership,” or any similar paradox, are thus void: all material is owned, at least for the duration of its use, and political conflict — i.e., conflict of

his own efforts, to transform lumber into a table has produced something that is not his own property in the end. Because the materials involved were that individual’s own property before they were modified and consolidated, it should be clear enough that the material “made” by their combination remains that same individual’s property.

Such characteristics make production acceptable in an anarchistic economy: it is a self-contained process by which an individual acts upon material he owns. There is no conscionable reason any third party, even a second party, may interfere in this process, or may claim its result. This is not to assume the awkward stance of those who oppose industrialism — some, in fact many, acts of production require the efforts of more than a single individual. In such cases, the multiple parties involved may act as partners in the production, which is subject to the same explicit agreement as any act of joint ownership, or some may act as employees, trading their labor for payment, which is subject to the same explicit agreement as any act of trade of service for material. Such acts of voluntary cooperation cannot be forbidden in an anarchistic society, nor are they subject at all to third party interference so long as they remain both voluntary and cooperative.

Even though production is self-contained, government and the special interest groups that control it are ever eager to have a hand in production, applying force to gain this or that benefit for themselves at the expense of someone else’s inconvenience, which is as good a “deal” as robbery is from the robber’s perspective. Legislators who do nothing of production seek to dictate the most ludicrous practices to those who know better, with predictable results, or to claim a lion’s share of the “new” material that has been “made” by this process. Volumes of legislation encroach upon every transaction involved in production, prescribe or circumscribe (and an abundance of the latter is merely a haphazard way of accomplishing the former) actions that are fundamentally self-contained,

it appropriate to an anarchistic economy, and virtually impossible, criminal by definition, in an economy in which third party force is applied to every exchange of goods or services.

These two forms of transaction, gift and trade, largely describe the legitimate methods by which an individual may properly gain property from others in an anarchistic economy. Other mechanisms exist, such as theft, extortion, etc., each of which relies upon the one element anarchism cannot abide: force. Whether by an individual or by the “authority” of government is irrelevant, any application of force immediately negates the voluntary component of such interactions, which makes them unsuited to any community — especially an anarchistic one.

Production

Another method of acquiring material is producing it — although by strict definition, production doesn’t result in a producer’s having additional material, but in transforming material he currently possesses into something more valuable by his own standards or by the standards he assumes to be held by those persons with whom he expects to trade his product. That production, on some scale, is necessary to human civilization is axiomatic — i.e., any argument to the contrary is tediously or risibly naive. The belief that government may, by force of arms or legislation imposed by force, have any sort of positive effect on production more so.

The term “transform” is carefully chosen, just as the term “make” is carefully chosen by other theorists. All too common is the perception that the product “made” by an act of production is new material — and such is a convenient perception to propagate if one’s economic theory also proposes that anything “new” is to be placed in a community pool. By such perceptions, an individual who uses *his* wood, *his* nails and glue, and *his* tools, not to mention

actions — will inevitably arise whenever the right of ownership of a material requisite is not clearly defined among those whose conflicting desires to act require that same material. This constitutes one reason, among many, that ownership is necessary to any political design that will not rapidly degenerate into conflict, and especially important for anarchic political theories, which by definition eschew a centralized power-structure that uses force to settle disputes among individual citizens.

Material as Result of Action

In addition to being a prerequisite for action, material is also the product of action. (Even in cases in which a material is designated a “natural resource,” there is still a process of harvesting it.) That material is the product of action is at least as significant, if not more, than the fact that material is requisite to action.

Anarchism stresses the importance of freedom to act. Obviously, this means that “to act” is important — but why? Action is important not in and of itself; it is important because rational individuals (and most individuals are rational, though some by rather twisted rationale) act teleologically. Every action is a cause undertaken to produce an intended effect — and in the case of human actions, most individuals desired effects are material.

For example, the desire for the freedom to bake bread is not primarily important because it allows an individual to experience the pleasure of the baking process (although, in some cases, the pleasure of performing a process can certainly qualify as an immaterial teleos) — it is primarily important because the process produces bread — which is, in turn, the material requisite of the action “to eat,” performed for the sake of avoiding yet another consequence, “hunger” or “death.”

To clarify: the first action, baking bread, is important because it produces bread — thus the right “to bake” is meaningless unless

one also acknowledge the baker's right to own the bread he has baked, i.e., to be able to use his bread as he desires. Thus, in order to veritably say that an individual has a right "to do" anything, one must also acknowledge that individual's right to have ownership, or control by any other name, of the product of that action, lest the "right" be rendered meaningless.

