

Anarchism Throughout History and Whether Anarchism is Radical

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With the diverse historical vernacular throughout the centuries of humans' existence, the terms used to describe anarchy have many variations. But the very concept of anarchy has been present since the dawn of man. Anarchism is the absolute expression of individualism, and the rejection of institutions that are put into place that try to coerce citizens. However, it was during the Industrial Revolution, when wealth disparity, in combination with an increased centralized state, that political thinkers that we regard as the earliest established anarchists developed their ideas that would eventually become the foundation of anarchism as we understand it.

Anarchism is often passed over in the common political discourse of modern developed societies, yet there is a certain degree of unspoken strength that anarchism has within the masses. As absurd of an example as it may be, when United States citizens are stuck standing in line at the DMV for hours, one could argue that anarchist thoughts began to arise. It is in these moments that people began to question what exactly it is that the government is doing to serve them as a citizen. Of course, these questions only come to creation when we feel as though our government is working inefficiently toward our favors, as in the case with the line at the DMV. However, these thoughts arise nonetheless, and even the faintest sparks of conviction in what we regard as unconventional ideology is worth analyzing.

An interesting thing about the idea of anarchism is that it transcends a classification of analysis. Simply put, a political realist would explain that the international relations system is anarchical, with no power residing over it. Whereas a political philosopher would analyze anarchy as the innate desire within

humans to have no outside power residing over their decisions made in life. As is true with any political ideology, there are countless sects that branch from the main ideology, and such is the case with anarchism. If one were to read about different styles or forms of anarchism, they would find an endless supply of political theorists developing their own types, some of which coincide or disagree with other theorists works. For the sake of this analysis, we will look solely at how anarchism differs on each side of the ideological spectrum, using Leon P. Baradat and John A. Phillips work *Political Ideologies, Their Origins and Impact* as the main point of reference. Likewise, there are common means that anarchists have used throughout history to try to achieve their ends, and some of these means are still employed by modern anarchist groups.

Anarchists that reside on the far left of the political spectrum, referred to as social anarchists, believe that government control limits the capabilities that people can contribute to society, and therefore, government must be eliminated. Social anarchism believes that government best serves the elites of society who, with their positions of power, create laws and political rules that serve only the elites, but laws that are nonetheless still expected to be obeyed by citizens. This unjust treatment of the citizens, it is believed by social anarchists, limits the people's opportunity to optimize their contribution to society. By promoting the advancement of the community, social anarchists believe that a society improves collectively when the restraints of coercive government are lifted. From this, most social anarchists would promote regional communities or societies, in which humans serve said communities with the optimized skills that they have developed without government trying to oppress their abilities. Social anarchism is perhaps the most well-known form of anarchism, due in large to the fact that many of the earliest anarchist writers were social anarchists, and

their work is often regarded as the basis of anarchism as we understand it.

Anarchists on the far right of the ideological spectrum, called individualist anarchists, have a set of beliefs that center around the notion that all people are driven by their own self interests. In individualist anarchism, it is believed that people's emphasis on self-interest creates a vacuum of Social Darwinism, where the society will best improve by the surviving of the most apt people. Individualist anarchism also “resists government policies such as minimum wage laws, welfare programs, affirmative action policies, and progressive income taxes, arguing that these policies protect the weak at expense of the strong” (2020). Programs, and most notably social welfare programs, are perceived by individualist anarchists as crutches that allow the weak to survive.

As forementioned, many of the earliest anarchists we regard as social anarchists because it was their angst towards their oppressive governments and societal elitists that promoted economic disparity that they most abhorred. The scholars and thinkers were most driven against the coercive forces of big business and government, rather than the idea of individual competition. Dissimilar are individualist anarchists, whose self-interests are such a focus of human success, that they would look at their peers as oppressors of their full capabilities as well, rather than people capable of promoting the community.

It is true that both social and individualist anarchists wish to disestablish the standing government in their given society. However, there are two crucial differences that one must recognize when looking at anarchism as an ideology on each side of the spectrum. The first being how both social and individualist anarchists feel government serves or disserves the current society. As previously mentioned, social anarchists feel as though elitists enforce laws and norms that oppress the masses, whereas individual anarchists feel that government

acts as a crutch that allows the societies weak to survive. Where one perceives government as an impediment on the capabilities of people, the other perceives government as a support system for people who aren't fit to maintain survival in the world.

