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On Socialism, Communism, and Anarchism
or: an imprecise definition of terms
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I was finally able to start interacting with them. Ideological labels are at their best when they are lenses. They're also so often blinders.

I try to think about it like I think about language itself. I care deeply about grammar and spelling, because I care deeply about communicating ideas. Grammar is an imprecise tool with which we can try to make our ideas clear. It's not, however, a useful set of limitations. There is no right or wrong in English, only "did I communicate my ideas as clearly as I could have."

So it is with labels. I am an anarchist, but I don't see myself limited by that ideological framework. I have certain ideas, and those ideas mean the best label for me is "anarchist," not that I am an anarchist and therefore I have certain ideas.

I distrust authoritarian socialism because I read history books for a living. 19th century political philosophers argued about the ideal role of the state in revolution, then revolutionists in the 20th century experimented with those ideas. To my understanding, the anarchists were right: seizing the state and wielding its power inevitably led to the misuse of that power.

I'm glad, therefore, that we have these labels, so that we can learn lessons from history about what didn't work. In order to communicate ideas, we have to classify things. We have to be have shorthand for "people who try to seize the power of the state" and for "people who want to directly distribute power from the bottom-up."

But I find myself sad when I meet someone coming from a Marxist tradition and I realize we're both steeped in 150 years of antagonism when we both, most likely, are fighting for the same thing: the end of capitalism and the equal distribution of both economic and political power.

Even though I'm right and they're wrong.

tury. Within the anarchic framework, "anarcho-communism" and the like are simply another idea among peers.

Social Democracy

Both communists and anarchists can generally be understood as "revolutionary socialists," in that the primary means by which they attempt to change society is through revolution. Historically, though, there's a third tendency within the socialist movement: social democrats. Like all of these terms, "social democracy" has a different meaning depending on time and place, but by and large, social democrats, like the anarchists, believe that you cannot use authoritarian means to institute socialism.

Like these other terms, social democracy means different things when you are describing the means or the ends. A socialist democracy is, well, a democratic state that is socialist—in which the means of production are owned socially instead of privately. By and large, social democrats believe in using existing democratic systems to reach a democratic socialist society, though some believe in revolution if it's necessary.

To just keep confusing matters, Marxists were generally social democrats historically, and the Bolsheviks specifically called themselves social democrats until they became the Communist Party.

Labels

In the end, this stuff only sort-of matters. In some ways, our insistence on adhering to these labels anchors us to the problems of the past. In other ways, understanding these labels allows us to understand the past more clearly.

For myself, identifying as an anarchist didn't change my perspective, it clarified it. It was like putting on a pair of glasses for the first time—ideas I'd had for years came suddenly into focus and

One time, maybe ten years back, I was on the DC metro with my family. My brother and I were happily talking about the feminist implications of *GI Joe*, because my brother is cool as hell, when a stranger looked over at my father (not knowing we were related) to complain about how I spoke.

"They really don't teach people how to speak English anymore," the stranger complained.

I'm not the world's fighty-est person, but I've also never been the world's least fighty person, so I confronted him immediately. "Oh?!" I asked. "What's wrong with the way we're talking?!"

He went on a tirade about how I used the word "like" too much when I talked and how kids these days have no respect for proper grammar and speech.

I… may or may not have started yelling at him on a crowded train, shouting things like "English isn't a formally codified language, motherfucker" and "I'm a fucking professional editor I think I know how the fucking English language works." He argued back. I danced circles around the man's terrible logic and eventually he fled the train while an angry dirty punk screamed at him.

This wasn't my proudest moment. Later, my father kindly reminded me that it's impolite to engage in a battle of wits with an unarmed man.

But I think about this moment often, because the world is full of pedants, and those pedants are convinced, incorrectly, that there is such a thing as "right" and "wrong" in spoken or written language. This pedantry leads to all kinds of classism and racism, turning everyone into little grammar police. The irony is that those grammar police are just… wrong. By thinking they know the rules of English, they prove themselves ignorant. Every professional editor knows the only list of rules you follow are the rules of your publication.

English is a language of guidelines, not laws.

Which is, frankly, one of the finest things about it.

