

Towards an Alternative Left

The Anarchist Response to Liberal and Neofascist Narratives

John Farthing II

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Four years of Donald Trump's narcissist clown show has been for many an awakening to the growing historical potency and momentum of what we may most accurately refer to as neo-fascism, as it shares many elements of traditional fascism while innovating new tactics and ideologies. Trump is not the first of this breed to gain state power, only the most flamboyantly obnoxious. Neo-fascists are driving the Russian chariot, Turkey is invading the revolutionary cantons of Rojava, Bolsonaro kills the indigenous to more efficiently burn the rainforest in Brazil, a coup in Bolivia replaces an indigenous socialist with a cabal of right wing capitalist oligarchs... and ultra-right wing political parties have growing parliamentary and street power throughout the world. By paying lip service to the electoral process they are more subtle than their traditional forebears, while having all the same key characteristics: authoritarian nationalism, populist demagoguery, imperialist militarism, an appeal to xenophobia, and a cult of personality built around strongman figureheads. There's been a groundswell of resistance inspired by Trump, but it's been more an instinctual reaction against smug neo-fascist hypocrisy than an expression of any coherent counter-narrative. Ideologically the opposition is diverse — a popular front with liberal, centrist, and radical elements. Of these I would argue that anarchists offer the most viable antifascist/anti-capitalist narrative, because only they correctly diagnose government as the essential problem rather than looking to it for solutions.

Anarchism (etymologically, "without rulers") is the social philosophy that begins from the first principle of individual sovereignty — you have to begin somewhere, and the self seems a reasonable place. Individual sovereignty is the idea that the organismic integrity and capacity for self-determination of the individual is incontestably valid natural law. From this follows the second foundational principle of anarchism: voluntary association. This principle states that all voluntary associations between or among sovereigns are legitimate, whereas any blocking of free interchange or any imposition of involuntary association is illegitimate. Anarchism asserts that all government is violence, and that all violence is a form of government: these two words are but synonyms for involuntary association. Under this theoretical understanding the State emphatically has no right to exist, and the questions of how to transcend the violence implicit in capitalism and government inspire the diverse currents of anarchist thought.

Because we've been indoctrinated in statist assumptions, anarchism is often treated as a fringe philosophy, as if government were something akin to breathing — natural and inevitable to the human condition. But consider that we as a species have lived for most of our time on this planet in smaller organic social units. These bands, tribes and moving villages of hunting-gathering/horticultural societies have been shown by archaeology and comparative anthropology to be dramatically less violent, stratified, and exploitative than the urban societies that have become prevalent since the Neolithic Revolution. The first City-States came into existence less than ten thousand years ago, whereas stateless homo sapiens evolved and proliferated hundreds of thousands of years before that. In terms of species-time the State is a recent aberration, not reaching many areas until European civilization went viral (so to speak), on the rest of the planet post-Columbus. Paleo-anarchy was sustainable for millennia but unable to withstand the assault of authoritarian civilization. While this makes for interesting debates of historical and anthropological theories, the issue is also concrete and personal: anarchists feel an existential mandate to recover the state of anarchy we lost when evicted from the Paleolithic Eden.

To provide an operational definition- Anarchy is any web of social interactions wherein all interactions are voluntary. When involuntary associations (harming, controlling, exploiting) occur, then anarchy has been broken and some government is attempting to impose itself. Political

anarchy is simply the absence of the State and other illegitimate institutions, and social anarchy is the happy state of being part of a community characterized by the absence of imposed domination of any kind. The nature of anarchy is by definition non-violent; when violence breaks out that means that somebody or some group of people is attempting to govern.

This is seemingly contradicted by use of the word “anarchy” as a synonym for mayhem and indiscriminate violence. Advocates for the State like to imply that without their “law and order” to protect us we would all be victims of each other in an orgy of indiscriminate slaughter- an interesting secular adaptation of the religious doctrine of original sin. Further, we anarchists have a not entirely unjustified association in the popular mind with a history of violent methods of protest and resistance. If anarchy is by definition non-violent, anarchism is not necessarily so. What gives?

