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Jim Shamlin  
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1997

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“This is a very brief piece I wrote for *THE ANARCH* — an e-zine of contemporary anarchistic theory. (BTW, surf by there — they need both readers and contributors to keep the publication running.) It’s a concise manifesto that cuts to the core of the argument. As a note, the material was edited from ‘Anarchy: The American Way’ and rewritten to better serve the printed medium, so it’s a great deal more focused and a great deal less affected.”

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# What Is Anarchism?

Jim Shamlin

1997

“Anarchism” seems to be a recurring theme that comes into vogue every decade or so — and with good reason: it’s very stylish, radical-sounding, and somewhat sinister. It gets attention. “Anarchy” as effective a term in marketing a political package as “new and improved” is in marketing fabric softeners — and like commercial advertising catch phrases, it loses some of its meaning with each recursion: Is a roll of toilet paper really “new” when the manufacturer has changed the pattern? Is ketchup significantly “improved” by substituting red dye number three for red dye number five? Can a shopworn political package deal be fobbed off as something fresh and different because of a pinch of salt more or less?

And so, terms are bandied about in utter disregard for their meanings. A score of mutually-exclusive theorists are in a mad rush to market their products as the latest brand of anarchism, and there is much in-fighting over whose flavor is genuine. The passion these marketers add to enhance the flavor of their long-stale arguments has long since annihilated logic — but that staple product, logic, maintains that a word has meaning, even when the meaning has been lost by those who use it. All rhetoric aside, “anarchism” *means* something — it defines a cer-

tain and specific standard to which a theory must conform in order to be considered genuinely anarchistic.

To begin, anarchism is a political theory, and political theories are not evanescent. To be valid, as a system, any “ism” must define a system it wishes to perpetuate. A federalist, for example, does not unseat a dictator then retire as his nation falls into the clutches of the next fascist — he is a revolutionary, and as such overthrows not merely a figurehead, but an entire political system itself, replacing it with something that is, by his contention, a better system, which then perpetuates. Likewise, if one is to be taken seriously as an anarchist, one must not merely revile the present political system. Further, the task of the anarchist is more demanding than that of the federalist — he must not substitute one government for another, but must abolish government altogether to establish a society that is perpetually devoid of government, of rule by force. This perpetuation is what qualifies anarchism as a political theory rather than a mere cry of discontent or grumble of temporary protest. Said another way, filling this requisite qualifies a theory as anarchistic and, conversely, disqualifies any theory that fails to do the same.

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Rebellion is, admittedly, a good start — it is, in fact, the first step in any revolution — but rebellion alone is insufficient as a basis for a complete political theory. Most rebels merely wish to reform their present political system, or to control it. They are not against government, nor against any specific form of government, nor even against their present government, but wish to alter the way their government is being used. In a word, they are *reformers*.

In most political systems, there are two or more factions. Traditionally, these are called “liberal” and “conservative,” though the precise definitions of those terms is subject to

interpretation and redefinition. In American politics, these two factions are generally represented by Democrats and Republicans, respectively. If one accepts any form of protest as “anarchism,” then a great many individuals in government itself may be labeled “anarchists.” When the liberal faction is in power, the conservative faction objects to the way in which government is used, and vice versa. There is discontent and protest, but neither side, at heart, really wants to abolish government. Indeed, they wish government to perpetuate — they merely want it to perpetuate under their own control. To call the members of government wish to seize control “anarchists” is clearly a misuse of the term.

Likewise, there are political camps outside of government who seek to reform it, whose ultimate end is to seize control over the machinery of a force-wielding government. Regardless of whether they wish to amend the system or take control of it, they do not oppose government *per se* — and are not anarchists. Even those who wish to abolish the *present* government, only to replace it with a new one of their own design, cannot logically be labeled as anarchists.

Again, anarchism has one goal: to establish a society that perpetuates without government *of any sort*. Any demand to reform government, to change government, even to replace government, does not meet this criterion, and is *not* anarchistic.

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Next, there is the question of whether anarchism is “right” or “left” — liberal or conservative, by whatever momentary definition those terms comprise. Largely, there are two factions within anarchism itself, the right and left, that largely parallel the beliefs of the conservative and liberal factions in government. In far too many cases, these right-anarchists and left-anarchists are merely liberals and conservatives at heart who have adopted anarchism almost as an afterthought.

Furthermore, the core of their beliefs includes, whether explicitly or implicitly, an organization of force to control the “civilian” population. The right-anarchist is, at worst, a 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalist robber-baron, who implicitly requires a force-wielding government to protect the property “rights” his system would create; and the left-anarchist, at worst, is a 20<sup>th</sup> century communist dictator, who implicitly requires a force-wielding government to impose the specific type of social organization his system would create. Granted, these caricatures are more tools of propaganda than of actual theoretical systems — but every caricature is merely the exaggeration of actual characteristics.

The main problem with this sort of categorization is that it is monoaxial — that it positions theories on a sliding scale from left to right. In truth, there is at least one more axis on which political theories should be measured: authoritarianism and libertarianism (the latter is meant generically, not in terms of the capital “L” Libertarianism) — the degree to which a government exerts control over a nation. It is possible for an absolute authoritarian, a tyrant, to be either liberal or conservative and still be a genuine tyrant. Likewise, it is possible for an absolute libertarian, an anarch, to be either liberal or conservative and still be a genuine anarch.

The popular left-right dichotomy is too often taken as the only dimension of political theory — it is convenient for authoritarians to have the public, at large, believe that there is no alternative to government and that their only choice is right or left. However, the benchmark of anarchism is not set on that axis: rather it is established by the latter extremity of the authoritarian-libertarian dimension. A genuine anarchist can lean to the right or to the left, so long as his theory does not explicitly or implicitly require authoritarian force to coerce the citizens, at large, to conform to his societal prefabrication.

What, then, is anarchism? One cannot say that anarchism is necessarily right or left, that the entirety of either side is absolutely wrong. There are members of both camps, right and left, who argue in favor of a society that perpetuates without government, and whose theories carefully circumscribe the foibles of their peers. The truth is that a variety of systems, even a mixed system, is possible. So long as the use of organized force is proscribed, an anarchistic nation may be either liberal or conservative. There may be differences both among and within communities, but so long as neither faction utilizes force to control the other to their liking, anarchism may prevail.

In sum, a broad range of diverse ideologies is possible within anarchism — and probable, as anarchy itself abhors the constraint of a singular ideology that proscribes alternative. The ability to pass fair an objective judgment, to be able to identify and qualify, requires perception and sapience — and in the case of anarchism, it requires perception beyond the one-dimensional mind-set promulgated by authoritarians in both liberal and conservative factions, sapience beyond the impulsiveness of knee-jerk negativity that characterizes present political debate. It requires knowing that anarchism does not specify how force should be used in politics, only that it should not.