

Autogenetic Horizontalism

A working definition for anarchism

Post-Comprehension

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“Anarchism is an extremely broad, *ill-defined*, and multifaceted phenomenon which spawned a vast amount of theory and campaigning *but relatively little practice, or, as the Italians say, lots of smoke but not much roast*. From early on there was *a polarization between the arch-individualism* promoted by readings of Max Stirner, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sergei Nechayev *and the communitarian politics of solidarity* advocated by Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin.” — Roger Griffin (Terrorist’s Creed: Fanatical Violence and the Human Need for Meaning) [emphasis added]

The point of using this quote from Roger Griffin (or, as Being calls him, *single-sentence British man*) is to illustrate that no matter how great of an academic scholar you are, even if your reputation has been built specifically on defining things (cough, cough), you can still get certain things wrong. Among them is defining (or, in this case, not even attempting to define) the political phenomenon of anarchism. A sticky word with its own reputation for misuse and buzzwordification, as many other political terms have a history of. So when Being heard that Zoe Baker was not only writing a book on anarchism but was also going to try and define it, Being was excited. As a nerd for semantics, Being would compare defining political terminology as similar to the culinary arts; you either get a gourmet five-star veggie burger like Roger Griffin’s ideal type for generic fascism or you’ll get a turd with two pieces of cardboard put under and over it like Umberto Eco’s list of fascist characteristics that Being mockingly refers to as an *Italian spaghetti list*. So Being was hoping for that five-star veggie burger but ended up getting a five-day-old McPlant when reading Baker’s definition of anarchism.

Don’t get Being wrong; her analysis of anarchist history and the methodologies involved are great, but this very specific but nonetheless important aspect of her analysis left Being with a bad taste in Being’s non-existent mouth. So this essay will focus exclusively on critiquing Zoe Baker’s definition of anarchism within her book *Means and Ends* and attempt to find a more useful definition of anarchism. Any debate about definitions of terms in social science like anarchism (or fascism) is going to be concerned with how heuristically useful it is for categorizing and understanding other phenomena and events around it. We can’t physically hold or examine “an anarchism”, similar to how one would hold or examine a chair or cat, given that the former is an abstract entity and the other two refer to physical phenomena. Not to say that defining what a cat or chair is somehow without its own complicated debates

Since the main focus of Zoe’s book provides a useful starting point for understanding where anarchism emerged as a mass movement and broader social phenomenon, Being won’t be critiquing her historical claims here and will focus on her definition. Being will also add that her emphasis on making anarchism a historical rather than transhistorical phenomenon is a very nice touch. Being agrees that it would be ridiculous to regard the hunter-gatherers or the many stateless peoples as inherently anarchists or “anarchistic,” as it would be faulty, anachronistic, and outright silly.

So, why is Zoe Baker’s definition of anarchism so bad as to justify an essay? Well, for starters, she defines anarchism as:

“a form of revolutionary anti-state socialism.”

The *anti-state aspect* of the definition is the most glaring to Being since it is a negative attribute that is surrounded by two positive ones, making her definition an odd hybrid of both a

positive and negative definition. (Side bar: A negative definition means to define a phenomenon by what it opposes, while a positive definition means to define a phenomenon by what it advocates.) This means Zoe is defining anarchism in part by what it is against, which doesn't reveal to us any of its properties; it simply points in the opposite direction of them. You wouldn't define water as "not the ground," and similarly, you wouldn't then define anarchism as "not fascism." It is far more useful to define anarchism by its core attributes, the concepts and beliefs the ideology cannot exist without, since doing so gives us the tools to understand where the ideology's opposition to the state comes from. Then, in understanding anarchism's anti-statism, we should start with the society it is setting forth, proposing, hoping to build, or already building. That society (world, era, epoch, galaxy, and so on) is one built around the self-direction, self-movement, and self-fulfillment of humanity (and beyond), trying to create a spatial-temporal area (or *supra-area* given anarchist's opposition to territorial borders) in which one is born (or reborn) with self-creation or at least the potential to attain the fullness of one's ability for self-creation, an autogenetic society.