There are two related and pivotal issues here: the nature of violence/government and the ethical dilemma of responding to it. As previously mentioned both violence and government are synonyms for involuntary association, wherein one person or class of people uses force to extract value from another person or class. An individual act of murder or rape is an act of micro-government, but the State does not exist until a privileged class cloaks a group of thugs in a mantle of legitimacy, and turns them loose to commit organized violence on a large scale. This is the nature of police power in every authoritarian society, and can only be achieved by convincing subject populations to collaborate in their victimization.. This cloaking, this swindle of invalidating individual sovereignty and sanctioning its oppression can only be achieved by the programming of assumptions and perceptions from childhood, until they seem universal and axiomatic. Anarchist critique is useful in deprogramming these ingrained fallacies, five of which I consider especially relevant to this consideration of effective resistance to neofascism in the 21st Century. I refer to these occupied territories of the mind as the fallacies of Extortion, Legitimate Force, Property, Participation, and Constitutionality. Consideration of these fallacies and related elements show anarchism to be an incisive and conceptually valuable alternative to traditional statist leftism.

The Extortion Fallacy

Of the many self-serving justifications offered by those who carry water for the authoritarian State, perhaps the most insidious is the Extortion fallacy, where those who govern offer, for a price, protection from the kinds of violence they themselves engender. This is obvious enough when a street gang (which is after all a quasi-State governing on the neighborhood level) demands protection money. But the same principle underlies all codes of taxation and criminal law, more subtle and more lucrative than the straightforward robbery perpetuated by gangsters. Even such legalisms as, for example, the murder statutes, do not exist a priori to protect human life, but rather to protect the monopoly on lethal force enjoyed by the State. This legitimized murder is expressed in police actions, imperialist wars, capital punishment, and genocide. The economic injustices inherent in capitalism – privilege, poverty, and exploitation, will systemically insure that unsanctioned killings will continue to occur; and the murder statutes neuter citizens away from the possibility of self-defense as individuals or communities, making them dependent on the State for protection. The sheep are neatly shorn.

This question of self-defense is central to anarchist critique, because it embodies the dilemma of response to governing violence. There are traditionally two broad schools of thought within anarchism on this issue, with a spectrum of interpretation between them. The minority position of anarcho-pacifism was arguably founded by Nikolai Tolstoy, and has been carried forward by such revered figures as Mahatma Gandhi (who described himself as an anarchist, though he is problematic in many ways (see below) and we don't claim him), Alex Comfort, and Paul Goodman. This ideological pole may be considered "pure" anarchism, in that those who profess it are true to their principles and refuse to participate in any form of governing/violence. This position is logically and ethically consistent, as perhaps best expressed by Bart de Ligt: "As long as the State and capitalism exist, violence is inevitable, and so... the consistent pacifist must be an anarchist, just as the consistent anarchist must be a pacifist." Even such a revolutionary as Errico Malatesta, an advocate of insurrectionary violence, proclaimed that "The main plank of Anarchism is the removal of violence from human relations." Look at this tangle of thorns.

Anarcho-pacifism may also claim some limited victories, as when Gandhian tactics helped replace the tyranny of British colonial rule with the tyranny of Indian nationalism. But pacifists have their own moral dilemmas- here's a quote from Mahatma Gandhi in response to the Holocaust:

"Hitler killed five million Jews. It is the greatest crime of our time. But the Jews should have offered themselves to the butcher's knife . They should have thrown themselves in the sea from the cliffs... It would have aroused the world and the people of Germany... As it is they succumbed anyway in their millions."

This nonviolent absolutism has been unacceptable to many anarchists, and has thus given birth to the majority current, insurrectionism, which asserts a right to revolutionary self-defense and is exemplified by Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, Goldman, and many others. Insurrectionists abdicate the symmetrical ethical consistency of Tolstoy, choosing instead to dirty their hands justifying forceful resistance to involuntary association. This is perhaps not purely anarchistic, because 'government' in the form of community self-defense is not only tolerated but vindicated. The doctrine here seems to be "Anarchy whenever possible, 'minarchy' whenever necessary."

Insurrectionism has a mixed record: direct action has resulted in liberationist social change on multiple occasions, but the "Propaganda by the Deed" assassinations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were counterproductive strategically. Nonetheless, the insurrectionists were twice able to establish embryonic anarchist autonomous zones, in the Free Territory of Ukraine in 1919, and Catalonia in 1936. These were surprisingly vibrant and effective polities that were only destroyed when attacked by both Fascists and Communists; authoritarians left and right being equally threatened by functional autonomy.

