# Some Thoughts About Anti-Authoritarianism

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May 1998

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THE SPLIT WITHIN LOVE AND RAGE has been frustrating for me because I think that a lot of the discussion has failed to identify the key issues. In part, I think this comes from problems within the various political theories at work. In part, I think that it comes from our having to come to obvious conclusions and examine their consequences. Predictably, I think that the most important and glaring omission in the discussion has been a clear definition of anti-authoritarianism. In this document, I will offer a definition and will try to show how that definition clarities some questions.

## Part I: Theory: The General Belief of Anti-Authoritarianism

Ever since I became an anarchist, I have felt dissatisfied with the available theoretical basis for my politics. Anarchists set ourselves a difficult task: we need to explain what it is that links together the state, capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism and also explain why it is that we're against them.

A simplistic answer would be to say: we are against them because they are all oppression. But this is really like saying that we are against bad things and for good things. No one is for oppression. The question is how you decide what's oppression and what isn't.

It seems to me that anarchists say two general things about these "oppressions": (1) they are all hierarchies — that is, they are all systems that unequally distribute social power and resources; (2) they are illegitimate and should therefore be dismantled. Logically, to say that something is illegitimate is to say that it is not necessary and not justified. That is, there is no reason according to nature, that things must be this way, nor is there any moral or logical reason either.

So, for example, we would not say that inequality of ability between tall and short people in slam-dunking a basketball is illegitimate, since it is inevitable due to nature (the fact that heights vary). Also, most people would agree that it is legitimate to restrict people's freedom in the interests of preventing them from committing murder, since preventing murder is morally legitimate.

Once we make distinctions between hierarchies that are legitimate and those that are not legitimate, there are two obvious consequences: (1) there is no point opposing hierarchies that are necessary or justified since they cannot or should not be changed; (2) hierarchies that are illegitimate should be opposed and changed. For example, if it were really true that people of color had the mental and moral capacity of children and white people had the capacity of adults, there would be no point in arguing for racial equality. It is only because we can reject the justification that we can say that racial inequality is illegitimate. We need to give a reason for our calling inequality illegitimate and that reason can only be that we think that the inequality is neither necessary nor justified.

Now, what distinguishes anti-authoritarianism from narrower positions like anti-racism, anti-sexism, or anti-capitalism, is that anti-authoritarianism opposes all forms of social inequality as illegitimate. That is, anti-authoritarianism should be defined as the belief that all forms of social hierarchy are illegitimate because they are neither necessary nor justified.

### The Consent Exception

As we all know, any form of social organization needs rules. Rules in general are mechanisms for regulating inequality. The rules of baseball limit who may and may not run around the bases

at any given time — that is they regulate an unequal distribution of power to run around the diamond. The rules of parliamentary procedure (so dear to everyone's heart in Love and Rage) limit who has the power to speak or vote. A system of rules is a system of inequalities: that is hierarchy.

So we appear to a have contradiction: anti-authoritarians oppose hierarchy on principle, but everyone knows that hierarchy is essential to having social life work at all. The resolution to this dilemma has been to say that hierarchy is illegitimate unless it is voluntary and consensual.

Now, you don't even have to think about this very hard for it to be obvious that the question of consent is very difficult. Did the emancipated slaves consent to stay in the Reconstruction South and work as sharecroppers? There is an endless supply of such questions and they are very hard to answer. My point is not to deny such questions but to point out that they are important precisely because we think there is such a thing as consent. Thus, the definition of hierarchy as legitimate only when consensual — opens up a lot of difficult questions of interpretation and evaluation, but it is not destroyed by those questions.

So to state the revised definition in one sentence: What defines anti-authoritarianism is the belief that all forms of social hierarchy are illegitimate unless they are consensual.

## Why Anti-Authoritarianism Doesn't Make Sense (Yet)

As I've tried to show in previous writings, this simple definition of anti-authoritarianism begs one crucial question: How do we know what's legitimate and what isn't? Remember that our assertion that hierarchy is illegitimate rests on two threads: that hierarchy is not necessary due to nature; that hierarchy is not morally or logically justified.

Although it is the more common argument, I think it is pretty clear that the "not necessary due to nature" argument is actually the easy one for two reasons. First, it is subject to empirical testing. Second, it almost always ends up being based upon moral arguments anyway.