Autogenesis is a far more descriptive and illuminating term, as it even runs into the **socialism aspect** of her definition. Socialism itself is built on workers' *self-management* of the means of production and, going further, building a world of free association of free producers, otherwise known as communism. Through this autogenetic component, we can draw a direct connection between these phenomena, which would explain why a large part of anarchism's history was within socialist movements. All of these terms—*anarchism*, *socialism*, and *communism*—hold autogenesis as a primary ideal within themselves; the differences then present themselves elsewhere in the area of primary ideological transportation, i.e., how do we move from *topia* (an existing place) to *utopia* (an ideal place)? So far, we can argue for anti-statism's removal from the definition and collapse it alongside socialism for autogenesis. This leads us to then discuss the final component in Baker's definition.

The **revolutionary aspect**, which can be replaced with the other half of anarchism, its prefigurative component. This is where its ideological transportation resides. Given that state socialism, liberalism, and fascism have engaged in their own revolutionary activities to create their own new orders but built on vastly different ideals between them. Baker is aware of state socialists who also want to achieve a free society as their end goal, so she's correct to say that anarchism isn't merely wanting this type of society. What's particularly strange and annoying to Being is that Baker mentions prefiguration as a major component of anarchism multiple times throughout the book but doesn't make it a part of her definition. That strangeness becomes painfully obvious given that the prefigurative methods used by anarchists are juxtaposed against the non-prefigurative methods of state socialists, showing a very direct and crucial difference between them ideologically and historically, which she brings attention to time and time again in her historical analysis. So Being was screaming internally throughout reading her book, "It's right there! Why didn't you just make it part of your definition?!"

Most notably here: "The anarchist commitment to the unity of means and ends led them to argue that working-class social movements should **establish horizontal social relations that are**, as far as is possible, **the same as those that would constitute an anarchist society**. In so doing, workers attempt **to construct the world as they wish it to be during their struggle against the world as it is**. They also create, through experimentation in the present, **the real methods of organization and association that people in the future might use to achieve the states of affairs that characterize an anarchist society**." [emphasis added]

One could (as Being will) replace the whole “revolutionary” part with “prefigurative”. Now, what kind of relationships are anarchists prefiguring? Well, the term “horizontal social relations” is also in that quote, and it would fit nicely alongside our concept of autogenesis since it explains where these relations are aimed at going, so let’s add horizontalism. Thus, we’ve set the standards for sprouting an anarchist anti-statism from within, with the state recognized as a self-replicating institution that separates humanity from their self-creation not only by its specific functions but through the army of subordinate clones it creates to dominate all parts of life, and opposed on that basis. This argument can also be used for racism, sexism, etc., as bigotries in general seek to separate a portion of individuals from their own fulfillments into subordinate positions. So there is no need to add anti-racism or anti-sexism to our definition, given that anarchists’ ideal society would naturally acquire those negative attributes.

To replace Baker’s “revolutionary anti-state socialism” definition with one that is more heuristically useful, Being proposes:

Anarchism is a political ideology and movement that, at its core, is an autogenetic form of prefigurative horizontalism.

A shortened form of this definition would then be *autogenetic horizontalism*. Now that’s one tasty and delicious veggie burger, if Being may say so. So then what remains is for us to unpack, or rather, re-unpack our (high-quality, five-star gourmet meal) ideal type of generic anarchism.

Autogenesis

The word autogenetic has the literal meaning of “self (auto)-birth (genetic).” As a political ideal, it expresses the establishment of a society in which an individual has attained the ability to self-direct toward their own development. This means that anarchism carries with it a unique and extreme expression of positive freedom because it seeks to structure society in such a way as to maximize the agency of all individuals. Similar notions of “self-direction” exist in other political ideologies, for example, liberalism’s notion of individual rights guaranteeing personal freedom under the legal protection of a liberal state. However, autogenesis is uniquely core to anarchist ideology. This means that even though liberalism has this notion of self-direction, it’s still tempered by the central notion in liberalism of trying to achieve a state that protects these freedoms as rights of the citizenry.

