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A Comment on... What is Anarchism?

Wayne Price

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Recently I was contacted by someone who identified himself as a U.S. journalist, writing about the anarchist movement in Thessaloniki, Greece. He asked me to help him to understand the underlying philosophy and program of anarchism. (I certainly could not have helped him on Thessaloniki, about which I know nothing.) He wrote me:

Here are a couple basic questions:

- *If you had to describe anarchism to someone who didn't know about it, how would you describe it?*
- *What is the goal of anarchism? The methods for achieving that goal?*
- *How do most anarchists define themselves? (I understand this is a generalization)*
- *Are there divisions within anarchism? If so, what are they? Do these groups act in solidarity or in opposition to one another?*

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- *Do you think there are a lot of misconceptions about anarchism?*
- *What's the historical context behind anarchism?*
- *Why do you think more people are flocking to it today, in countries like Greece? What would you say is the appeal of this kind of movement?*

This was my response (briefly covering the essentials, not everything):

There are many misconceptions about anarchism. Many people think that anarchists want society just as it is, but without police. Others think that anarchists are for senseless violence and destruction (“anarchy” meaning “chaos”); they do not know that many anarchists are absolute pacifists. For such reasons, anarchists have sometimes used alternate terms, such as “libertarian socialists” or “anti-authoritarian socialists.”

While there are various interpretations of anarchism, I would describe it as a social movement whose goal is freedom in society. It aims to end capitalism, the state, and all other forms of exploitation and oppression (landlordism, sexism-patriarchy, racism, homophobia, domination of weaker nations, war, exploitation/destruction of the ecological world, etc.) By the “state,” I do not mean all forms of social coordination or decision-making, but the specific bureaucratic-military alienated social machine, with specialized layers of armed people, which stands separate from and above the rest of society.

Positively, by “anarchy” I mean a society of freely associated humans, organized in voluntary organizations and communities, to carry out all social tasks in freedom. Decentralized, directly democratic, face-to-face work place councils and neighborhood assemblies would manage their own affairs as much as possible, while forming federations and networks on regional, national, continental, and world levels. This is not

a state, but the self-organization of the people. The economy would be a federation of self-managing industries, consumer coops, small enterprises, and collective communes. So long as violence is still necessary for communal self-defense, the police and military would be replaced by an armed and democratically organized people (a popular militia).

To achieve these goals, anarchists have proposed various strategies. Anarchists reject the use of the state as an instrument to change society. The state has always served ruling minorities and can do nothing else. While not necessarily opposing all demands on the state, anarchists neither form parties to run in elections (reformism) nor try to overthrow the state and create a new state (Leninism).

Some anarchists believe that they can reach a free society by gradually building up alternate institutions, geared neither to profit nor power. By incremental stages, these cooperatives, organic farms, bike shops, and other forms of rational, peaceful, living will eventually overtake the state and capitalism. Others (such as myself) are not against such alternate institutions, but do not regard them as a strategy. These revolutionary anarchists do not believe that the capitalist class with its state and other institutions would peacefully and legally permit the people to change from capitalism to anarchist socialism—even when the big majority wished to make the change. Therefore they think in terms of a social revolution to overturn and dismantle the state and capitalism (how violent or nonviolent depends a great deal on the extent of capitalist resistance to a democratic change).

Revolutionary anarchists tend to be divided. Some see themselves as carrying out the revolution themselves by their own militant and violent actions (called “insurrectionists”). Others focus on building mass struggles of workers and other oppressed people, aiming to create a large-scale rebellion (“class-struggle anarchists”). There are various other issues, theoretical, tactical, and strategic on which anarchists differ.

People are flocking to anarchism today because the Left of state socialism (reformist or Leninist) has failed so badly. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the changes in China have discredited Marxism to a great degree, while the reformist social democracy has given up any vision of a new society. But the existing system has not gotten better. Rather it is shaking apart, unable to deal with its economic, political, and ecological world crises. Therefore a new generation has turned to anarchism as an alternate, even more radical, hope for a better world.