For example, an argument that differences in educational achievement between Blacks and whites are due to differences in intelligence and therefore cannot be corrected through social changes can be proven wrong through various kinds of testing and experiments. In fact, it has already been proven wrong many times. And many (most, I would argue) claims that appear to be based on nature — like prohibition on miscegenation — only make sense in moral terms. Even an apparently scientific claim like miscegenation should be prevented because it "pollutes the gene pool" falls apart when someone asks, "So what, who cares if the races mix and pure 'white or Black stock'ceases to exist?" The answer is inevitably moral: that such a thing would be wrong. But if destroying arguments for the natural necessity of hierarchy is the easy part, destroying moral arguments is the hard part.

Imagine this scenario. Three people meet: a pro-apartheid Afrikaner, a member of the Nation of Islam, and an anarchist. The Afrikaner says: The Dutch Reformed Church has said that Black people are morally inferior to white people and should be dominated by whites for their own good. The Nation of Islam person says: Elijah Mohammed, a prophet of God, has said that Black people are morally superior to whites and should view whites as demonic. The anarchist says: No one is morally superior to anyone else, and society should be based on mutual aid and respect, not domination and hatred.

Now consider these two questions: (1) On what basis will you say that any one of them is right? (2) What kind of argument will you put forward to convince the two wrong people that

they are wrong, so that they will consent to a particular social order if they hold views that are diametrically opposed to (and suppressed by) that social order?

The argument that I have put forward previously, although in slightly different terms, is that you cannot know moral systems are wrong *in a way that will be useful in convincing their adherents to change their minds.*

This presents a nearly fatal problem for anti-authoritarianism. Our politics only make sense if we can (1) know that all forms of social hierarchy are illegitimate; (2) convince everyone else to consent to a society based on our politics. But the problem I've sketched above seems to pretty clearly show that we cannot really fulfill either. Our ideas about the illegitimacy of non-consensual hierarchy are properly opinions or statements of faith, not knowledge. And we are wholly incapable of constructing arguments to convince people who currently hold opposing viewpoints that they should change their minds — not because we're stupid but because such arguments are logically impossible.

## Moral Pluralism to the Rescue

To my mind, anti-authoritarianism can only be saved from this paradox of its own ideas through one assertion: That if we don't have moral knowledge, neither does anyone else. That is, if we don't really know what's right and wrong no one else does either. And therefore, although we can't prove that defense of hierarchy is wrong, their advocates can't prove they're right.

Thus, even though we don't have moral knowledge ourselves, we do know that humanity exists in a condition of moral pluralism: There are many competing moral beliefs, but none of them can convincingly defend any particular social organization against a strongly held contrary opinion.

From that starting point, I think it is reasonable to make the following theoretical steps. First, since we have no moral or natural obligations to one another, we are morally free individuals. Second, since we recognize that living in some form of society is to our benefit, we can negotiate a social contract from our initial position of moral equality (this isn't necessarily the obvious thing for us to do, but I do think one could argue that it is the only way to start a society from the original position of isolated individualism). Third, no one starting from a position of equality would rationally accept a social structure based on inequality (since they know they wouldn't know whether they would benefit or suffer in the long run). Therefore, we can say that social inequality is illegitimate, since it cannot be shown to be necessary, cannot be justified and could not rationally be the result of consent

Note: First, this is a fast and dirty argument about very complex ideas, and I have no illusions that it is definitive. Rather, I think that I've shown two things: (1) a paradox within anti-authoritarianism; (2) a possible, coherent solution. This is not a proof, but a suggestion, Second, this is theory not strategy. By "social contract" I do not mean a worldwide town meeting at which everyone agrees and makes nice. Rather, I mean that there needs to be some generally recognized way of people consenting to form a society (hierarchy), or else we cannot guarantee our principle of rejecting non-consensual hierarchy. "Contract" is the historical way of talking about this, and I think it has some advantages (like the legal implication that it is freely entered into and that the parties are equals). Third, even once we've worked out this part of the argument — which is no mean feat — the question of what a pluralist society will look like remains to be answered. I think that anarchism and other versions of anti-authoritarianism (Liberalism) offer

the most interesting ideas about this, but we shouldn't fool ourselves about how much work remains. Fourth, for those of you who've suffered through my previous writing about this, there are two things you might be interested in. First, one mistake of my previous writing was to focus on the impossibility of proving our beliefs before establishing clearly the role of those beliefs in the first place; I've tried to get the order right this time. Secondly, my previous focus on rights is just an extension of the point of moral pluralism — my argument remains that the idea of rights only makes sense if you have perfect moral knowledge, which I have tried to show is impossible.