It is, in fact, unavoidable that a given action must be performed in order to possess a certain material. For a government to issue a legislative order that declares that each person shall have something without defining the process by which such commodity is to be produced is ludicrous. For an individual to expect to enjoy a material without undertaking the action to produce it more so. Yet this is the lapse of logic when any body of people demand, and any legislative body mandates, the universal possession of material.

While it is physically impossible for a single individual, living in isolation, to have a thing without producing it, there is a mechanism for a governmental power-structure to provide a commodity without producing it. Propaganda aside, this process is generally known as "stealing," or, worse yet, "slavery." Such phenomena are abhorrent to anarchists — yet they are the natural result of the demands that some anarchists illogically expect to be fulfilled without force.

Thus, the desire to have something without assuming the responsibility of producing it is much like the demand to have one's cake and eat it, too. Practiced on a large scale, the result is a non-productive class of citizens who live parasitically, extorting the materials they desire from an enslaved working class. In that way, many communists demand the very system of exploitation they claim to abhor.

Again, no political system can conjure materials from thin air. The most ethical practice, the course of action most compatible with the standard of freedom, is to adopt a custom by which no one will be prevented from acting in ways that achieve their desired ends — which means, in turn, respecting the individual's right

assistance is for the purpose of making trade "fair." Such demands completely overlook the fact that fairness cannot be established by force.

To begin, there is no universal and absolute standard of value — no objective and non-situational logic that provides a stable and universal exchange rate that dictates a standard value of every thing in relation to every other thing. One cannot irrefutably say that one piece of fruit is "worth" another of a different kind, as some or more difficult to cultivate and more expensive to transport to extreme locales. Nor can one say that "this" is always worth "that," for a shortage of "this"es makes them more dear in terms of an abundance of "that"s. An universal, absolute, and objective standard of value for all materials (and services, for that matter) that is accepted by all parties has never yet been established — nor, is it safe to say, will it ever be.

Because there is no universal exchange rate, no objective standard, each party to a trade must voluntarily accept the material offered them and voluntarily part with the material they surrender in return. The only standard of fairness in trade derives from the *mutual* agreement of the parties involved in each incident of trade. Should force be applied to the negotiations, the voluntary component of trade is at once violated. It takes no trick of logic to demonstrate the fundamental wrongness of using force to gain something that one could not obtain from a willing partner, and there is little difference between common robbery, in which an individual takes what he desires and gives nothing in return, and the application of force to trade, which allows an individual to take what he desires and give virtually nothing in return. Such is the motivation of those who demand third-party "mitigation" in transactions: they are not interested in fairness, but in applying force to the transaction to gain more for themselves.

Again, in order for legitimate trade to take place, there must be a voluntary agreement that is mutual to the parties involved in the exchange — the self-contained nature of this transaction makes

Trade

While gifts are common and charity is essential to the temporary or permanent survival of some members of society, a far greater percentage of the adult community obtains material by trade. The most obvious form of trade is material for material — a quantity of something for a quantity of something else — which is most common in the marketplace. A far more common form of trade in post-industrial civilization is the trade of service for material, a process by which those who lack material to trade for material may engage in trade all the same, bartering with their time and effort to gain the material they lack (and then, in most economies, to take this material they've earned and trade it for more desirable material in the marketplace, as previously described).

Trade, like gift, is a transaction that takes place between two parties, but with one distinct difference: there is no passive recipient. Each party must fully and explicitly agree to the items and quantities involved — they must reach a mutual and voluntary agreement as to the nature, quantity, and quality of goods to be exchanged. Otherwise, trade does not, by definition, take place. Again, no third party is necessary to the transaction — and if force is involved, there is no longer mutual voluntary consent to the transaction, and trade, by definition, is not taking place. Thus, trade is entirely possible without the “assistance” of government.

Trade is a simple exchange of materials between two parties, and yet, there is a common misconception that government is somehow necessary to trade. There are any number of trivial niggling matters for which some argue government is essential, such as establishing a standard currency (as if currency were essential to trade, which it is not, and as if the market would not derive its own form of currency, which it almost inevitably does) or to promote trade (as if a man with nothing but bread and a man with nothing but vegetables wouldn't think to exchange them on their own). But by far, the most common cry for governmental

to own materials, and to dispose of those materials as his own reason dictates, while respecting the property of others. Or, in simpler terms, to follow the standard of “my freedom to swing my fist ends at the tip of your nose.”

A careful examination of material and its importance to action as both prerequisite and teleos should demonstrate, and dismiss complaints to the contrary, that “political” actions cannot be considered in isolation of the material environment in which they are performed. Further, when issues of potential conflict among parties arise, it is most often the separate parties demands for material rather than for the ability to perform the desired actions uninhibited, that come into conflict, and it is primarily for this reason that the concept of property is important, especially in an anarchistic society.

