

Are Libertarians "Anarchists"?

by [Murray N. Rothbard](#)

The libertarian who is happily engaged expounding his political philosophy in the full glory of his convictions is almost sure to be brought short by one unfailing gambit of the statist. As the libertarian is denouncing public education or the Post Office, or refers to taxation as legalized robbery, the statist invariably challenges. "Well, then are you an *anarchist*?" The libertarian is reduced to sputtering "No, no, of course I'm not an anarchist." "Well, then, what governmental measures *do* you favor? What *type of* taxes do you wish to impose?" The statist has irretrievably gained the offensive, and, having no answer to the first question, the libertarian finds himself surrendering his case.

Thus, the libertarian will usually reply: "Well, I believe in a *limited* government, the government being limited to the defense of the person or property or the individual against invasion by force or fraud." I have tried to show in my article, ["The Real Aggressor"](#) in the April 1954 *Faith and Freedom* that this leaves the conservative helpless before the argument "necessary for defense," when it is used for gigantic measures of statism and bloodshed. There are other consequences equally or more grave. The statist can pursue the matter further: "If you grant that it is legitimate for people to band together and allow the State to coerce individuals to pay taxes for a certain service — "defense" — why is it not equally moral and legitimate for people to join in a similar way and allow the State the right to provide other services — such as post offices, "welfare," steel, power, etc.? If a State supported by a majority can morally do one, why not morally do the others?" I confess that I see no answer to this question. If it is proper and legitimate to coerce an unwilling Henry Thoreau into paying taxes for his own "protection" to a coercive state monopoly, I see no reason why it should not be equally proper to force him to pay the State for any other services, whether they be groceries, charity, newspapers, or steel. We are left to conclude that the pure libertarian must advocate a society where an individual may voluntarily support none or any police or judicial agency that he deems to be efficient and worthy of his custom.

I do not here intend to engage in a detailed exposition of this system, but only to answer the

question, is this anarchism? This seemingly simple question is actually a very difficult one to answer in a sentence, or in a brief yes-or-no reply. In the first place, there is no accepted meaning to the word "anarchism" itself. The average person may *think* he knows what it means, especially that it is bad, but actually he does not. In that sense, the word has become something like the lamented word "liberal," except that the latter has "good" connotations in the emotions of the average man. The almost insuperable distortions and confusions have come both from the opponents and the adherents of anarchism. The former have completely distorted anarchist tenets and made various fallacious charges, while the latter have been split into numerous warring camps with political philosophies that are literally as far apart as communism and individualism. The situation is further confused by the fact that, often, the various anarchist groups themselves did not recognize the enormous ideological conflict between them.

One very popular charge against anarchism is that it "means chaos." Whether a specific type of anarchism would lead to "chaos" is a matter for analysis; no anarchist, however, ever deliberately wanted to bring about chaos. Whatever else he or she may have been, no anarchist has ever deliberately willed chaos or world destruction. Indeed, anarchists have always believed that the establishment of their system would eliminate the chaotic elements now troubling the world. One amusing incident, illuminating this misconception, occurred after the end of the war when a young enthusiast for world government wrote a book entitled *One World or Anarchy*, and Canada's leading anarchist shot back with a work entitled *Anarchy or Chaos*.

The major difficulty in any analysis of anarchism is that the term covers extremely conflicting doctrines. The root of the word comes from the term *anarche*, meaning opposition to authority or commands. This is broad enough to cover a host of different political doctrines. Generally these doctrines have been lumped together as "anarchist" because of their common hostility to the existence of the State, the coercive monopolist of force and authority. Anarchism arose in the 19th century, and since then the most active and dominant anarchist doctrine has been that of "anarchist communism." This is an apt term for a doctrine which has also been called "collectivist anarchism," "anarcho-syndicalism," and "libertarian communism." We may term this set of related doctrines "left-wing anarchism." Anarchist communism is primarily of Russian origin, forged by Prince Peter Kropotkin and Michael Bakunin, and it is this form that has connoted "anarchism" throughout the continent of Europe.