## Part II: Some Applied Issues

I confess that I don't have the heart to systematically respond to the various positions put forward during the debate with Love and Rage over the past few months. Instead, here I offer a few thoughts about issues that have come up and my opinion about the options open to anti-authoritarians. I hope this is helpful.

### Coercion and Consent: Building the Antechamber of Revolution

One crucial consequence of this definition of anti-authoritarianism is that it creates the well known dilemma of anti-authoritarian revolution: If we oppose all non-consensual hierarchies, that must include any that we might be tempted to set up in trying to transform society. This is the source of the anti-authoritarian critique of Marxism: "temporary," non-consensual hierarchies established in the name of liberation are as illegitimate as any others; in fact, they may be more dangerous than other hierarchies since they falsely appear to be libratory.

So how do anti-authoritarians try to transform society? I think there are three possible answers: homogeneity, non-consensual hierarchy, and consensual hierarchy. To give this discussion some flesh, I'd like to introduce what people in the New York local of Love and Rage) have called the "Bensonhurst question": after the revolution, will we force white enclaves to desegregate? The obvious dilemma is: if we don't force them to desegregate, what kind of anti-racists are we? If we do force them to desegregate, what kind of anti-authoritarians are we?

The simplistic answer, upheld in countless anarchist'zines are records, is that after the revolution there will no need for coercion or hierarchy because everyone will just get along and there will be no serious conflict. I think that no one in Love and Rage holds this position explicitly, but I think some of our politics unconsciously incorporate this (like calling in principle for the abolition of prisons). As an aside, it's worth noting that Lenin explicitly upholds this idea in State and Revolution; some other time I'll show why this utopian assumption is incredibly dangerous. At the moment, I'm going to assume that everyone in Love and Rage agrees it is unrealistic. This point of view sees the Bensonhurst question being resolved "automatically" by the stripping away of phony differences based on so-called race.

The non-consensual hierarchy solution basically prioritizes solving the wrong of racism over preserving anti-authoritarianism. There are good-faith arguments to be made about why this might be essential to human liberation, but anti-authoritarians cannot agree with them. (That is, anti-authoritarians, as a matter of principle, believe that any use of non-consensual hierarchy hinders the cause of human liberation. This crucial point also seems to have gone unsaid during the recent debates, although it is centrally important.)

Finally, there is the consensual hierarchy solution. Basically, this prioritizes anti-authoritarianism over solving the problem of racism. I think that this is analogous to the Zapatista claim that they are not trying to impose their particular politi cal values on society, but rather are trying to create "an antechamber to revolution": a political process through which Mexican society can decide its future. For anti-authoritarians, there are two key goals: (1) establishing a process of democratic polit ical decision-making and enforcement within communities; (2) establishing a method of determining what people constitute a single community and what people constitute different communities. Thus, if Bensonhurst consensually constituted a community with other people, and there were a valid democratic vote to desegregate, then yes, Bensonhurst would have to desegregate. But if Bensonhurst did not belong to a larger community, or if it did but that community failed to vote to desegregate, then no, it would not have to desegregate and we should not force it to do so.

The general point I'm trying to make here is that hierarchy and coercion themselves should not be problems for anti-authoritarians. Rather the question is whether hierarchy and coercion are legitimate. On an individual scale, that question is resolved through the issue of consent. On a community or political scale, the question is resolved through deciding who forms a single political community and who forms distinct communities. Without this distinction, we are left to choose between simplistic ideas of utter social homogeneity, or authoritarian ideas about the legitimacy of non-consensual hierarchies.

### Government and Economics

I have a number of differences with people in Love and Rage about the question of how much of a political structure we will need "after the revolution." But as long as the principle is clear — that any degree of political structure is legitimate provided it is consensual (and doesn't threaten the continued freedom of the society) and illegiti mate under any other conditions — then my differences are matters of detail. That is, it isn't the structure or extent of political organization (government) that makes or breaks anti-authoritarianism, it is the political relationship of that structure to the people affected by it.

Similarly with questions of anarchist economics. The simplistic anarchist vision of worker-controlled factories with no political oversight seems to me likely to reproduce market competition among factories. Some degree of political oversight is clearly necessary. The dividing issue is not the amount of oversight but the *political* relationship between workers in the factories and the political structure that exercises control over them.

## Conclusion

I sincerely hope that these thoughts contribute to the discussion within Love and Rage. I look forward to speaking with people about these questions further, on a per sonal level.

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From *A New World in Our Hearts: Eight Years of Writings from the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation* edited by Roy San Filippo.
Originally published in Love and Rage *Federation Bulletin,* May 1998.

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