MANIFESTATIONS OF PROPERTY

Having explored the interrelationship among actions and materials, the impact of material issues upon political matters becomes clearer — so clear, in fact, that few informed theorists debate their correlation. What remains in present debate is the various manifestations of property — or, in simpler terms, in determining what constitutes “material,” and how this material should be held within a society to avoid conflict in regard to its use. The following section largely categorizes material into four groups — person, object, space, and idea — for the purpose of determining which of these categories may be held as property and, by examining the extremes of public and private ownership, to demonstrate that the latter is most compatible with peaceful coexistence in an anarchic society.

Person as Property

The first category of property, one’s own person, would seem to be axiomatic — if a person does not have dominion over his own body, he cannot be called “free” by any stretch of the imagination. And yet, by some rhetorical sophistry, some theories attempt to uphold freedom while, at the same time, usurping the sovereignty of every human being.

Theories that support universal property, in the strictest sense, do not acknowledge citizens sovereignty over their own persons. The labor of the individual, they claim, is the “common property” of the entire community, and may therefore be directed, by what-

or ritually given or received on certain occasions. Finally, to object to gift is to object to the benign phenomenon of voluntary philanthropy, a socially valuable practice that is objected to only by the most extreme and foolish political theorists.

The gift transaction involves and generally affects only the donor and the recipient. The interference of a third party to the transaction is therefore neither necessary nor desirable. Even so, many political systems make much pretense of gift by legislating charity as a social benefit, or as a “right,” generally following the principle that the end justifies any means necessary to achieve it. Governments employ an array of tactics for extortion to slavery to gather material from some and redistribute it to others who need or want it, which at once negates the voluntary nature of the gift transaction. In addition to the use of force to engender charity, there are designs to regulate it: all too many theories try to create the illusion of a social benefit by restricting how much of what may be given and to whom. Again, the nature and quantity of material involved in a gift transaction, as well as the determination of the recipient, not to mention whether a gift is granted at all, are all subject only to the discretion of the donor, and must be, if the process can accurately be referred to as “voluntary.” If force of any kind effects or affects the process of transferring ownership, the material involved cannot accurately be referred to as a “gift.”

In sum, transactions that fit the definition of gift, with all its voluntary components, are beneficial, even essential, to any society. They cannot be excluded from an anarchic economy, but neither can gifts be justly institutionalized or regulated — nor can they unjustly be institutionalized or regulated except by force of government in an economic system that is anything but anarchic, or by any definition “free.”

bribe more than he is objectively due by undermining the barter process — in effect, by exchanging goods under the table. Further corruption of the term occurs when politicians and extortionists (who differ only nominally in this sense), employ euphemisms such as “donations” or “contributions” for the property they acquire and manage. Such euphemisms serve poorly at camouflaging the fact that such transactions are not gifts at all — the material is not voluntarily granted by the donor (though he may seem willing enough, he is not acting out of charity, but under threat of force) to a recipient of his choosing, nor does the recipient necessarily welcome the material. While might claim that such “mediated charity” has a social function, such mediation immediately changes the nature of the transaction.

Dismissing such misinterpretations of the term, the nature of “gift” becomes clearer: a donor unilaterally and voluntarily transfers the ownership of such property as he chooses to a recipient, who has not given, nor is obliged to give, any material or service in return, whose only “right” in the transaction is to accept the gift or to decline it. Upon acceptance, the material becomes the property of the recipient, who may dispose of it as he pleases, pursuant to any conditions that may have been made at the time of its presentation. (An example of such conditions would be the present “food stamp” program, in which recipients are given a certain amount of “currency” in the form of coupons which they supposedly may use only to purchase foodstuffs.)

Gift transactions are socially necessary: much of the property a person acquires for the first twenty or so years of life (which can be of shorter or longer duration — much longer in some cases) is received as gift. That is to say that children, by nature, require that every material necessity is provided as gift by their parents or guardians. Gifts are also essential to people in times of misfortune, though far fewer people and in fewer occasions and briefer durations than certain sorts would have it believed. Aside from necessity, gift transactions remain a part of culture: gifts are traditionally

ever means are effective, by the community. Some go even further: in one of the many extremist passages of *We*, Evgevnii Zamiatim declares that each person is the “sexual property” of the community, whose duty is to surrender themselves to any other member of the community at any time. In this way, Zamiatim legitimizes rape as the liberation of community property — and in similar ways, murder, slavery, and any other fundamental abuses of human beings can be justified as the liberation or utilization of an individual whose very person is not his own possession.

