



What do anarchists believe?

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As myriad commentators have lately observed, conservatives generally and President Trump, in particular, are becoming increasingly preoccupied with anarchists and anarchism. As an anarchist speaking only for myself, the present moment seems like a fitting time to explain some of anarchism's longstanding ideas and debates

Earlier this year, Trump announced that the federal government would take steps to designate antifa — a loosely-affiliated network of antifascist activists, many of whom self-identify as anarchists — a terrorist organization. Recently, Trump signed a memorandum that aims to withhold federal funds from what it terms "anarchist jurisdictions," to be identified using several factors set out in the memo (e.g., "whether a jurisdiction unreasonably refuses to accept offers of law enforcement assistance from the federal government").

Trump has even taken to Twitter to denounce anarchists, several of his tweets over the past several days making reference to them, one such tweet asking, "When is Slow Joe Biden going to criticize the Anarchists, Thugs & Agitators in ANTIFA."

Anarchism — as a set of philosophical values — favors relationships and organizations based upon the freely-given consent of all participants; as a body of ideas, it resists violence, oppression, and domination by definition. Historically and traditionally, to be an anarchist is to be a critic and opponent of the capitalist system.

However, it turns out that this, on its own, can accommodate a diverse range of libertarian visions for a future stateless society: Anarchists may be communists who look forward to the abolition of private property and market competition, or primitivists who oppose civilization itself, or even free-market individualists who recognize a difference between capitalism as it exists (and has existed) and a genuine free market absent the kind of coercive special privilege and monopolism anarchists oppose.

The divisions within anarchism don't stop there. Anarchists have disagreed amongst ourselves as to when, for example, state violence may be met with violence, or when it is permissible to attack fascists, white supremacists, and Nazis physically. For well over a century, anarchists have engaged in arguments as to the merits of violent action, the propaganda of the deed, sabotage, terrorism, and assassinations.

This debate roughly tracks the historical divide between those classed as individualist anarchists (variously phrased "philosophical anarchists" and "Boston anarchists") and those called social anarchists (frequently associated with anarchist communism or anarchist collectivism, for example).

The individualist wing of the anarchism movement largely favored an incremental, evolutionary approach, in which libertarian and mutualistic institutions would gradually and peacefully replace today's authoritarian institutions, transforming society.

At its best, anarchism represents both a philosophy of mutual respect, contract, and cooperation and a set of strategies for building — right now, both within and outside of the existing order — the infrastructures of mutual aid and a better world. Over one 100 years ago, introducing his biography of the pioneering American inventor, musician, businessman, and anarchist Josiah Warren,

William Bailie explained that anarchism "teaches not violence, nor does it inculcate insurrection. Neither is it an incipient revolution." Bailie went so far as to argue that anarchism "is not even a menace to the social order, nor yet a plotting for the destruction of kings and rulers." For Bailie, following leading anarchist lights like Warren and Benjamin Tucker, anarchism was about principled opposition to systemic violence and hence chaos. Anarchism's whole justification for existence was to prosecute the argument that the existing order is founded up violence, oppression, and exploitation — that a freer and more just world, without ruling classes or ruled classes, is both desirable and possible.

Anarchist infighting has been a venerable tradition. For his part, Tucker insisted that anarchist communism was a contradiction in terms (a term that "has no sense"), even remarking that the anarchists fighting in the Spanish Civil War were "a crazy bunch", adding, "'Anarchism' in Spain is a misnomer." He frequently criticized anarchist communists for making appeals to violence and revolutionary action. "There is not a tyrant in the civilized world today," he wrote, "who would not do anything in his power to precipitate a bloody revolution rather than see himself confronted by any large fraction of his subjects determined not to obey." He argued that any revolution that "comes by violence and in advance of light" is foredoomed, built upon a foundation of sand. The whole hope of humanity, Tucker said, is bound up in avoiding just the kind of "revolution by force" that so many anarchists were attempting to touch off.

Attempts to police the label or excommunicate certain elements are exercises in futility, usually self-serving and tendentious — notably because anarchist history does include episodes of violence. And anarchist violence, even at its very worst, has always paled next to the systematic, institutional violence of the state, the crimes of which are especially dangerous in that they're never called what they are. Paraphrasing Max Stirner, the state calls its violence law the violence of all other crimes.

But even if particular self-identified anarchists believe that violence and destruction are somehow excusable or justifiable given the situation or the historical context, they are strategically unsound as tactics for positive, liberatory social change. Depending in large part on how anarchists proceed from here, anarchism could be poised to become a vital source of new ideas at a point of apparent crisis in our history. But to fulfill that function, it will have to be anarchism of Tucker's "philosophical" variety — certainly not without direct action, but embracing direct action only of the nonviolent kind.

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