Autogenesis, then, in anarchism, is one that forms from within the individual and not by the rules and norms of a given society or someone else. However, some form of organization or group activity is required to create a spatial area in which such a condition of life could emerge. Every member of that society has this sense of self-ownership, therefore decentralizing the ability to affect society such that no person or group can truly claim to wield political power over others, hence creating an “anti-ocracy” to connect back to the literal meaning of the term an-archism. This positive position creates an anarchist’s range of negative positions, as it’s opposed to any system or person who tries to violate it by wielding power against another’s self-development to create a hierarchical position over them. At the same time, this does not mean anarchism is in favor of people being able to cause harm to each other or build hierarchies. Force is wielded as long as it’s perceived as dismantling hierarchical positions in favor of non-hierarchical ones. Self-

creation is not inherently anarchist in general and must be synthesized with another component to create its emergence.

Prefigurative horizontalism

A synthesis of the prefigurative struggle and the horizontal social relations to create a process (or ideological vehicle) of establishing horizontal means consistent with and evolving toward the autogenetic end that guides the anarchist movement on its temporal journey. The point of connecting means and ends in this way is to immediately create *a sense of a temporal union* between the present struggle against a world ruled by hierarchies and the desired future of a world without hierarchy. Such a union is seen as necessary to root the present anarchist movement in a common trans-temporal struggle that will maintain it against a perceived decay into the transitional verticalism exhibited in state socialism, which tries to create and use an “intermediate state” (a middle spatial-temporality) between the capitalist present and communist future. Anarchists argue that this intermediate state breaks the temporal union of the present struggle toward the communist future, a disconnection that ultimately results in the recreation of present inequalities but dressed in liberatory rhetoric and aesthetics.

Through the anarchist core comes the manifestation of organizations concerned with creating and preserving this temporal union, resulting in political methods for the enlargement of the perceived potential of realizing the ideal anarchist society and protecting it from ever-encroaching subordinating authorities. One such method is the anarchist-specific conception of “federalism,” which embodies the temporal union through collective decision-making and consensus enforced through voluntary participation in a federated form of self-organization as both a means for present organizing and an ideal for the future organization of society. The size of this ranges from small-group activities to large-scale coordination. A more specific version of anarchist federalism as a revolutionary method resides within anarcho-syndicalism, which involves these mechanisms in unionist and other labor activities. Other methods include a type of insurrectionism that hopes to cause spontaneous rebellion that results in an anarchist society through informal organizing and activities conducted through individuals or affinity groups as an alternative to the federalist approach.

In Conclusion

When these components of autogenesis, prefiguration, and horizontalism are synthesized in this specific relationship with one another, it creates an explosively radical political ideology that’s nucleus is grounded forward in building a society through the creation of an assortment of associations striving for freedom that are ever evolving, expanding, enlarging, separating, and reconnecting into fostering a level of self-creativity, free agency, and individual development unseen in all of human history. All with the drive to achieve the temporal union of autogenetic means and ends.

While Zoe Baker’s definition of anarchism as “*a form of revolutionary anti-state socialism*” came up short with its lack of specificity and clarity about the core positive attributes that drive anarchism forward, she accurately identified the closeness of anarchism to socialism, and, though not included in her definition, she correctly recognized that prefiguration is incredibly important

to anarchism. Compared to Roger Griffin's baffling lack of even an attempt at defining the ideology, instead characterizing it as "ill-defined" and "lots of smoke but not much roast", Baker's five-day-old McPlant clearly had the necessary ingredients.

The value of a well-made definition is its use as a tool for lighting up a dark path in front of you. It shouldn't be used to alter the physical markers of this path but to help someone decipher where one trail ends and another begins based on the information they've acquired. The many everyday conversations around defining concepts are unfortunately riddled with less rigor and understanding, causing many individuals to come to the conclusion to swear off and roll their eyes at the sight of definitions, even remarking on their "unimportance" or passing them off as "non-relevant niche details." No matter how much you despise the stress and headache of these verbal confrontations, we are unable to avoid having to confront them in everyday life (let alone in areas of formal academia), and so instead of stubbornly running ahead into the dark in spite of the light, one should try and embrace the potential of a good, well-made definition to light their way ahead and make things, if not easier, more comprehensible.

And don't worry, a great definition can't make things post-comprehensible, *Bazinga*.

Citations:

- Zoe Baker, *Means and Ends: The Revolutionary Practice of Anarchism in Europe and the United States*. (2023)
- Roger Griffin, *Terrorist's Creed: Fanatical Violence and the Human Need for Meaning*. (2012)

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