Legitimate Force

The lie at the center of all statist ideologies is what is here designated as the Legitimate Force fallacy. This is the foundational assumption that the State has the moral right to commit acts of involuntary association (murder, kidnapping, enslavement, robbery) that neither individuals nor unsanctioned collectives are ever justified in committing. Every society that includes the authoritarian cancer of government will produce a sanctioning rationalization for its excesses.

It's worth noting that every governed society includes a privileged class and an apologist ideology that justifies its domination. These self-serving rationalizations occur equally in monarchies, democracies, oligarchies and dictatorships.

In fairness I should point out that only pacifists are immune from the siren song of legitimate force. Insurrectionary anarchists who allow for revolutionary self-defense are vulnerable to self-serving justifications, rationalizing their power and joining the long tradition of revolutionaries who betray the ideals of their revolution, as did the Bolsheviks. When this happens the former subversives always create a new privileged class and a new ideology to justify their privilege.

The Property Mystique

Here, it is necessary to not only legitimize the use of force but also to validate the unequal access to the means and ends of production enjoyed by the dominant class. This requires what I call the Property fallacy. It may be seen in capitalist societies wherein the simultaneous existence of starving children and billionaires in the same city is not understood as violence, while the destruction of capitalist machinery in protest is considered violent "eco-terrorism." Referring to sabotage by that often misused propaganda word, terrorism, is an abuse of language that deserves its own treatment, but for now let us consider this mystical transubstantiation whereby that which actually hurts people (systemic poverty) is not proscribed as violent, but that which harms not people, but privilege, is. The most extreme example of this absurdity may be found by applying the same logic to a slaveholding society: Quakers on the Underground Railroad were violent terrorists, violating the property rights of law-abiding Southerners.

The word "privilege" comes from the Latin for "private law" and was overt in feudal times – those lords and landholders who possessed the wealth to keep hired thugs made their own law directly. Now they do so through surrogates endowed with mystical legitimacy, such as the (allegedly) democratically-elected representatives the West is so proud of. This serves to make the origins and maintenance of privilege more covert.

Private property (not personal property, this important distinction deserves an essay of its own) may or may not be the root of all civilized evil- it's certainly the case that there's been an historical correlation between agricultural surpluses and the development of authoritarian social forms. But whether or not property was the serpent of paleolithic Eden, it's certainly one of the primary demons of the current historical dilemma – not as the mass of unnecessary stuff we've neurotically accumulated but in the abstract notion of justified ownership. This fallacy distorts our thinking away from the natural law of human need to the artificial laws of ruling-class privilege: the laws that rely on governing force to preserve their existence. Anarchists assert numerous theoretical models of libertarian socialism in an effort to correct this distortion, while many insurrectionists would argue that destruction of capitalist property is a legitimate tactic of revolutionary self-defense, not only non-violent, but anti-violence.

Direct Action and the Fallacy of Participation

Sabotage (along with strikes, boycotts, occupations etc) is an example of direct action, which is usually the only kind of political action anarchists are comfortable with. An excellent guide to the subject published on crimethinc.com describes direct action as "Solving problems yourself

rather than petitioning the authorities or relying on external institutions.” The majority of citizens in Western democracies on the other hand, tend to favor indirect action (i.e. voting). There is a cliché in popular culture: “If you don’t vote, then you have no right to complain or protest.” This expresses what I call the Participation fallacy. Liberals are outraged when we encourage people not to vote or campaign, when we argue that indirect action is not only futile but corrupting. These diametrically opposed tactical philosophies cause divergence between people who should be natural allies. This distinction between traditional and alternative leftist narratives deserves careful attention.

The liberal (and Marxist-Leninist, which is still relevant in theory if not in practice) view is that the vehicle for positive social change is to be found in the machinery of the State, however flawed it may be. Liberals assert a legislative solution for every social problem, and place great hope in their champions, those white knights of the electoral process: Robert Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy, Bernie Sanders. To the degree that these champions and legislative solutions (inevitably) fall short, traditional diet-leftists will claim partial victory and vow continued struggle. And when exploitative capitalism continues to refine privilege and injustice, the liberal has the consolation of self-satisfied (and illusionary) pragmatism — “I tried to the best of my ability using existing means. Did you?” When in actuality those existing means are part of the problem. In seeking the pragmatism of worldly means the liberal drifts towards the idealistic assumption that the State is capable of using force ethically.