The principal feature of anarchist communism is that it attacks private property just as vigorously as it attacks the State. Capitalism is considered as much of a tyranny, "in the economic realm," as the State in the political realm. The left-wing anarchist hates capitalism and private property with perhaps even more fervor than does the socialist or Communist. Like the Marxists, the left-wing anarchist is convinced that the capitalists exploit and dominate the workers, and also that the landlords invariably are exploiting peasants. The economic views of the anarchists present them with a crucial dilemma, the *pons asinorum* of left-wing anarchy: how can capitalism and private property be abolished, while the State is abolished at the same time? The socialists proclaim the glory of the State, and the use of the State to abolish private property — for them the dilemma does not exist. The orthodox Marxist Communist, who pays lip service to the ideal of left-wing anarchy, resolves the dilemma by use of the Hegelian dialectic: that mysterious process by which something is converted into its opposite. The Marxists would enlarge the State to the maximum and abolish capitalism, and then sit back confidently to wait upon the State's "withering away."

The spurious logic of the dialectic is not open to the left-wing anarchists, who wish to abolish the State and capitalism simultaneously. The nearest those anarchists have come to resolving the problem has been to uphold syndicalism as the ideal. In syndicalism, each group of workers and peasants is supposed to own its means of production in common, and plan for itself, while cooperating with other collectives and communes. Logical analysis of these schemes would readily show that the whole program is nonsense. Either of two things would occur: one central agency would plan for and direct the various subgroups, or the collectives themselves would be really autonomous. But the crucial question is whether these agencies would be empowered to use force to

put their decisions into effect. All of the left-wing anarchists have agreed that force is necessary against recalcitrants. But then the first possibility means nothing more nor less than Communism, while the second leads to a real chaos of diverse and clashing Communisms, that would probably lead finally to some central Communism after a period of social war. Thus, left-wing anarchism must in practice signify either regular Communism or a true chaos of communistic syndics. In both cases, the actual result must be *that the State is reestablished under another name*. It is the tragic irony of left-wing anarchism that, despite the hopes of its supporters, it is not really anarchism at all. It is either Communism or chaos.

It is no wonder therefore that the term "anarchism" has received a bad press. The leading anarchists, particularly in Europe, have always been of the left-wing variety, and today the anarchists are exclusively in the left-wing camp. Add to that the tradition of revolutionary violence stemming from European conditions, and it is little wonder that anarchism is discredited. Anarchism was politically very powerful in Spain, and during the Spanish Civil War, anarchists established communes and collectives wielding coercive authority. One of their first steps was to abolish the use of money on the pain of a death penalty. It is obvious that the supposed anarchist hatred of coercion had gone very much awry. The reason was the insoluble contradiction between the antistate and the antiproperty tenets of left-wing anarchy.

How is it, then, that despite the fatal logical contradictions in left-wing anarchism, there are a highly influential group of British intellectuals who currently belong to this school, including the art critic Sir Herbert Read, and the psychiatrist Alex Comfort? The answer is that anarchists, perhaps unconsciously seeing the hopelessness of their position, have made a point of rejecting logic and reason entirely. They stress spontaneity, emotions, instincts, rather than allegedly cold and inhuman logic. By so doing, they can of course remain blind to the irrationality of their position. Of economics, which would show them the impossibility of their system, they are completely ignorant, perhaps more so than any other group of political theorists. The dilemma about coercion they attempt to resolve by the absurd theory that crime would simply disappear if the State were abolished, so that no coercion would have to be used. Irrationality indeed permeates almost all of the views of the left-wing anarchists. They reject industrialism as well as private property, and tend to favor returning to the handicraft and simple peasant conditions or the Middle Ages. They are fanatically in favor of modern art, which they consider "anarchist" art. They have an intense hatred of money and of material improvements. Living a simple peasant existence, in communes, is extolled as "living the anarchist life," while a civilized person is supposed to be viciously bourgeois and unanarchist. Thus, the ideas of the left-wing anarchists have become a nonsensical jumble, far more irrational than that of the Marxists, and deservedly looked upon with contempt by almost everyone as hopelessly "crackpot." Unfortunately the result is that the good criticisms that they sometimes make of State tyranny tend to be tarred with the same "crackpot" brush.