But whose property, after all, is the individual in such a system? The “community” or any collective is a mere abstraction, thus no “community,” as a whole, is able to do anything constantly and consistently. And if all are equal, then who is to direct the actions of whom? Who is to enforce, or even determine, the interests of the collective if there is no authority derived from a centralized power structure? The dilemma of right of use or direction constantly resurfaces in response to “community” property of any kind — and has not, as yet, been satisfactorily answered.

Fortunately, most theorists are not so extreme. Among their attempts to reconcile such ideas with anarchism, and to make it practicable at all, a more liberal interpretation of property is often adopted, effectively acknowledging the importance of recognizing the individual as his own property, while everything else “outside the skin” belongs to the community.

The sovereignty of the individual, the right of each person to have dominion over himself, is axiomatic in any dissertation on the topic of freedom, i.e., any argument to the contrary is absurd. If each person is the property of a collective, to be utilized by others without reserve, he then has no right over himself (except, perhaps, during brief reprieves when the community neglects to utilize him) and thus is quite literally a slave. In order to be free, every citizen must hold his own person as property.

Object as Property

The second category of property, objects, marks the fundamental level of dispute between among the various species of anarchists. Those who oppose ownership on a conceptual level borrow a phrase from French socialists to argue that “all property is theft,” that in order to be free, one must have access to any thing — things being, again, the material requisites with which actions are performed. But this is only half of the relationship between objects and things. The other half, which shows that most objects are the product of actions, abhors such a view. Again, the value of an action performed for the sake of producing an object is annihilated if the producer hasn’t the possession of the object he has made.

Further, it may be argued that the incentive to perform productive actions is also annihilated by the negation of object as property. It is the desire to have a thing that causes one to produce it — the fruits of one’s labor are the reward for that labor, and if one will be denied the fruit, there is no incentive to perform the labor. It is, perhaps, the parasitic desire to have a thing without the necessity of having to undertake the labor of producing it that gives such theories a sordid appeal — but such a desire may be satisfied in any society ... if one has a gun.

It is a simple fact of nature that a manufactured good will not exist until someone manufactures it. A single individual, living in isolation, will not have bread until he makes it. This fact is not negated by the number of people involved. A thousand people, or a million, living in a society, will not have bread if none of them undertake the effort make it. Some portion of them must be enlisted, or exploited, to make the bread so that all may have — and it is undoubtedly the desire of many who propose such theories to be of the class who receives without having to make.

In this sense, their opponents maintain greater appeal to the individual of integrity, who does not wish to possess the fruit of others’ labor, but to be secure in the fruit of his own. It is only under

Contractual Acquisition

A basic fact that troubles far too many theorists is that people presently exist, and will continue to be born into, an environment in which the vast majority of property is already owned by someone else. While other forms of acquisition exist, the primary and most widely practiced method of acquiring property is to acquire it from those who presently possess it. While there are many inventive ways to separate property from the persons who possess it, anarchism must rely upon acquisition by contract. Such a “contract” is not necessarily a formal, written document (though such it may be), but a mutual agreement among parties, distinguished from other devices by the fact that ownership of the property is transferred voluntarily among two willing parties — it is only in such instances of voluntary and mutual cooperation that force, including and especially force of government, is entirely unnecessary. Such contracts can take myriad forms, but can generally be categorized as gift and trade.

Gift

The nature of a “gift” would at first seem obvious — it is the transference of ownership in which one willing party voluntarily and unconditionally grants the ownership of material to a recipient who is willing to receive it. Unfortunately, the meaning has become muddled: Common connotations of the word “gift” also include items given as rewards or payment. If material is “given” in return for another material or a service already granted, it is not a gift, but a payment. If material is “given” with the expectation that another material or a service will be effected or influenced by the “gift,” then it is not a gift, but a bribe. Such practices are unethical and, unfortunately, effective ways of circumventing negotiation: By giving something as “gift,” the donor may be able to gain by

ESTABLISHMENT OF OWNERSHIP

There are many ways that an individual can come into possession of property — it is entirely possible, for example, to steal property, or to obtain it under threat of force. Such methods of obtaining property, which are just as often practiced as forbidden by governments, are ill-suited to civilized coexistence for reasons far too rudimentary and too conventional to necessitate lengthy discourse. Theft and extortion, even when practiced under such euphemisms such as “acquisition” and “taxation,” are plainly unacceptable methods for obtaining the ownership of property, and must immediately be set aside.

What then remains for citizens of an anarchist community are those methods by which ownership may be gained without reasonable objection. Specific methods provided by this principle include contractual acquisition, in which the previous owner voluntarily yields property to another individual; production, by which an individual modifies, combines, or otherwise labors upon his existing property to transform it into something “new;” and, in rare cases, the acquisition of unclaimed property, by which process an individual lays claim to property that has been discarded or, in any case, is not claimed by any other party. Each of these methods is quite suitable for the acquisition of property in an anarchistic society.

such a system, in which the ownership of objects is upheld, that the freedom to undertake any productive action has value, reward, or incentive.

