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Do I Need To Be An Optimist To Be An Anarchist?

Lee Shevek

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Many people new to anarchist ideas might find much that they resonate with in the political philosophy, but feel that they have some reservations that keep them from being able to identify fully with anarchism. Anarchism as many come to know it is, in many ways, a profoundly optimistic philosophy when it comes to the human condition. Much of our analysis (or at least the analysis that tends to be more popular and therefore more widespread) is grounded in the idea that much of the harm in our world is produced by the conditions of hierarchy and domination, and would be incredibly lessened if those conditions were radically and fundamentally changed. This remains an important component of anarchistic philosophy which is not my intention to diminish here. However, not all people are ready to embrace this faith in an inherent human capacity for good. Many of us are survivors of trauma, trauma created and compounded by systems but often enacted by individual people (sometimes even other anarchists). Individual people who saw our agency as forfeit, who refused again and again to recognize our humanity, who — even when the choice for accountability

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and care was clearly available, chose to do us harm instead. To those who have experienced this trauma, often multiple times from many different people, it can be extremely difficult to accept an anarchist philosophy that seems so dependent upon us believing unerringly in the human capacity to be good, to care for others, and to reject power.

If this is your experience, then this essay is for you.

Anarchism is not, despite some popular articulations of it, dependent upon the idea that once we “reach anarchism” (an idea itself that is incredibly fraught, but that is a topic for another time) we will have reached a utopic end of history where everyone is good to one another and no harm ever happens. While anarchists *do* recognize that much of the harm we are familiar with today is produced by a larger sociohistorical context, our political philosophy does not give a pass to individuals who do harm, nor is the project of anarchism dependent on their capacity or willingness to change.

Despite popular belief, anarchism does not rely on the idea that there just won’t be any harmful people in an anarchistic world. Many of us recognize there will likely always be *some* harmful people. Incorporating that into our analysis means we also recognize that it’s best practice not to keep around apparatuses of control that allow them to do that harm on a massive scale.

If it is your belief that “there will always be bad people” regardless of the structures that surround them, the logical conclusion of that belief is “so let’s make sure the harm they can do is limited and challengeable” not “so let’s build a huge social structure that allows us to control them and hope none of them take power of it!” You need not have an optimistic view of how much better humans will be without systems of domination to be an anarchist. Instead, you can recognize that if there will always be people who wish to harm others, that the sensible conclusion is to tear down any system that could be

used by any human to commit harm on an even more massive scale than they'd ever be capable of doing on their own.

I, personally, do hold the view that if we did not live within a system that is built upon justifications for — and practices of — domination, control, and exploitation we would very likely have far less people utilizing those justifications to do harm in everyday life, but that view is secondary in terms of why I'm an anarchist. I am a survivor of several different kinds of violence that were made possible and exacerbated by larger structures of domination. I know people have the capacity to do so much harm and I see my own political project as being driven by the goal of limiting that capacity. If people will continue to be harmful regardless of the system they live in, then it would be a profound improvement to make sure that the people they hurt have the capacity to respond and to challenge them, rather than being restricted by that person's system-granted authority.

As an example: would the abuse I experienced as a child not have occurred if I had grown up in an anarchist world? Quite possibly. The values the abusive adults in my life had were in many ways the products of the historical and social context in which we lived that validated and encouraged that abuse. However, what's more important to me is not the idea that my parents would have been good and not abusive in a different world, but rather I would have had the *agency* to leave or to find allies in challenging that abuse even if they had still been abusive people. I experienced harm from my individual parents, yes, and we can talk all day about the social/historical context that made them abusive. But the point is that the larger system of control that gave them total authority over me is what made the trauma I experienced possible.

This goes for so much of the violence and harm in our world. It is astronomically compounded by structures of domination that make it incredibly easy for people who want to do harm to take advantage of those structures and advance their own power. My view is, if there truly are always going to be harmful

people, I'd much rather encounter them on more equal terms than have social systems in place that make it exponentially more dangerous to resist or challenge them. And that's anarchism, too.

Anarchism is not simply a process of negation, nor has it ever been. Destroying systems of domination also requires building collective and *ongoing* practices of anti-power, which includes building the capacity to attack new systems of domination as they arise. Anarchism is not only about removing or reducing people's ability to do harm, but also increasing people's ability to address and challenge harm when it happens. It is an ongoing process, not an end of history.

Need you be an optimist in regards to the human condition to be an anarchist? In short, not at all. If the pain and trauma you have experienced at the hands of others time and time again has made you wary of any system or political philosophy that compels you to begin at a point of trust and determined belief that people can be fundamentally different than they have shown themselves to be, anarchism can still provide a political home for you. You need not believe that all forms of harm would melt away to reveal utopia. All that anarchism asks of you is to fight for the values of anti-power, to resist hierarchy in all the forms it may take, and to challenge harm from whoever it may come from. The rejection of injustice is enough, even if you still struggle in seeing the possibilities of better worlds beyond that rejection. The rejection itself, that this world of harm and abuse is unacceptable and will not be submitted to, is where the real strength of anarchism lies.