There are numerous mystical spooks that have historically been used to justify police power — Divine Right of Kings, Consent of the Governed, Dictatorship of the Proletariat, Wisdom of the Leader, Constitutionality of the Republic: all of these are gloves covering the authoritarian fist. The glove may be silk or wool or velvet, but the fist is always cold and bloodstained steel. And if the anarchist begins with an idealistic refusal to collaborate with or participate in the violence of governing, s/he moves towards the concrete strategic practicality of direct action resistance and building alternative networks of free association outside of government control.

At the core of the anarchist rejection of indirect action is a diagnosis of government as being inherently illegitimate because it rests on a foundation of force used to maintain class privilege. And like Sauron’s ring, one cannot wield something evil to long-term good result. If a Bernie Sanders, no matter how fortified with integrity, were to achieve real power then they would be corrupted or destroyed, as if Gandalf attempted to wield the One Ring. Those who vote or campaign not only pour their creative energy into a malignant void; they also become complicit in the crimes their governments must by nature commit.

Constitutions are a Con

There are no ambiguities or exceptions in the anarchist indictment of government, but liberals draw a distinction between the validity of Western-style parliamentary republics and all other statist forms. This implied doctrine of Constitutional Exceptionalism is another fallacy, and a divergence between anarchism and mainstream/liberal interpretation. Liberals love to invoke constitutional rights, formal legalisms allegedly foundational to democratic States. Anarchists instead assert natural rights, intrinsic to our existential condition and independent of any historical documents. We consider the constitutional fallacy as yet another way of falsely legitimizing the authoritarian State and diffusing the revolutionary will of the people, giving them a paper

shield to hide behind as a co-opted alternative to direct action resistance. We acknowledge that the intent behind such documents as the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights was libertarian in nature- they were meant as tools to rein in (though not abolish) the tyranny of the State. The point is that these progressive innovations did not work, and could not work, because they depended on the State to interpret and enforce them. Thomas Paine recognized this, in his *Rights of Man*: “I have no idea of petitioning for rights. Whatever the rights of the people are, they have a right to them, and none have a right to either withhold or grant them.”

And it gets worse. Democratic forms make voters complicit and give them an illusion of potency; but even if it weren't fake, even if they had real power, representative democracy would still be a grotesquely illegitimate system, because it opens the way for tyranny of the majority – violating the natural rights of individual sovereignty and voluntary association. Remember that Hitler was democratically elected in 1933, and slavery in the Old South would have been democratically upheld even with full suffrage. The takeaway lesson here is that no document, no system of formal legalism can be an effective antidote to the corrosive tendencies of violence and privilege inherent in government. Looking to constitutions is but another kind of indirect action, one that looks to the past when we can only be saved in the present, by our own actions. Voltairine de Cleyre said it best in 1909: “Anarchism says, Make no laws whatever concerning speech, and speech will be free; so soon as you make a declaration on paper that speech shall be free, you will have a hundred lawyers proving that ‘freedom does not mean abuse, nor liberty license’; and they will define and define freedom out of existence. Let the guarantee of free speech be in every man's determination to use it, and we shall have no need of paper declarations.”

Between the poles of pacifism and insurrectionism there are many shades of interpretation to the problem of violence in human relationships. While ethical, tactical, and strategic questions remain unresolved and will continue to be contested, in its essential indictment of State violence anarchism is a strong and coherent counter-narrative to the dominant order of our civilization. Since the bankruptcy of authoritarian Marxism became apparent, libertarian socialism has become one of the few comprehensive revolutionary narratives left to oppose the hegemony of global capitalism. Not anarchism alone though – we stand with all people seeking liberation and autonomy, with women and indigenous peoples as our vanguard.

Anarchists don't have all the right answers, but I'm convinced we're at least asking the right questions: how do we moderate the possibility of violence in human social interaction? How do we abolish capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, police, and prisons? How do we liberate ourselves? Anarchists have always been the most militant opponents of fascism, and this becomes increasingly important as Trump and other neofascists grab the pussy of political power from the democratic statists who oppose/collaborate with them. This is a time of terrifying opportunity for those of us who look at the State and say with Bakunin, that “The urge to destroy is also a creative urge.” Our task is to experiment with autonomous social forms, while we strategically hinder, sabotage, subvert, and protect ourselves against government (all governments) until such time as they may be completely superseded and replaced with cooperative networks of mutual aid, including those of minarchist self-defense.

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