Furthermore, the ownership of object clarifies right of use. Nothing is available in unlimited supply, and scarcity, in any degree, causes conflict — how is this conflict to be solved? Take, for example, the example of two citizens in conflict over an item that they wish to use in mutually exclusive ways. Without ownership of object, each has equal right to it, and there can be no fair resolution. Generally, this results in a more-or-less arbitrary decision on the part of a third party, whose authority to make such decisions rests in force. (And, it stands to note, such a decision involves de facto ownership of property — the one permitted to use it becomes its owner.) With ownership of property, the resolution is rather simple: the citizen who owns the material may do with it as he pleases, and anyone who wishes to do otherwise it must bargain with him.

Thus, if material is to be used at all, it must be classified at some point as the property of the individual who uses it. Any attempt to negate ownership of object only muddles the issue and, in the end, does not negate ownership, but places ownership it in the hands of the collective — which is then to place all ownership in the hands of a centralized power structure that claims the power to speak on behalf of the whole, and to back its decisions by force.

Space as Property

The third category of property, space, includes such “materials” as land, real estate, and other forms of location. It is fundamentally different from object as property in that object defines the parameter of “what” one may act with, upon, or to produce, whereas space defines the parameter of “where” one may perform actions — which is more important than it might, at first, seem.

Theorists who oppose the concept of space as property hold that all spaces are “public,” to be available to anyone at any time — but even the staunchest of such theorists concedes that personal space is necessary. Their opponents, strictest sense, maintain that all spaces are “private,” to be maintained and controlled by their owners — but even the staunchest of capitalists concedes that some degree of public availability is necessary. In this way, the lines between the separate parties’ stances begin to blur, and some individual members of each camp find themselves agreeing with some members of the other, often to their mutual surprise.

Many of the problems endemic to unowned space parallel the problems of unowned objects. It is axiomatic that two objects may not occupy the same space at the same time, and that some actions are mutually exclusive in terms of their space requirements. Some cannot, for example, use a “public” street for a drag race while others use it for a parade. Thus, a decision must be made, and then enforced, as to who will have de facto ownership of that space during a given time. Again, the power to make and enforce such decisions in systems that include “public” spaces must abide in a centralized power structure whose authority is derived from the force it may bring to bear.

Granted, some problems arise under the zealous application of space as property: a retail operation cannot remain in business long if it disallows prospective customers access to the premises — but the owner of a space may remain an owner of it while granting others permission to use it. And the owner of a tract of land can cause considerable problems if he strictly denies access to others who wish to pass across it — but such disputes are inevitable and would occur even in a system of public property, if the central authority granted exclusive use of a space to one party, denying others passage. The principal difference is that, in a system of property, disputes are settled among those involved in them rather than by the forceful interference of a third party. Again, the result is that spaces are owned in any system by their de facto use — and while

one’s treatment of ownership, the ability of individuals to voluntarily cooperate. Both individual and group ownership, the latter only by mutual and voluntary consent, remain viable and necessary manifestations of ownership in an anarchic society.

More significantly, individual ownership is a prerequisite of group ownership: in order to voluntarily participate in group ownership, one must first clearly and individually possess material that one may voluntarily consign to the group's pool. The alternative, distilling group ownership from universal ownership, would entail stealing or misappropriating certain materials from society at large for use by a group, as directed by a central committee of de facto owners whose authority is not derived from mutual consent, but from force.

Thus, all material must be owned individually, at least at some point. While it would be impossible, not to mention counterproductive, for an anarchic society to rely solely upon individual ownership, the benefits of group ownership are limited, so group ownership should likewise be limited by the criterion of voluntary participation — which would itself be impossible without a foundation upon individual ownership.

To assign material the status of property allays the potential for many, perhaps even a majority of, political conflicts, by clearly establishing the privileges of use that are the core of many political debates. This benefit, however, is immediately negated if both elements, the material and the owner, are not clearly defined — and it is for this reason, primarily, that universal ownership can be considered neither valid nor viable in any nation. It is, in many ways, the very fountainhead of a majority of political conflict, and the conflict it creates engender fissures which become factions which become governments. Anarchism can no more abide universal ownership than universal ownership can create peace — which is to say, not at all.

Of the manifestations of ownership that remain, individual and group, it is clear that the former must precede the later, but if the benefits of social coexistence are not to be altogether negated, it must not supersede it. Where there is no individual ownership, there are no individual rights — but even so, it is no lesser offense to political ethics or common sense to attempt to forbid, through

private possession of space does not allay all conflicts of interests, it avoids an entirely larger gamut of conflicts (and their forcible “solutions”) that result from the “public” ownership of spaces.

