

What Is Anarchism?

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What Anarchism Is

Anarchism as philosophy

Anarchism derives from the philosophical premise that institutionalized power and enforcement, especially in the form of the State, is a negative method of trying to create and maintain social cohesion. The defining aspect of anarchism is a categorical rejection of the principle and practice of government. Further, anarchism entails a radical critique of the exercise of authority and power. Holding to the conviction that cooperation is a better and more just way of attaining social harmony than competition, anarchists have promoted voluntary cooperation, egalitarian relations, and mutual aid.

Anarchism as politics

In the political realm, anarchism begins from the premise that in order to be truly free, people need to dispense with government and its institutionalization in the State. The politics of representation, being hierarchical, is also considered authoritarian. Instead, anarchists promote direct action, which means any action undertaken in one's own interest without asking for permission from the State and its agents. The ultimate vision is a classless and stateless society, free from all forms of exploitation.

Anarchism as resistance

Anarchists promote self-organized alternatives to hierarchical institutions. This doesn't mean opening a collective business or starting a collective living space. It means the creation of individual and collective projects that challenge the legitimacy of government and other institutions of social control, not just projects where people have the opportunity to become accustomed to making and carrying out all the work and play decisions in their lives.

Anarchism as methodology

Critical thinking leads to theory, where life is examined with a mixture of objective and subjective analysis. Ideology, on the other hand, leads to pat answers that have been previously formulated according to particular agendas (while anarchism can easily become ossified into an ideology, the constant use of critical theory can work against that). Anarchist critical thinking provides a challenge to conformity and mediocrity in social and political relations. This challenge enhances the place of the individual in relation to the collective.

Anarchist Principles

Every political philosophy contains a set of principles. These are perspectives and practices that are not negotiable; they are the foundational definitions that make the philosophy distinct from others. Anarchist principles are derived from the premises and theories of anarchism, as well as the methodology of critical thinking, and they reinforce each other. The principles that come out of anarchist theory are the following:

Direct Action

This term has become twisted and misused by various political activists in the past 30 years. In its original anarchist meaning, the term refers to any action undertaken without the permission, and outside the interest of, governmental institutions. It can refer to volunteering with Food Not Bombs, going on strike (especially without the approval of a union), shoplifting, or setting up a micro-powered radio station. It doesn't mean engaging in civil disobedience in cooperation with the police; it doesn't mean breaking the law or breaking a window if the intention is merely to register public disapproval of some governmental policy. Breaking things can be examples of direct action—but the intention behind these acts are what is important, not the acts themselves. Direct action has nothing to do with pressuring any part of a government to alter a policy; it is by definition anti-statist. Attempting to alter a government policy is called lobbying; it is aimed at representatives, and so cannot be direct action. Presenting a list of demands or protesting a particular policy, in the hopes of getting noticed by the state (whose rulers will then somehow change something about the way it operates), is never direct action, even if the means used to pressure legislators are illegal. Direct action is when we do things for ourselves, without begging, asking, or demanding that someone in authority help us.

Voluntary Cooperation

Anarchists believe that cooperation is more beneficial than competition. Further, we believe that cooperation, in order to be authentic, must be voluntary. Guidelines and cultural norms are agreed upon and adhered to by the individuals who are interested in creating and maintaining them, and there are no coercive institutions to enforce them. Voluntary cooperation includes voluntary association. Each individual retains the choice to join or not to join any particular association of people; and the people in any association reserve for themselves the ability to ask another individual to join them, or to refuse her/him admittance.

Mutual Aid

There are perhaps as many misunderstandings concerning mutual aid as there are about direct action. Mutual aid doesn't mean automatic solidarity with whoever asks for it, nor does it mean that anarchists have an obligation to enter into relationships with other oppositional forces. It doesn't mean a tit-for-tat arrangement; rather it means to be able to give freely and take freely: from each according to her/his ability, to each according to her/his need. Mutual aid is only possible between and among equals (which means among friends and trusted long-term allies). Solidarity, on the other hand (since it is offered to and asked for by ad hoc allies), needs to include the reality of reciprocation; otherwise it is nothing but charity.

Critical Thinking as Anarchist Methodology

It is important to look at how critical thinking operates in terms of developing a course of action in the real world. The crucial components to critical thought are the following:

Critique

We notice that there is injustice and suffering in the world, and so we ask the question, “What’s wrong?” We look at the mechanisms, institutions, and social dynamics that create and perpetuate injustice, and analyze them thoroughly, down to their root causes—hence the term radical. For example, there is violence in the world. We need to examine what we mean when we use the term and what other people mean when they use it; an anarchist definition will probably be different than that of a statist. We need to figure out why that is. Next we need to try to discover the main causes of violence, and who benefits from its continued existence.

Analysis

We try to understand how a particular injustice is created and perpetuated, and why it’s wrong. We study, discuss, and interpret the relevant facts and history of the problem, and begin to formulate a reasonable solution based on those facts. Using the example of violence, we develop our analysis by tracing its widespread practice by the various institutions that exist in the US, and what they have in common with other formal and informal institutions around the world. We will probably discover that, as the world has become more dominated by industrial capitalism, it has become increasingly more violent. A possible solution to the continued existence of violence, therefore, might begin with the idea of abolishing industrial capitalism.