The other important difference between both the far left and far right of anarchism is in the fundamental idea of what it is believed people desire for themselves. A social anarchist would argue that by having skills optimized, people will involuntarily be willing to serve the community that they live within for the betterment of the entire society. Individual anarchists are always self-driven, and self-interest is the absolute pinnacle of motivation. These differences not only alter how each anarchist views the world around them, but it could also alter the means through which they would attempt to achieve freedom from any coercive government.

Before recognizing the common means that anarchists believe to be the most apt in achieving their ideal society, it is important to note that either the social or individual anarchist can partake in any of the means mentioned below. Later in this paper, the militaristic nature of modern individual anarchism in the United States will be discussed. However, both the left and right anarchic ideologies have ideological participants that would use any strategies necessary to succeed in achieving their goal.

To achieve the ideal society, one that disestablishes the standing government and allows people to live without oppression, certain anarchists would emphasize using pacifism. Pacifism is the belief that nonviolent means are the most successful in achieving the end result anarchists seek. One man who emphasized the use of pacifism was Russian noble Leo Tolstoy who, after witnessing the harsh mistreatment of Russian peasants by the state, developed his ideals of anarchism across his wide array of writings. Tolstoy denounced the churches treatment of the peasants and

believed that the church manipulated the bible by telling the peasants to simply endure their hardships. However, Tolstoy remained a devout Christian, and a lot his ideas were centered around his conviction in God. Tolstoy is credited with developing a doctrine of passive resistance that would eventually be used by both anarchists and other individuals seeking change in their given societies. Beyond anarchists, other individuals seeking change in their society learned from Tolstoy's pacifist messages. One of these individuals was Mahatma Gandhi, who used pacifism in his fight for Indian independence, and in doing so, "demonstrated dramatically the immortality of using force" (2020). It's worth mentioning that although pacifism would imply no use of violence or force in working towards achieving autonomy from government, that is not to say that there is a lack of motivation in using pacifism, but rather, pacifists perceive their strategies as the most necessary to achieve their goals.

Pacifism has a certain objectivity to it that makes it stray from the other possible avenue of means: revolution. Pacifists make a conscious choice not to employ violence; no matter how aggressive the protest tactics may become, there is still zero violence being used by a pacifist. Revolutionary anarchists believe that any means that are necessary to achieve what they wish to achieve can be used, including violence. An example of the changes in revolutionary strategies could be expressed by Russian aristocrat Mikhail Bakunin, who advocated "terrorism and destruction. Bakunin contended that a successful revolution would come about by arming the underworld of a society—its vagabonds, pimps, thieves, murderers—the lumpenproletariat" (2020). This should not be confused with somebody such as Karl Marx, although not an anarchist, who called for his communist revolution to be enacted by the hardworking and honest proletariat working class who had been subject to economic disparity at the hands of societal elites. When looking at the past, and more

specifically past revolutions, through a historical lens, we fall victim to examining the events objectively and placing similar labels on historical figures that are far from similar. Sure, Marx's proletariat and Bakunin's lumpenproletariat are both revolutionist groups. However, their hypothetical means through which they would employ their tactics would be drastically different.

The question of whether anarchism as an ideology is radical rests mainly in the intent and beliefs of each individual anarchist. The idea of radicalism is dependent on individuals seeking "immediate, profound, and progressive change in the existing order" (2020). So, if we are to follow this understanding of radicalism to its absolute core, anarchism has the potential to be a radical ideology. The difference between a radical anarchist and another anarchist would be distinguishable by the means through which each anarchist would try to achieve their "perfect world" of sorts, or one where anarchism succeeds. What is meant by this is that an anarchist, residing on either the left or right of the ideological spectrum, who seeks global change, but understands the impediments that would inhibit the possibility of such change anytime soon, is not radical. The earliest anarchists were observational scholars, who studied their societies and developed ideas about the ideal society in which no government existed. Because the earliest works were more theoretical than practical, many of them didn't write about the actual means through which they wanted to succeed in their goals. So, anarchist scholars who devote their lives to writing about the core foundations of anarchism aren't radical. However, an anarchist who is seeking immediate change, and is partaking in the necessary means to achieve that change, whether it be through pacifism or revolution, is radical.

There is no "off switch" that anarchists can simply turn off. Throughout this discussion, the objection to national government was most closely examined. However, anarchists'

disdain for the current society that they live in rarely end at the standing government. If someone is extreme enough in their thinking to wish for the destruction of their nation's government, then they are certainly more likely to oppose other facets of society such as (but not limited to) religion, family environment, and social institutions. So, it seems fair to say that people such as this are never going to be entirely content with whatever world is developed from the existing one. And if by chance they are, then there will be a new “crop” of anarchists in the new society, willing to take the helm of opposing the norms that exist in the newly created anarchical world.