Idea as Property

Finally, there is the category of immaterial property — the ownership of materials that can generally be described as “ideas” or “concepts.” Such property is generally protected by governments through copyrights, trademarks, patents, and the like. Idea as property is unlike the other categories in this way: the “item” to be held as property is not material in a tangible sense, and is far more difficult to discuss in terms of possession and rightful ownership than the other manifestations of property. Those reasons, among others, have caused many to abandon the concept of idea as property altogether.

It is argued that immaterial property has its purpose: to ensure that a creative inventor (such as an author or composer) is compensated for the mass-production of his work, or to ensure that a more practical inventor's interest in his invention is protected, such that no individual or organization with more resources may produce and market his invention before he is able to recoup the cost of his research and development. More importantly, immaterial products are also the result of labor, albeit labor of a more intangible kind than, for example, the making of a tangible product, and to disavow the property of intangible “material” is again to violate the incentive relationship between the effort of production and the product itself.

The rebuttal to this argument is that, in practice, such property does not require protection: knowledge, unlike objects, cannot be accessed in any way except by permission of the possessor — or, to draw an analogy, a secret will not be known unless the person who knows it tells. Thus, the only way one may lose possession

of an immaterial good is to divulge it, which is at once to give permission to others to use it and to divulge it further. Also, the ownership of space and of object gives the possessor of immaterial property the ability to safeguard it against publication: no-one can “steal” an invention that is diagrammed on a piece of paper that is kept in someone’s office unless they first violate the inventor’s space by trespassing into his office and then his property by stealing the paper. It is, in that way, the responsibility of the owner to safeguard his immaterial property he wishes to protect from being divulged in the first place — and if he fulfills this responsibility, his immaterial “property” is safe.

Finally, because it is extremely difficult to guard an idea once it’s divulged, purposefully or by accident, government of some type is necessary to secure immaterial property — and the benefit of safeguarding such property is not worth the cost of establishing a force-wielding authority that is required to protect it. Also, as previously discussed, it is the responsibility of the inventor to protect his own immaterial property from being divulged. No act of government can un-curdle the milk a citizen has failed to refrigerate. Thus, while there is some basis for calling for the respect of immaterial property, it is entirely likely that the phenomenon of immaterial property is important in a rhetorical sense, but not in a practical one.

Having considered each manifestation of property, it is clear that only the first three categories — person, object, and space — may be considered significant to political debate. The final category, ideas, is neither practically nor politically significant, and can only by device be considered a “material” at all. As for the former three, each must be categorized as property, and as material significant to action, hence politically significant. Further, if an economy is to remain anarchic, without an institution of force to effect egalitarian redistribution or to grant permission or direction for usage, the ownership of these materials is the singular method by which right of use may be determined.

annihilates civilization itself: the teleos of social existence is to gain the benefits of cooperation and interaction, and to forbid cooperation is to undermine society’s very reason for existence. Further, this cooperation among individuals is natural: to forbid such cooperation would inevitably require force of arms, a governmental structure (itself ideally created by the very process of cooperation it is designed to prevent) virtually as immense and authoritarian as a government designed to force involuntary cooperation. One cannot conscientiously, for the sake of logical tidiness, negate the freedom of individuals to voluntarily pool their resources.

There are also secondary material consequences of relying solely upon individual ownership: individual ownership, exclusively practiced, would create and perpetuate a two-class society of “haves” and “have-nots.” While wealthy individuals would have the materials requisite for a broad horizon of opportunities, those without wealth would be limited to very few actions. While this is the natural consequence of the relationship between action and material, it is unnatural in that it prevents those who lack wealth from combining their resources to expand their horizon of opportunities — which, again, is one of the primary reasons for participation in social existence.

Considering these and other disadvantages, it is clear that individual ownership cannot be practiced exclusively — yet *it must be practiced*. Not all material can conveniently be designated as property of a group. It is the nature of many items (among them the vast majority of “bare necessities”) that they may be used by only one person — a single item of food, a single article of clothing, a given tool, and automobile, etc., may only be used by one person at any given time. To place such items under group control would result in perpetual conflict; and further, those members of a group entrusted with delegating permissions would gain virtually infinite power over the rest. Such conflicts and inequities can be avoided only by acknowledging the individual ownership of such property.