The imprecision of language is liberating—there are no walls around our words and therefore our ideas—but it can also be confusing. Quite regularly, people argue about something (like socialism or anarchism or capitalism or fascism, as examples) without ever realizing that each person is arguing about a different concept while still using the same terms.

So then, I'd like to offer a bit of a definition of terms. It's going to be an imprecise set of definitions, though. I am not attempting to lay out what's known as a prescriptive set of definitions, but instead a descriptive set. That is to say, this is not "the rules about what these words mean," but instead "what I have observed these words to mean throughout my years of engaging in politics and reading about the history of politics."

We'll start with three big ones: socialism, communism, and anarchism, as well as some related terms like "democratic socialism," "authoritarian socialism," and "libertarian socialism." All of which, funnily enough, have different meanings depending on the context of time and place.

The point of understanding these terms is not to reify the differences between us, nor to suggest that existing frameworks developed in the 19th century are what we should use here in the 21st, but instead so that we can better understand where various people might be coming from and better understand history.

Socialism

Socialism is, broadly understood, the largest umbrella term here. Socialism is the belief that we would be better off if our economic system encouraged economic equality. It's "what if we learned how to share, though" applied to entire economies. Specifically, socialists tend to believe that the "means of production" (factories, farms, etc) ought to be "socially owned" rather than "privately owned." Basically, this means that a factory ought to be owned and operated

choose to see anarchism not as an end goal but instead a process, a means by which to challenge oppression wherever it crops up.

When you view anarchism itself as the broad umbrella, rather than putting it under socialism, the ideologies under that umbrella are generally related either to the type of society they wish to create (such as anarcho-communism or collectivism or mutualism), the means by which they hope to get to an anarchist society (such as anarcho-syndicalism or insurrectionary anarchism), or which systems of oppression they are personally most focused on challenging (such as anarcha-feminism or queer anarchism).

For the most part, anarchism developed alongside the rest of the socialist movement, but since the beginning of anarchism as a political identity, there has been another branch of it that does not consider itself part of the socialist movement: individualist anarchism (contrasted with "social anarchism"). Individualist anarchists still developed in opposition to capitalism. Some individualist anarchists might be considered "market anarchists" in which they specifically want to make certain there is still a market economy and money, just without capitalism. Others are more concerned with the role of the individual within society ("egoists").

Then there are nihilist anarchists, who oppose all the same hierarchies and systems of oppression as the rest of the anarchists but have no interest in describing or fighting for some idealized society and are instead solely focused on the fight against the existent.

Finally, there's been a somewhat recent attempt, one that I am very excited about, to break the connection between anarchism and Western enlightenment thinking entirely. Indigenous North American anarchists have developed a framework around the word "anarchic," a broader umbrella for all tendencies towards individual liberty and economic cooperation, regardless of their cultural origin. Many, many people all over the world have lineages and traditions of anarchic struggle they are more interested in referring to than something that was developed in Western Europe in the 19th cen-

ing class to run its own affairs through a horizontal distribution of power.

In the 19th century, in the earliest socialist organizations, there were debates and arguments and splits between the "authoritarian socialists" such as Karl Marx and the "libertarian socialists" such as Mikhail Bakunin. As always, there was a general consensus about the goals, but an intense disagreement about what means to use to reach those goals.

"Libertarian socialist" was often shortened simply to "libertarian," and for much of the history of the world, "libertarian" just meant "anarchist" and was specifically and explicitly anticapitalist. The modern American use of the word "Libertarian" to describe advocates of capitalism is more recent, and the word was intentionally stolen from us. (Murray Rothbard acknowledged this when he wrote: "One gratifying aspect of our rise to some prominence is that, for the first time in my memory, we, 'our side,' had captured a crucial word from the enemy. 'Libertarians' had long been simply a polite word for left-wing anarchists, that is for anti-private property anarchists, either of the communist or syndicalist variety. But now we had taken it over.")

So one way of understanding anarchism is a form of socialism that believes in the revolutionary power of the working class to dismantle the state and share power.

Most of the time, for most self-described anarchists throughout history, anarchists are specifically fighting for communism—a stateless, moneyless society built around ideals of solidarity, mutual aid, and free association.