Likewise, it would seem almost paradoxical to have an anarchist organization try to disestablish the government, because such an organization would require hierarchy and rule following to some extent, which is the very idea that anarchism abhors. Russian revolutionary and nihilist Sergei Nechayev, a protégé of Bakunin, greatly expressed the behavior that many anarchists would most likely involve themselves with, if required to partake in a movement with a group. Nechayev “schemed and plotted unscrupulously. Devoted to only one idea, the destruction of the state, he lied, cheated, and even murdered his own co-conspirators” (2020). Although this scenario sounds like the intro to some tacky bar joke, imagine 20 anarchists sitting in a room together, trying to plot the disestablishment of their government. There is too much room for debate amongst anarchists. Establishing what facets of society are to be disestablished, the means of success, and what exactly is desired upon success make it difficult for anarchism to be a viable ideology in the relative future.

As humans, we are constantly in search of a certain identity that defines who we are. Even without a state residing over people, people will always live their lives by a set of unconscious laws that they obey, and they involuntarily even

expect others to obey. In this is another example of why anarchism wouldn't be a viable outcome in the near future. If people are always going to have their own set of rules that drive their own decisions, then humans are never entirely capable of separating themselves from what they perceive as law and order. Simply put, no matter how many institutions/governmental ordeals the anarchists try to remove from a society, there will always be underlying systems that drive the decisions of humans. These underlying decisions differentiate their moral rights from their moral wrongs.

At times, people today feel as though they're in a pressure cooker of politics, steadily reaching its boiling point and being fueled by the polarization that we face as a country. The Capitol riots that took place on January 6, 2021 were a case that has left the country picking up the pieces. What exactly caused us to reach this point? Many are quick to place it on the 2016 election. However, lack of trust in government has been on the rise far longer than we may expect. In her work *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*, Elizabeth A. Thesis-Morse writes, "certain contextual factors lead to upticks in trust, but the overall message is the dramatic drop in political trust over the past fifty years. By the 2016 election, the level of trust had dropped to the lowest level ever recorded by the ANES survey" (2018). Part of Trump's campaign, which he further emphasized while in office, was a message that emphasized a lack of trust that citizens should have in both politicians and overall government. Of course, Trump wasn't the first member of the two main parties to take the approach of "cleaning out the gutters" of our government. However, never before has a political outsider with such notoriety placed himself at the head of one of the two main parties in such a manner as Trump did.

Following the events at the Capitol, media outlets were quick to group the mass of people at the Capitol as

supporters of President Donald Trump. While many of them were in fact there in support of President Trump, it seems that it was the people's lack of trust in government more than anything else that drove them to behave the way they did. As is forementioned, the sheer possibility of anarchism having a potential future in the United States seems unlikely. However, when a mass group expresses an extreme lack of trust in government, and expresses feelings that the voting process is corrupted, this can lead people to lose conviction in everything that their government stands for.

When observing an event such as the Capitol riot, it is dangerous to simply label every individual person that was involved as ideologically minded. Political ideologies are so widely esoteric that the only thing uniting a lot of the people that day was their allegiance to the narrative their president was cheated out of his position. In a *New York Times* article written by Katrin Bennhold and Michael Schwartz, the authors label the insurrectionists as “apocalyptically minded and far right” (2021). Of course, when relaying the news to the public, journalists must sometimes cast journalistic nets that try to aptly explain situations in a manner that is still consumable by the public. Yes, many of the people that were at the Capitol building were far right, but can we argue that they were anarchic?

In this we discover the difficulties of trying to understand anarchism as an ideology, especially when trying to apply it to people. If we are to hypothetically explain that the people at the Capitol were anarchists, and we believe that many of the people were far right, then it should hold true that they were individualist anarchists. However, their lack of trust in the political systems, and more specifically the presidential election, seems more socially anarchic in nature.

The concept of anarchism often carries with it a negative connotation. Anarchy is most commonly synonymous with chaos and disorder, and that is how the general public will

most likely always perceive anarchism as an ideology as well. Yet, our understanding of words and ideologies are constantly changing, and political culture is never idle. That's not to say that anarchism will one day be an ideology that is commonplace, and it's certainly not to say that one day the world will work within an anarchic system. But to count out the possibility of any potential future is misguided, especially in the realm of politics.

References:

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