It is also important to note that, if each faction accepts the concept of group ownership, even such extreme rivals as capitalism and communism may be concomitantly practiced: the conditions of participation in a group, the amount of material members consign to the group, and the method by which pooled resources are managed are all variable, subject to the explicit agreement made upon amalgamation. Whether a group functions as a commune or as a company is dependent upon the aforementioned variables — which are, by definition, variable. Granted, capitalists tend to lean too far toward the individual side of the spectrum of ownership and communists too far to the universal, but if both “sides” respect the fundamental principles of group ownership — voluntary participation and material voluntarily consigned to the group’s control, these two very different economic systems could peaceably coexist within an anarchistic nation. (The third principle, the explicit agreement, isn’t important to the coexistence of these two systems — though it remains important to the way that each will function internally.)

Individual Ownership

The final manifestation of ownership, individual ownership, all too conveniently disposes of the problems and conflicts inherent in both universal and group ownership: if it is accepted that every given material is the property of a single individual, then clearly that individual has the sole right to use it or to grant permission for its use. Thus, there are no conflicts among separate parties who are acknowledged to have an “equal” share of ownership in it, etc. Of the three manifestations, individual ownership is clearly the most dialectically logical and precise. In practice, however, individual ownership does have its flaws:

Primarily, any economic system that annihilates cooperation, the voluntary pooling of resources among individuals, immediately

MANIFESTATIONS OF OWNERSHIP

By the natural consequences of the relationship between action and its material requisite, ownership clearly exists. If it does not exist explicitly, then it exists implicitly – which is to say that the ownership of material may be clearly and definitely defined, or it may be defined in a rough, unclear, and uncertain way. The importance of definite and certain definition of ownership – i.e., of the privilege of using a material or granting permission for its use – should be self-evident: when a material’s ownership is not clearly defined, there will inevitably be conflict among the separate parties that simultaneously claim, even implicitly, the privilege of using it or of governing its use.

Of equal importance to the debate over property are the manifestations of ownership. To say that this item or that space has the status of “property” is only half the argument: conflicting theories may commonly support the concept of property, whether explicitly or implicitly, but differ dramatically on their concept of the person or entity that acts as owner. Ownership is not a singular phenomenon, one that exists only in one form: manifestations of ownership can generally be placed on a spectrum, from universal to individual, by the number of persons who have ownership or the control of use. In examining these separate definitions of “owner,” and their concrete applications, it becomes evident that the closer a manifestation of ownership to the individual side of the spectrum, the less the potential for conflicts of interest among parties who claim ownership, hence the less the need for government or any

ing resources necessitates an agreement. While such an agreement may well be implicit and ill-defined, there is yet the opportunity for each individual who joins the group to make that agreement specific and explicit – to provide conditions to the agreement that define mutually acceptable ways in which the pooled material will be used, but more importantly, to define, well in advance of conflict, mechanisms by which conflicts among the members of the group may be peaceably resolved and, equally important, to affect the results of a dissolution. Again, this is not strictly essential to group ownership – it is an option, an important option that exists in any incidence of group ownership, but in no incident of universal ownership.

It has been mentioned briefly that the larger a group, the less functional that group will be in terms of its ownership and management of pooled resources – a theorem that merits further investigation: as a group expands, each member has less control over the pooled resources. If the group is limited to two members, each has an considerable share of control. In a larger group, perhaps a dozen or so, the amount of individual control is naturally diminished – but it is still convenient for the group to meet and to discuss the control of their pooled resources in minute detail. But when a group grows larger, to hundreds or thousands, individual control becomes negligible, and discussions of the way in which pooled resources will be managed become inconvenient. A central bureau, certain individuals appointed by the members who hold a share in the pool of resources, gain practical control over the pooled material. Such is the case when a democracy turns into a republic, or when a company turns into a corporation – and then come the problems endemic to any centralized representative government, which fails to represent its constituents, or to any group of professional managers, who cease to manage, or who do so in a less than professional manner. This is the reason that, while it is theoretically possible, it is improbable that a system of group ownership will evolve by merger into universal ownership.

consolidated and who have no definite or explicit opportunity to negotiate the conditions and terms imposed upon them. Each of these differences is significant to the functioning of the economic union, specifically to the way that conflicts are addressed.

Finiteness is important to containing the conflicts that will inevitably arise when members of the group disagree. In the worst-case scenario, a disagreement among the members of a group has exhausted all passive mechanisms for resolution. If the group and the material involved are both infinite, as in the case of universal ownership, this conflict will take place upon the societal scale and has the potential to involve all material. Because group ownership involves a finite and specific group of individuals, any conflict over pooled resources is contained within that group; a small number of people rather than an entire society is involved in and affected by such conflicts. Also, because the material involved is limited to resources that were voluntarily pooled, rather than all that is, an unfavorable resolution to such conflicts will not leave those members of the group whose interests the resolution has turned against utterly bereft — in the worst of resolutions, they stand to lose only those materials they voluntarily consigned to the control of the group.