Strategy

We devise a set of goals for how we want to change the situation into one that fits our principles and analyses. This is where our overall vision is based. We try to figure out how to implement our ideas practically. A major goal of an anarchist strategy is to undermine people’s belief in the legitimacy of the State, to make it possible for all people to gain confidence in retaking control of all aspects of our lives. Is one of the goals of anarchism to create a world where violence is minimized, or to create a world completely without violence? This will depend on how we define violence with our critique and analysis.

Tactics

We come up with actions that are compatible with our strategy. The main question to ask is “What methods/tools can be used to achieve the goal?” The answer is whatever helps to make the goal(s) a reality; whatever is expedient at the moment depending on who’s involved and what exactly we are trying to accomplish. Of course our tactics must be in keeping with our principles. But it is important to remember that tactics are not the same thing as principles. Non-violence is not an anarchist principle; it is a tactic. Depending on the situation, we decide when it’s convenient—or not—to adhere to non-violent guidelines. At times we may decide that it makes more sense to fight back with force. Morality plays no part in deciding upon which tactics to use in a given situation—it only matters what is compatible with our strategy and principles.

What Anarchism Is Not

Anarchism is not extreme Liberalism

Liberalism is based on the theory of the Social Contract, where citizens give up full liberty in exchange for political and economic security. This security is supposed to be provided by the State, which regulates, mediates, and enforces the Social Contract. More generically, Liberalism can be equated with Republicanism, which stands for the rule of law. The liberal wing pays lip service to rule of the people, while the conservative wing is more honest in wanting rule of some people. The principles of Liberalism include majority rule, various civil liberties like free speech, tolerance, and equality before the law, as well as free enterprise and private property. These principles are legislated and guaranteed by the State, which is seen as the same thing as the People. Liberals who are unsatisfied with certain policies and wish to remedy them use tactics that are compatible with liberalism: petition and demonstration. Liberals believe that whatever injustices exist within the Social Contract can be fixed by electing better or wiser legislative representatives who will enact better laws to be enforced by better cops.

Anarchism is not extreme Social Democracy

The realm of Social Democracy is not really that much different than that of Liberalism; the main aspect that has differentiated the two used to be a commitment to socialism (meaning “social” ownership of property, but really meaning state ownership) instead of capitalism (private ownership). Since the mid-’60s, however, almost all social democrats have abandoned this commitment in favor of what they call a mixed economy. Social Democrats also consider that they are carrying out the will of the people through the State, only the Social Democratic State has even more regulatory power than the classical Liberal State. Social Democrats are committed to the tactics of peaceful and legal changes within a parliamentary State; like Liberals, they see the solutions to injustice coming from the election of better and wiser representatives.

Anarchism is not extreme Leninism

In the economic sphere, Leninism is the most extreme form of Social Democracy, while in the political sphere, it more closely resembles conservative Republicanism. Leninists don’t waste time with any sort of private ownership; the State owns and controls all production (and most other realms of social activity). The principle of Democratic Centralism limits the number of people who have decision-making power to a small group. The various derivatives of Leninism (from the infinite varieties of trotskyism through stalinism and maoism) all have as a goal a strong centralized and bureaucratic State. The goals of Leninism are the expropriation of private property, the seizing of State power, and the eventual global triumph of their ideology. Tactically, Leninists don’t care if their methods are compassionate or nasty. Leninists want to win, and that’s all that counts; anyone who stands in their way is an enemy and deserves no mercy. All Leninist parties and governments have a record of brutality and repression against perceived enemies – especially anarchists.

Anarchism is not any form of Statism

What all these different forms of Republicanism have in common is a belief that the State can and must control its citizens. The Leftist trajectory from Liberalism, through Social Democracy, and up to Leninism is a continuum of increasingly intrusive government. The principles of these forms of Statism vary only slightly, and all of them have much more in common with each other than anarchism has with any one of them. Leftists rely upon legislation and representation; anarchists, adhering to the principle of direct action, are the objective opponents of Liberalism, Social Democracy, and Leninism – and the Leftists know it. If anarchists forget (or worse, don't even know) what their principles are, it's all too easy for us to get sucked into manipulative alliances in which these principles play absolutely no part. Without knowing and using anarchist principles, we can't recognize authentically anarchist tactics or methods, so that when non-anarchists adopt anarchistic methods (like affinity groups and spokescouncils), many anarchists become confused. They think that the liberals or socialists have transformed themselves into quasi-anarchists because of the use of familiar tools. But Leftists use these tactics because they function well, not because the Leftists have suddenly become promoters of anti-statism. Anarchists, being history's most consistent losers, need to approach non-anarchist oppositionists with suspicion, not solidarity; we need to look beyond form, refusing to be hoodwinked by familiar-looking tactics. Anarchists need to know, remember, and maintain anarchist principles. From that position of strength, we can then decide when – or whether – to enter into short-term alliances with those who'd rather see us disappear.

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