

Anarchy is deeply ideological, and that's okay

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A recurrent theme in anarchist discourse is that, unlike Marxism, social democracy and countless other ideologies, anarchy has an almost neutral tendency; it's a void, it's an absence of something rather than anything itself. It's not hard to see why it *seems* that way, after all, it can take innumerable forms; a focus on hierarchy implies the rejection of a rigid blueprint. Where coercion, domination, and ultimately — hierarchical outcomes — are absent, there's no compelling reason why an anarchistic society should exclude certain features; barring their malicious forms, non-essential markets should be embraced; short of inherent destructivity, technological developments should be welcomed. Far from monotonous, anarchy is beautifully diverse, and this leads to a tragic conflation with naturalistic processes. It's often described as organic, because it thrives in every direction, and no two localities will appear the same. The assumption that it's simply human nature taking hold, after it's been freed from the shackles of the state, capitalism, and all sorts of other horrible incentives that exist under the status quo, is a grave mistake. In anarchist literature, too much emphasis has been placed on an overly optimistic anthropological record, and this has resulted in a disservice to progress towards our ends. This isn't cause for apathy; if human nature is fundamentally flawed, it should only be seen as further impetus to implement a system that opposes domination.¹

Regardless if you view anarchy as a direction we move towards or a distinct form of social organisation,² the same basic problem materialises: what exactly should be tolerated in order to enable a largely non-hierarchical society? The truth is, when specifics are given serious thought, you arrive at an inescapable conclusion: anarchy is not only unmistakably ideological, but it's an aspect that should be embraced. It's often too unwieldy to bring up, but necessary if we want a chance of implementing something beyond only a facade of our ideals. Basic needs are a clear demonstration of this. In the absence of scarcity impracticalities, providing essentials on the basis of indirect reciprocity — in other words, mutual aid — is the most obvious way to remain consistent with a non-hierarchical form of social organisation. Do we then allow for the freedom of other members of an anarchist society, collectively speaking, to not provide these needs? No, as this implies the freedom to establish hierarchy. It's the paradox of tolerance considered in a broader context.³ Errico Malatesta briefly touches upon this sentiment in a noteworthy way:

[Some] seem almost to believe that after having brought down government and private property we would allow both to be quietly built up again,

¹ Realistically, human nature is not only far more complex than a simple binary, but malleable. The assumption that human nature is patently flawed is used within this text because it's much more useful as a counter to anarchist sceptics.

² Contrasting the term *anarchy* with *anarchism* is relevant here, but colloquially, they're often used interchangeably.

³ In this respect, it can be referred to as the paradox of hierarchy.

because of respect for the freedom of those who might feel the need to be rulers and property owners. A truly curious way of interpreting our ideas.⁴

There are many ways to frame the overarching point. Positive and negative freedom. A void versus a concerted effort towards a more equitable form of social organisation. Regardless of which construct is adopted, the implication is that it's a very deliberate process that involves a constant struggle.⁵ It's not simply a natural phenomenon that will spring up with only a nominal rejection of hierarchy; while it's tempting to refer to patterns of mutual aid that are observed amongst animals, intraspecies behaviour in the wild is also incredibly brutal at times, and this omission makes the naturalistic argument problematic; we can employ stronger reasoning than the basic survival instincts of animals.

A deliberate ideology will also often make trade-offs in terms of efficiency. It might very well be the case that a society based on indirect reciprocity will be optimal, but even if it sometimes wasn't — even if the world turned slightly slower — we should do it anyway. The fixation with traveling at a breakneck speed, at a terrible human cost, is a big reason we've ended up here. Put differently, it's the rejection of a rigid calculus in favour of our ideals; it's undeniable that in a society based upon mutual aid, some will never reciprocate. The main point of contention is if this would lead to a detrimental societal outcome. Even taking into account the imperfect nature of humans, it's extremely difficult to make that case; you would have to square the fact that there will be far less individuals in dire situations as a result of meeting basic needs, with a theory that few will want to maintain their communities. And all of this is assuming that our current system of reciprocity is more “efficient” in the first place; there's a real possibility that our pace of advancement will actually increase under anarchy, especially beyond the superficial. The somewhat outlier stance herein, however, is that it *shouldn't matter*.

Anarchy involves difficult decisions. Sometimes there's a cost to freedom. Sometimes it's detrimental to efficiency. And, as the opposition to hierarchy strongly favours equality, needing constant exertion to keep intact, it isn't some natural societal mode either. Rather than deny these facets we should accept them. If that makes us ideologues, then so be it.

⁴ Errico Malatesta. 1891. *Anarchy*, p. 22. Retrieved Feb 18, 2023 from <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/errico-malatesta-anarchy.pdf>. If you're familiar with my other works, you've probably noticed that I've used the same quote on multiple occasions, which is a testament to how well it's held up.

⁵ To interpret it through a different lens: how “free” is a society where necessities such as food, healthcare and housing are contingent on direct reciprocity? It's strongly arguable that a coercive system such as this, which mirrors the status quo, is incompatible with anarchy. Trying to impose a foundation of direct reciprocity with an anarchist society is akin to placing a square peg in a round hole. This also elicits the obvious question: does taking the steps necessary to meet these needs on the basis of *indirect* reciprocity — which can be roughly synonymised with mutual aid — amount to an unfree society? No, because freedom doesn't imply the freedom to rule.

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