

Anarchism: The View from Liberty

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Like libertarianism, anarchism has carved out a niche related to and intersecting with the major ideological families, yet markedly different from their most typical forms. Like libertarianism, too, anarchism straddles more than one ideological family.¹ But whereas libertarianism overlaps with some liberal and conservative stances that are similar in the ordering and salience of their formative political concepts, anarchism is a looser umbrella term that covers a cluster of concepts whose totality can be made to pull in entirely different ideological directions: towards an individualist or a socialist mode.²

It may be mistaken to lump the two schools of anarchism under one roof, or family. Despite the shared name, the actual usage of concepts under its aegis offers insufficient joint features to construct a collective family profile. True, anarchism has a common core, embracing three concepts: first—indicated in the name of this ideational cluster—antagonism to power, culminating in the desire to annihilate it (power is decontested as centralized and hierarchical and manifested above all, though not exclusively, in the state); second, a belief in liberty, decontested as spontaneous voluntarism; third, the postulation of natural human harmony.³ But the adjacent concepts each mode conjoins to the core elicit very different sets of beliefs. In the one, the isolated individual is the supreme unit of analysis; in the other, the community composed of sociable individuals. The individualist mode may result in an abstract and principled resistance to monopolies of organized power in the name of a liberty understood as forbearance from intervention in individual actions. The socialist mode will identify the state as a concrete, historical instrument of class domination, a body oppressing groups and distorting natural mutualist human relationships, that has to be superseded. The generality and ‘thinness’ of the core begs the question whether the allegiance of the two modes is not primarily to libertarianism and to the socialist family respectively.⁴ After all, both the Marxist ‘withering away of the state’ and the state of nature theme in early Lockean liberalism point to the possibility of rational communities and individuals foregoing (or almost foregoing) the need for coercion in social life.

¹ Cp. D. Miller, *Anarchism* (London, 1984), 3, who correctly argues that ‘anarchism is not really an ideology, but rather the point of intersection of several ideologies’.

² The better-known and dominant variant is socialist anarchism.

³ Although anarchism is usually classed as a radical movement (cp. A. Carter, *The Political Theory of Anarchism* (London, 1971), 57), the naturalness of the harmonious end-state has also a static and conservative appeal.

⁴ Cp. J. Jennings, ‘Anarchism’, in R. Eatwell and A. Wright (eds.), *Contemporary Political Ideologies* (London, 1993), 127.

The reason for considering anarchism in conjunction with libertarianism lies in the striking first-line position accorded to the concept of liberty in both these conceptual groupings, whereas none of the core anarchist concepts is part of the socialist core. Though socialist anarchism espoused liberty, it had to be understood—as the Russian anarchist thinker Michael Bakunin saw it—within a social context,⁵ and was hence proximate to one possible logical corollary of harmony: community. In libertarian as well as individualist anarchist theories—both containing few core concepts—personal liberty stands out as their self-styled hallmark. As with any ideology that elevates one core concept at the expense of others, the result is a simplistic world-view combined with a faith in easy remedies to social ills. These creeds gloss over the invariable complexity of ideological structure, either by ignoring the implicit multiplicity of their internal conceptual arrangements, or by using (paradoxically for freedom-fighters but typical of the political struggle over legitimating language) intellectual coercion and manipulation to exclude obvious conceptual connections.

While individualist anarchists share with liberals a high esteem for the idea of liberty, they diverge from liberals by not drawing the *limitation* of power—through distribution and accountability mechanisms designed to give effect to liberty—into their core conceptual structure. One reason for this are the adjacent conceptions of human nature to which they subscribe. Some individualist anarchists, such as William Godwin, associated an individualism decontested as self-government with a progressive rationalism that included benevolence towards others. That objective and universal rationalism⁶ ensured that self-government would be compatible with social life, and it could therefore contain an embryonic notion of community.⁷ As with liberalism, this version of anarchism paid particular heed to the individual capacity for rational self-development and self-regulation. Indeed, it overvalued them, as a consequence allowing liberty free reign, because the potential conflicts which attended its maximization had been ruled out by this quasi-utopian vision. Unlike liberalism, it was confident enough about self-development to forgo surrounding it with enabling concepts and functions designed to facilitate individuality, such as the state. But other individualist anarchists adopted a more separatist view of human nature, and the proximate conceptions of rationality mutated as well. The identification of people as egoists (hardly a liberal view of human nature) was locked into a self-serving instrumental rationality. Max Stirner, an icon of later individualist anarchists, construed egoism as the sovereignty of individual judgement—a conception of autonomy as ‘ownness’ that negated any other-imposed or self-imposed obligations and abandoned all intimations of a concept of community.⁸ But whereas he conjured up a society in a condition of nihilistic conflict that departed from anarchist core assumptions, other anarchists pursued a different conceptual route.

If neither this option nor that of rational benevolence was open, a third recourse was to be found in Spencer’s early predictions, and in that of some of his disciples such as Donisthorpe, foreseeing the redundancy of the state in the course of social evolution,⁹ thus supporting the core by means of a notion of natural social progress. A fourth version of individualist anarchism was to retain egoism but to moderate it, and account for social co-operation, through an espousal of

⁵ Cp. G. Crowder, *Classical Anarchism* (Oxford, 1991), 125–30.

⁶ *Ibid.* 11.

⁷ Cp. M. Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* (London, 1986), 1–5, 171–3.

⁸ Cp. D. Leopold, ‘Introduction’, in M. Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. xi–xxxii.

⁹ See Taylor, *Men Versus the State*, 178, 192.

market relationships.¹⁰ This was the most prevalent conceptual configuration among individualist anarchists, most of whom focused on economic as well as political concentrations of power. Liberty and individualism could be mutually decontested through the conception of equal liberty, which attacked the joint barriers of accumulated property and state centralization. As most libertarians knew, the market was a mechanism through which property and power could be dispersed as a function of self-interest, a variant developed in late nineteenth-century America—against an appropriate cultural backdrop—by publicists such as Benjamin Tucker. Instead of asserting, as did socialist anarchists, that common ownership was the key to eroding individual differences of economic power, it located that key in the equalizing mechanisms of distributing property in an undistorted, ‘natural’, market.¹¹ Morphologically, the market became the adjacent concept supplying social stability by acting as a constraint on the destructive consequences of individual egoism, and thus replaced the appeal to the harmonious potential of benevolent reason, let alone the socialist anarchist appeal to social solidarity.

¹⁰ See Miller, *Anarchism*, 30–44.

¹¹ Cp. F. H. Brooks, ‘American Individualist Anarchism; What It Was and Why It Failed’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, I (1996), 75–95.

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