It is also important that participation in group ownership is voluntary. Freedom, and political ethics in general, abhor compulsion — anarchist ethics even more so — thus any system in which individuals are compelled to do something against their will is plainly unacceptable, even if that “something” is as benign as being the member of a group. Under group ownership, participation in such conglomerates is entirely voluntary — no-one is forced to join a group, no-one is forced to surrender material to the group, and no-one is forced to remain a member of that group. This is, perhaps, the most important difference between universal and group ownership.

Finally, the terms and conditions of each individual’s participation in the group are negotiable. The mere act of voluntarily pool-

other organization to moderate that conflict by force — or, more directly stated, the more definite the concept of “owner,” the more suitable the theory becomes to application in an anarchistic society.

Universal Ownership

The most conflict-prone manifestation of ownership is “universal ownership,” a contradiction-in-terms born of rhetorical sleight of hand. Proponents of a system of universal ownership generally claim that everyone owns everything, or that no-one owns anything, two statements that have roughly the same meaning: ownership is practiced, but not defined with any sort of consistency. It has been sufficiently explained that conflicts-of-interest arise when two parties wish to make use of a given material simultaneously. Whether ownership is disavowed completely or made universal, the concrete result is the same: five million people are acknowledged to have the same degree of “right” to eat a single crust of bread. Thus, universal ownership is prone to creating universal conflict.

In that way, universal ownership is utterly incompatible with anarchism: when large numbers of individuals have a claim to a given material, there must be a method for settling that dispute. The only conscionable solution that proponents of universal property propose is a centralized and highly authoritarian structure. Government.

Not only is universal ownership incompatible with anarchism; it is incompatible with civilized coexistence in general. Every item becomes the subject of dispute among the entire society, or at least those who are cognizant of the material’s existence and have an interest in claiming it for their own. These disputes are then “settled” by a central organization, whose decisions are based on arbitrary

logic, which is greatly open to corruption, and carried out or insured by physical force.

Such phenomena can be witnessed in present society in the ongoing battle for “public” land: in the midwest, debate is common between ranchers, who wish to loose their herds to graze upon these pastures, and ecophiles, who wish to let the land fallow. Each claim is backed by a societal benefit, and each party has the same “right” to use this “public” space. Which of them has the greater “right” defies logic, and those in charge of making a fair decision can easily be swayed by political pull or with what is, in effect, bribery using cash or votes. Whatever the outcome, the decision will be to some degree arbitrary, it will certainly not be objectively fair, and it will be backed by force of arms. Fully cognizant of the problems inherent in this sort of conflict, proponents of universal ownership wish to relegate every space, every material, and every person to the same status of “public” property, subject to the same, or greater, debate to be resolved by the same, or worse process of arbitrary logic.

Resolution of such conflicts over every material would require a government of incredible size, with hundreds of legislators setting criteria by which these disputes will be settled, thousands of arbiters to mediate these conflicts and to make decisions, and legions upon legions of armed troops to enforce them. The result is not anarchy, but the most totalitarian of governments.

Furthermore, the authoritarian organization that resolves conflicts is the de-facto owner of all property. Such a government would necessarily maintain and grant, or refuse to grant, permission for use, exercising over all property the same domain that an individual has over his personal property. In practice, such a government would operate as an organization that holds a monopoly on all materials and possesses all capital, and in that way would have a virtually infinite control over the realm of all action.

In sum, universal ownership is self-contradicting. The incidence of conflict over what few materials are presently defined as “public” property provide insight into what would occur, on a much greater scale if all property were made “public”: a large and totalitarian government that possesses all property and controls all actions — no manifestation of ownership could be less compatible with anarchism.

Group Ownership

Fortunately, most proponents of universal ownership do not propose universal ownership at all, but group ownership (or a reckless and ill-conceived melange of the two). “Group ownership” covers a broad spectrum of possibilities: from two to millions of people may be included in such a group (though the more members, the less functional the group will be); the mechanisms and degree of control of the members is largely arbitrary; and the nature and purpose of the group is entirely variable and mutable.

For some, universal ownership would seem to be the ultimate end of group ownership, an inevitable destination as groups merge into larger and larger groups, until all of society are participants in a single group. While this is theoretically possible, it is far from probable, because group ownership is distinctly different from universal ownership. Specifically, group ownership differs from universal ownership in three important respects:

1. Group ownership involves a finite number of parties and only such material has been consigned to the group
2. Participation in the group is voluntary
3. The conditions and terms of participation are negotiable

This is quite unlike universal ownership, which involves an infinite number of parties, all of whose material has been involuntarily