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My Anarchism

Sidney E. Parker

1981

In 1947, at 17 years of age, I began to call myself an anarchist. Having spent some three years in the socialist movement I naturally conceived of anarchism as a form of communism. I exchanged Bukharin for Bakunin, Kautsky for Kropotkin and Marx for Malatesta, but the goal of common ownership remained the same, even if the route was now a different one. And it was this goal to which I held for about the next ten years, despite changes in emphasis and tactics.

Towards the end of the 1950's I began to have serious doubts about the compatibility of anarchism and communism. At first my criticisms of anarchism as communism were mild and were mainly concerned to point out that there were other ways of viewing anarchism than the communist one. Then, in 1961, I read Max Stirner's *The Ego and His Own* and became convinced that anarchism was not a communism, but an individualism. The conclusion I then reached, and to which I still hold, was that individualism, in the words of John Beverley Robinson, is "the recognition by the individual that he is above all institutions and formulas; that they exist only so far as he chooses to make them his own by accepting them", and further, it is "the realisation by the individual that he is and individual; that, as far as he is concerned, he is the only individual". (This is not a claim for Solipsism. Robinson goes on to recognise there

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are “other individuals.” “But none of these is himself. He stands apart. His consciousness, and the desires and gratifications that enter into it, is a thing unique, no other can enter into it.”)

It followed from this that, because they recognised no institution or formula as having authority over them, individualists were logically anarchists. And, because they denied the validity of any authority over the individual, anarchists were logically individualists, since this denial affirmed the primacy of the individual. My anarchism then became freed from the last vestiges of that altruistic idealism which casts out service to God and the state only to replace it with service to Society and Humanity. Not only this, but anarchism as I now saw it, drove authority out of its final hiding place in such spooks as ‘duty’ and “moral obligation’ and became firmly grounded in *conscious* egoism.

My former goal of a stateless communist society became repellent to me. Jealous of preserving my individuality I had no wish to have my ego dissolved into the amorphousness of an egalitarian herd. Communism would render me powerless before the economic collectivity. The common ownership of the means of production would confront me with the choice: integrate or perish. Any group, or federation of groups, can be as powerful as any State if it monopolises in any given area the possibilities of action and realisation. The result would be social totalitarianism, even if it were done in the name of “anarchism”. In practice stateless communism would vest all executive power in the hands of mass assemblies or elected delegates. Either way it would be expressed *de facto* government of the individual by the majority. What power could I exercise for example if I were stuck at the base of the pyramid of workers’ councils proposed as the administrative structure for industries in the communist society? At best, and in its purest form, such a system might produce an “anarchism” of groups. It would not produce *an anarchism of individuals*.

But this rejection of the communist utopia did not end my formulation of anarchism as an individualism. Communism was certainly incompatible with anarchism, but was anarchism compatible with any normative social order? In other words, was it possible to realise anarchism as a form of society?

In *Man vs The State* Herbert Spencer remarks that “social organisation has laws over-riding individual wills; and laws disregard of which must be fraught with disaster.” Leaving aside the pertinent question: disaster for whom? I can see what Spencer is driving at. Most people who call themselves anarchists assume that the disappearance of the State will mean the disappearance of authority. Indeed, a favourite answer to those who argue against the possibility of a society existing without a government is to give examples of primitive societies which are or were stateless and ask, if they can function like this, why can't we? For example, Hubert Deschamps in his book *The Political Institutions of Black Africa* describes tribes in which “There is no necessity for command, nor coercive institutions; conflicts are reduced to a minimum by the absence of social differences, making it impossible for one to rise above another, and above all, by the natural obedience to ancestral customs” (My emphasis). In such societies, then, there is no vertical authority exercised by a State, but there is a horizontal authority exercised by “society” in the form of “ancestral customs” — customs that are often more ubiquitous and despotic than modern governments! That such a model of social control is in the minds of some professed anarchists is shown by Nicolas Waiter in his pamphlet *About Anarchism*. Here he states that in “the most libertarian society” the “proper treatment of delinquency would be part of the educational and health system, and would not become an institutionalised system of punishment. The last resort would not be imprisonment or death, but boycott or expulsion.” The same “last resort” of many primitive societies against those who violate their customs is thus envisaged as a mechanism of

an anarchist society, presumably on the grounds that we have a fine future in our past.

From what I know of history there does not seem to have been any organised collectivity which has been without authority, whether that of custom or of law. This is because all collectivises need norms to which their members must conform if they are to function. And these norms need sanctions to ensure that they are obeyed by any recalcitrant individual. These sanctions may be customary, religious, political, economic or moral, but they all add up to authority over the individual. Anarchism has never existed as a form of society, nor is it ever likely to. Indeed, I consider it a grave mistake to conceive of anarchism as a social theory; I do not expect any type of society to guarantee or to respect my individuality, for all societies seek to undermine the self-ownership which is its basis. All seek to principle my being and behaviour by ideals of cooperation, or competition, or brotherhood, or mutual benefit, or love as the dominant group in each society defines them. In all societies, therefore, the individual who is supposed to be the focal point of benefit gets lost in the welter of generalities which stand over and above his particularity and concreteness. Thus the war between the individual and society will go on as long as both exist. Anarchism is not a form of society. It is the cutting edge of individualism, the negative side of an egoist philosophy. The anarchist is not a peddler of schemes of social salvation, but a permanent resister of all attempts to subordinate the uniqueness of the individual to the authority of the collective. The anarchist is someone who refuses to be seduced even by the most glittering or most rational vision of a society in which diverse egoisms have been harnessed into harmonising one with another.

In the above-mentioned pamphlet by Nicolas Walter, the kind of anarchism I have outlined is rather scornfully dismissed as suitable for “poets and tramps,” as “anarchy here and now, if not in the world, then in one’s own life”.

Indeed, and where and when else can one expect it?