Considering the dominant anarchists, it is obvious that the question "are libertarians anarchists?" must be answered unhesitatingly in the negative. We are at completely opposite poles. Confusion enters, however, because of the existence in the past, particularly in the United States, of a small but brilliant group of "individualist anarchists" headed by Benjamin R. Tucker. Here we come to a different breed. The individualist anarchists have contributed a great deal to libertarian thought. They have provided some of the best statements of individualism and antistatism that have ever been penned. In the *political* sphere, the individualist anarchists were generally sound libertarians. They favored private property, extolled free competition, and battled all forms of governmental intervention. Politically, the Tucker anarchists had two principal defects: (1) they failed to advocate defense of private landholdings beyond what the owner used personally; (2) they relied too heavily on juries and failed to see the necessity for a body of constitutional libertarian law which the private courts would have to uphold.

Contrasted to their minor political failings, however, they fell into grievous economic error. They believed that interest and profit were exploitative, due to an allegedly artificial restriction on the money supply. Let the State and its monetary regulations be removed, and free banking be

established, they believed, and everyone would print as much money as he needed, and interest and profits would fall to zero. This hyperinflationist doctrine, acquired from the Frenchman Proudhon, is economic nonsense. We must remember, however, that "respectable" economics, then and now, has been permeated with inflationist errors, and very few economists have grasped the essentials of monetary phenomena. The inflationists simply take the more genteel inflationism of fashionable economics and courageously push it to its logical conclusion.

The irony of this situation was that while the individualist anarchists laid great stress on their nonsensical banking theories, their political order that they advocated would have led to economic results directly contrary to what they believed. They thought that free banking would lead to indefinite expansion of the money supply, whereas the truth is precisely the reverse: it would lead to "hard money" and absence of inflation. The economic fallacies of the Tuckerites, however, are of a completely different order than those of the collectivist anarchists. The errors of the collectivists led them to advocate virtual political Communism, while the economic errors of the individualists still permitted them to advocate a nearly libertarian system. The superficial might easily confuse the two, because the individualists were led to attack "capitalists," whom they felt were exploiting the workers through State restriction of the money supply.

These "right-wing" anarchists did not take the foolish position that crime would disappear in the anarchist society. Yet they did tend to underestimate the crime problem, and as a result never recognized the need for a fixed libertarian constitution. Without such a constitution, the private judicial process might become truly "anarchic" in the popular sense.

The Tucker wing of anarchism flourished in the 19th century, but died out by World War I. Many libertarian thinkers in that Golden Age of liberalism were working on doctrines that were similar in many respects. These genuine libertarians never referred to themselves as anarchists, however; probably the main reason was that all the anarchist groups, even the right wingers, possessed socialistic *economic* doctrines in common.

Here we should note still a third variety of anarchist thought, one completely different from either the collectivists or individualists. This is the absolute pacifism of Leo Tolstoy. This preaches a society where force would not even be used to defend person and property, whether by State or private organizations. Tolstoy's program of nonviolence has influenced many alleged pacifists today, mainly through Gandhi, but the latter do not realize that there can be no genuinely complete pacifism unless the State and other defense agencies are eliminated. This type of anarchism, above all others, rests on an excessively idealistic view of human nature. It could only work in a community of saints.

We must conclude that the question "are libertarians anarchists?" simply cannot be answered on etymological grounds. The vagueness of the term itself is such that the libertarian system would be considered anarchist by some people and archist by others. We must therefore turn to history for enlightenment; here we find that none of the proclaimed anarchist groups correspond to the libertarian position, that even the best of them have unrealistic and socialistic elements in their doctrines. Furthermore, we find that all of the current anarchists are irrational collectivists, and therefore at opposite poles from our position. We must therefore conclude that we are *not* anarchists, and that those who call us anarchists are not on firm etymological ground, and are being completely unhistorical. On the other hand, it is clear that we are not *archists* either: we do not believe in establishing a tyrannical central authority that will coerce the noninvasive as well as the invasive. Perhaps, then, we could call ourselves by a new name: *nonarchist*. Then, when, in the jousting of debate, the inevitable challenge "are you an anarchist?" is heard, we can, for perhaps the first and last time, find ourselves in the luxury of the "middle of the road" and say, "Sir, I am neither an anarchist nor an archist, but am squarely down the *nonarchic* middle of the road."