Anarchism itself though is a broad umbrella, and most modern anarchists (myself included) tend to describe anarchism on its own terms rather than specifically relating it to socialism and communism. Anarchists seek to dismantle oppressive hierarchies such as class, white supremacy, capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, cis-hetero-normativity, and of course the state itself. Many anarchists

either by the workers themselves or the state, rather than by shareholders and private business interests.

Of course, it's easy to look at even that definition and realize that "factories ought to be owned by the workers" is an entirely different idea than "factories ought to be owned by the state," so obviously there are many different types of socialists. And there are many more ideas within socialism as well: in some instances, people have gone for hybrid models where, for example, a food store might be operated both by the workers and the customers—basically, everyone who is directly affected by the policies of that store.

Socialism is, fundamentally, in opposition to capitalism. Because of a hundred years of cold war and post-cold war propaganda, capitalism itself is wildly misunderstood. Capitalism is not, as it is commonly misunderstood, "an economic system in which you work for money and then use that money to buy the things that you want and need." Capitalism is better understood as "an economic system in which some people leverage their capital (the things they already own) to make money, while everyone else has to work for their money."

What socialism is fundamentally opposed to is the leveraging of capital for personal gain, not the existence of money. Some socialists desire a society with money, some don't.

That's the big broad umbrella of socialism. But over the years, what it means to say "I am a socialist" has changed several times. As all of the various leftist political labels coalesced throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, calling yourself a socialist was, in some ways, saying "I am opposed to capitalism but I am neither a communist nor an anarchist." Or more specifically, the people who were most likely to call themselves socialists were democratic socialists, who we'll get to in a bit.

Communism

Communism, then, can be understood as a more radical form of socialism. In general, communism is the word for a stateless, socialist society without any social classes or money. In a communist society, political power rests at a local level (such as in "soviets," which were originally workers councils representing the workers in various industries and locations). These various local entities would federate together to form a larger structure that can make decisions, but the power is invested in the local level.

That is roughly the communism that was described by and strived for by various communist thinkers such as Karl Marx and Peter Kropotkin. But different communists have disagreed wildly (and in the end, violently) on how to reach that society. Basically, some communists want to seize state power (aka authority) and use it to establish a socialist state, with the goal of eventually dispersing that state's power out to the various local groups. Other communists want to build power up from the ground up instead of the top-down and believe the purpose of revolution is not the seizing of centralized power but the destruction of centralized power.

The "seize the state" sorts derive their ideology from Karl Marx and are generally considered to be part of the "Marxist" tradition. The "destroy the state immediately" sorts are the anarchists, who fittingly enough don't have quite the same attachment to any specific historical person (though Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin are generally considered their ideological founders).

For decades, to call yourself a "communist" meant you desired a stateless, classless society and didn't necessarily indicate whether you believed in seizing the state or destroying it. But during the Russian revolutions of 1917, when anarchists and Bolsheviks and other leftist revolutionaries worked together to overthrow the Tsar, the Bolshevik party renamed itself the Communist Party and became the Communists (with a capital-C). Since they won the ensuing civil war, Communists controlled the USSR and the confusion (and mass murder) began.

The USSR never became a communist society—it never did away with social classes, money, or the state. Instead, it was a socialist state that claimed to be moving in the direction of communism.

So… the Communists ruled a socialist state. The USSR set up the "comintern," which controlled the highly hierarchical "Communist Parties" in countries all around the world. To identify as a communist for most of the 20th century generally meant to be a member of the Communist Party and therefore to be taking orders directly from the USSR.

It's for this reason that most socialists, whether they believed in communism or not, stopped identifying with the label communist. Well, for that reason and because the western democracies were running "red scares" in which they socially sanctioned or imprisoned or deported anyone suspected of being a communist. Not that socialists or anarchists were treated much better.

These days, you will run across people who consciously describe their politics as "little-c" communism. This is more than just a semantic difference—capital-C communism implies the association with a communist party, which are generally authoritarian, while little-c communism describes one's interest in creating a classless, stateless society.

Anarchism

Just as there are several definitions of socialism and communism, there are several definitions of anarchism. Historically, it's maybe easiest to understand anarchism as a position under the socialist umbrella I've described above. An anarchist, in this context, is a socialist who does not believe in using state power to reach socialism but instead seeks to imbue power directly into the work-