

AN OVERVIEW OF INDIVIDUALIST ANARCHIST THOUGHT

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Introduction

Anarchists all hold two principles in common: the rejection of involuntary social organizations and structures and the advocacy of individual freedom of thought and action. But they have always differed among themselves on many issues, especially on economic questions and ways of arriving at the new society. Various libertarians advocate any number of alternative modes of ownership of property, ways of managing enterprises, methods of achieving social change, and processes for making decisions. This diversity of thought has led to a number of distinct branches within the anarchist movement.

The predominant tendency among libertarians is that of the social revolutionaries. They are generally either anarchist communists, who believe everything should be owned in common and that all decisions should be made collectively and democratically, or anarchists syndicalists who envision a world based on labor unions and democratically controlled work places, with planning and decision-making taking place in various committees and councils. These social anarchists reject individual private property and believe that individuals' needs and desires are best realized through groups, collectives, and communities.

At the opposite end of the anarchist spectrum are the anarchist capitalists, who envision a form of capitalism without the state, which would bear little resemblance to the economic system which goes by the same name today. They argue that the inequities associated with capitalism are not the result of profit, interest, rent and other unearned wealth, but are caused by the government's favoring of some corporations at the expense of others by means of corporate welfare and legal restrictions on competition and access to credit. They believe that with the abolition of government everyone would have the ability to form their own capitalist enterprise should they so choose and that competition and a real free market would enrich virtually everyone and eliminate poverty.

The Individualists

There is, however, another group within the anarchist movement that rejects both communal and capitalist economic arrangements. These are the individualists, who originated in the United States in the 1800s. From the 1820s to the 1860s, Josiah Warren and vari-

ous associates engaged in a number of economic and social projects based on the concepts that cost should be the limit of price, and that profit, interest, and rent are forms of theft that exist only because of government promotion and protection. These endeavors ranged from a 'Time Store' in Cincinnati to intentional communities in various places, including the anarchist village of Modern Times on Long Island. While all of these enterprises were considered at least limited successes by their participants, demonstrating the viability of the anarchist individualist idea, none of them were long-lived.

While the experimental phase of the individualist movement ended with the demise of Modern Times, a number of individualists continued to agitate for social change through such publications as *The Word* and *Liberty*, and organizations including the New England Labor Reform League, and the Boston Anarchists' Club. This movement faded out when *Liberty* ceased publication in 1908 and its editor, Benjamin Tucker, left the United States. While there were individualist writers, movements, and groups in France, Italy, Russia, and Germany, the American movement was by far the largest and most influential.

These organizations and publications were 'rediscovered' in the 1960s and 1970s, with both capitalist and some non-capitalist anarchists tracing the origins of their modern movements to the old American libertarian individualists. The anarchist capitalists, however, reject a key part of the thought of the individualists, that wealth is created by individual labor and that rent, interest, and profit are ways to steal this wealth from its rightful owners. Their support for capitalist economic forms puts them outside the tradition of these staunchly anticapitalist anarchists.

What Anarchist Individualists Believe

Anarchist individualists argue that the initiation of force is always unjust, and that groups of people are entitled to no more freedom of action than are individuals. Activities that are unacceptable when engaged in by one person do not become tolerable when they are engaged in by a group of people, even if that group constitutes itself as a government. If it is wrong for my neighbor to steal from me or reduce me to slavery, it is just as wrong for the state to do so in the form of taxation, the military draft, or compulsory education. Governments of all sorts are based on force, robbery,

and the mandatory compliance of their subjects with the laws and regulations of the rulers.

Like all other anarchists, individualists think the way to maximize human freedom and happiness is to abolish the state and all other involuntary relationships, organizations, and institutions. They believe that all people should be free to choose with whom they associate, what kind of work they do, how they dispose of the products of their labor, where they live, and what kinds of recreation in which they engage. The only limit on someone's freedom of action should be the equal freedom of others to live their lives unmolested. In other words, the area in which someone may freely swing their arm ends where the nose of another person begins.

Where individualists differ most from other anarchists is in the area of economics. Unlike communist anarchists, individualists advocate the private ownership of property and individual retention of the products of one's labor. This means the *whole* product of one's labor. Individualists reject profit as an unjust theft of the product of the labor of another, and therefore have as little in common with capitalists as they have with socialists.

Individualists support tenure of land based on use and occupancy and believe rent is simply another form of profit-taking by the unproductive. People should have title only to the amount of land they can use and work themselves, but would be free to pool their resources in order to engage in larger scale operations for the sake of efficiency and greater productivity. The parties to such cooperative arrangements would still be entitled to the full product of their labor, thus generating no profit.

Because the government's monopoly on the issuance of legal tender and chartering of banks artificially restricts the supply of money and increases the cost while decreasing the availability of credit, individualists advocate an entirely new banking and currency system. Mutual banks or other credit institutions would be free to issue their own forms of money and would compete among themselves for customers, thus driving down the costs of obtaining credit to the those associated with the bank's operating expenses and the salaries of the bank workers. Members of such institutions would thus be able to obtain credit without having to repay loans at the crippling interest rates now current. Interest, like rent and profit would no longer exist, as free people with real choices would not be required to pay tribute to those who now control the money supply.

Social Relations in an Individualist Community

Individualists maintain that people should be free to

associate with whomever they choose and avoid whatever interactions and institutions they prefer to keep clear of. While collectively-oriented anarchists envision participatory democracy and representative committees of various sorts as key parts of their libertarian societies, individualists tend to foresee few permanent 'public' institutions and bodies. People would come together on an *ad hoc* basis to solve specific problems or deal with certain projects, and then separate again to go about their independent lives. Individualists see no need for committees, councils, or other standing bodies to oversee the day-to-day relationships of people. The spontaneous order generated by the social and economic interactions of free individuals would produce all the structure necessary to sustain community life.

Contracts between individuals, whether explicit or simply understood, would play a key part in interpersonal relations. Unlike governmental 'social contracts', constitutions and laws which purport to bind people who have not, in fact, consented to be governed, individuals in a stateless world would have to spell out for each other their expectations in all social and economic interactions. New social norms would have to be constantly negotiated and renegotiated as people and their desires change. While this may seem cumbersome compared to the relative ease of going along with received social rules and customs, the vastly increased freedom of action which individuals would attain would more than compensate for the inconvenience of having to make up our own minds about things.

Individuals and voluntary groups would produce whatever products people wish to acquire and exchange would take place in an unrestricted marketplace, where true free competition would keep prices down to the level of the actual cost of production. The regulations and licensing schemes that now restrict the supply and increase the costs of certain kinds of products and services would be done away with resulting in increased access to many services and products, like health care and drugs, that are scarce and expensive now primarily as a result of government meddling.

As with everything else in a society without government, individuals would have to make their own provisions for self-defense and the security of themselves and their property. While people in a freer society with less social and economic inequality would likely encounter less crime and violence, interpersonal nastiness would surely still exist. People would be free to protect themselves with whatever weapons they choose when the governments and laws that attempt to disarm the populace are done away with. They would also have the option of forming voluntary groups for joint self-defense or purchasing defense services from others willing to provide them for a fee.

All of the new freedoms experienced with the abolition of the state would also entail new risks for individuals. An unregulated health care market would allow anyone to offer themselves up as a healer, the elimination of gun laws would increase the supply of lethal weapons, and potentially dangerous drugs would be freely available. Without the supposed safety net of government rules and regulations and state welfare programs, we would all have only ourselves and our chosen associates to rely on to keep out of harm's way and deal with the consequences of our mistakes and misjudgments. People would have to take it upon themselves to become informed as individuals about products, services, and other people, and try to make wise decisions in dealing with their new-found freedoms. Freedom is a risky business, but its benefits far outweigh the risks.

How to Get There from Here

Means and ends are inextricably connected for the anarchist individualist. Thus, it is important to choose methods of pursuing social change that do not conflict with libertarian values and do not violate the freedoms of others. While individualists often see themselves as abolitionists, in that they advocate the immediate abolition of all government and laws and welcome any diminution in the power of the state, they recognize that social change in a libertarian direction will come about gradually.

While some individualists are pacifists, rejecting any form of violence, others support individuals' freedom to defend themselves against aggression using force if necessary. While condoning such force in self-defense, however, libertarians oppose any initiation of violence and advocate the use of non-violent direct action as the primary method of changing society and abolishing government.

Viewing capitalist economic relations as forms of legal theft, individualists support workers who occupy their workplaces and continue to run the operations as worker-owned and run cooperatives, including farm-workers who take over and cultivate tracts of land currently held by profit-making corporations. But, in addition to such direct confrontation with state-supported economic institutions, anarchists advocate setting up alternative organizations and cooperatives to take the place of and/or compete with conventional businesses. Ranging from worker-initiated and run small enterprises to intentional communities to local currencies, such endeavors can substitute, at least for their participants, a libertarian arrangement for some of the most exploitative relationships in the mainstream economy, as well as provide an example to others of the possibilities available to self-directed individuals and groups.

As for abolishing political institutions, the individualist anarchist approach is to encourage people to withdraw their support for the state whenever and wherever possible, eventually forcing the state out of business by starving it of money, personnel, and deference. Tax avoidance/evasion, draft resistance, refusal to vote, public denunciation of government war-making and international meddling, withdrawal from government schools, and circumvention of state rules and regulations all help weaken and lessen respect for government power. As in the case of the economy, it is also important to set up alternatives to state-provided 'services' that many have come to depend on. Homeschooling networks, private charitable hospitals and clinics, and food pantries and shelters on the model of those run by groups like the anarchist Catholic Workers can take the place of government-provided miseducation, illness care, and homeless 'services'. These alternative efforts instead offer a humane, respectful, and caring substitute model for the hierarchical, invasive, and judgemental way in which governments herd and warehouse their young, infirm, and unlucky subjects.

Besides supporting and participating in alternatives to capitalism and the state, libertarians need to publicize their efforts, explain the individualist outlook and approaches to others, and continuously point out the shortcomings and evils of the political, economic and social institutions to which we are all subject. This requires the use of all communication methods available, including print and broadcast media; public demonstrations, lectures, and discussions; and the internet. Unless other people become aware there are alternatives to the current set-up, and come to see change in the direction of liberty as desirable, there is no way an anarchist society will ever come about.

The individualist anarchist methods of promoting social change discussed above will not bring about a new world quickly and will require a great effort on the part of individualists. But they are the only means by which such change can be accomplished without compromising anarchist principles and endangering the lives and freedoms of others. And the protection of life and the promotion of liberty are the whole point of the anarchist individualist project.

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