

# MERE ANARCHY

## CHRIS COOPER



I can still remember the joy with which I realised that I was an anarchist. It was a few years ago, at the time of the first elections to the European Parliament. Like a responsible citizen I had tried to arrive at some judgement on the relative merits of the rival parties' candidates. Like a conscientious *Guardian* reader, I had despaired of the task. Though I was liable, from time to time, to call myself a socialist, in my heart of hearts I knew that I was not one: obscurely I knew that the exaltation of the 'workers' and the 'underprivileged' was a vicious and hypocritical creed. I was not a Tory: I did not believe in the rule of the wise and the good. I was not a Liberal, whatever that was. I believed myself condemned to permanent political agnosticism.

A conversation with a colleague reminded me that there was such a thing as anarchism and showed me that there was at least one person who took it seriously — or at least, as seriously as that individual took anything. I took the label for myself, bought one or two books on the subject and turned up at the polling booths to write some antistatist slogan or other on the ballot slip.

The negative theses of anarchism seemed the clearest and most persuasive side of the doctrine. The state was clearly a coercive institution whose claim to moral authority was completely illegitimate. Taxation, conscription, the detailed regulation of our everyday lives, the ubiquitous warfare among nations — these were the evils that followed from the dominion of the state. I could see that no parliamentary candidate was committed to combatting the state as such, so the impossibility of choosing among them was now no longer mere confusion but a philosophically grounded rejection. I had discovered some principles at last - I knew what I was against.

Or at least, most of the things I was against. I wasn't quite sure about capitalism, for example. Anarchists seemed to condemn with one voice the 'rule of gold'. I was in favour of

people being rich — the more of them the better; and it seemed that if people were to be free then they must be free to grow unequally rich — and even, in some cases, to grow poor.

Anarchists also seemed to be against big cities and paid work for large companies and eating junk food. Since I enjoyed all these forbidden fruits quite frequently, I began to get feelings of guilt all over again. Anarchists seemed to be condemned to live in the same purgatory inhabited by social democrats, whether they vote Labour or Alliance: the purgatory of trying to believe one set of principles while prospering on directly contrary ones.

### THE RIGHT KIND OF ANARCHISM

So I returned to my political apathy. My 'Anarchist' label began to look grubby and neglected. And then I discovered the thing that every such classification needs to give it new life: a subclassification. I discovered that there were varieties of anarchism and that hitherto I'd been subscribing to the wrong one: anarcho-socialism.

To name the creed is to perceive its glaring self-contradiction. Anarchy is freedom, including the freedom not to be a socialist or live like one. It's the freedom not to participate in communal activities or to share communal goals. It's the freedom to strike private deals with other individuals for personal enrichment. It's freedom not only from the rule of the state but also from that of the village, the commune or the production syndicate. It's freedom not only of thought but of action.

These implications of the term came into focus only after I had encountered a contrary hyphenated form of anarchy: anarcho-capitalism. Of course, the self-contradiction inherent in *this* term was likewise glaringly obvious — at first. Evidently an anarcho-capitalist would have to be someone who advocated unrestrained pollution, looting of the world's resources, wage slavery of the masses, despoiling of work, alienation of the workers, exploitation of the Third World by the rich world, etc, etc. Anybody who was enthusiastic about such things would in logic and conscience be bound to turn in his sandals and stop calling himself an anarchist.

Most other varieties of anarchist believe that anarcho-capitalists actually do look on these things with favour — if they have heard of anarcho-capitalism at all (see Political Notes 4: *Anarchy versus Anarcho-Capitalism*). They should pursue the matter further.

With time, much reading and many discussions at The Alternative Bookshop, the notion of anarcho-capitalism came into focus for me. I came to realise that freedom means nothing if it does not mean the freedom to make mutually beneficial exchanges with others and that this requires a notion of private

### Personal Perspectives No. 1

ISSN 0267 7156 ISBN 1 85637 240 5

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,  
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN  
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1984: Libertarian Alliance; Chris Cooper.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author,  
and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its  
Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame  
Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait  
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**



property — that is, a notion of a part of the world within which an individual enjoys freedom of action.

## OWNERSHIP

It was also clear to me that one's property must include one's own person and the fruits of one's own labour. Now I don't think socialists of any description have gone so far as to advocate the collective ownership of bodily organs: they have not contemplated compelling the unfairly healthy and long-lived to donate retinas, kidneys or lungs to those unfortunates who, through no fault of their own, suffer deprivation in those areas. But they are far from granting the principle of sovereignty over one's own body. They are ready to restrict smokers and drinkers — with even more enthusiasm than they would seek out and control heroin users for they have committed themselves to the welfare of all and they're damn well not going to let people damage themselves at the public expense.

Likewise, socialists' opinions on private ownership of wealth are equally jaundiced. They only reluctantly concede that there could be any individually created wealth, or that anyone can justly lay claim to a greater share of some product than anyone else who has been even remotely involved in its creation. And even if it could be shown that someone — even though fit and healthy — had a just claim to a greater than average share of 'society's' wealth, it would be despicable of him to demand it and unthinkable that he be given it.

Anarcho-socialists are not different from other socialists in these respects. Some of them may incline to the view that each commune (or syndicate, or whatever) should have control over the disposal of its own product — but that's only because they haven't worked out the consequences of such a subversive freedom. In a society of collectives that traded freely with each other, utopian ideals would soon be challenged by opportunities for enrichment. Some units would be more efficient at supplying goods than others, and the fortunes of the less able would decline in consequence. Rather than change their ways, the less able would demand that they should continue to receive 'according to their need'. But I suspect that this formula would prove less powerful in an amorphous society of producers than it currently is in our centralised society, ruled by easily manipulated governments. So these inefficient producers would lose out because of the enterprise of others. Society would have degenerated (or advanced) from living by the golden rule to living under the rule of gold.

Soon some collectives would find that they could increase their own productivity and hence the personal wealth of their members by means of the division and specialisation of labour. And then the road would be open to 'alienation' of the worker from his product.

But before these developments had progressed very far, 'society' would probably have stepped in and squashed the free market in the name of adherence to anarchist ideals. Self-seeking and acquisitiveness would be abolished by law — and with them, independence and opportunity. Security and fairness would be legislated — and with them, regulation and scarcity.

## NO ANARCHO-CAPITALIST REVOLUTION

A great revolution was once achieved under the slogan of 'Liberty, equality, brotherhood'. Those who proclaimed equality loudest were put in positions of authority over their fellows. Those who were not sufficiently enthusiastic about liberty were put in chains. Those who were deemed to have been unbrotherly were beheaded. An anarcho-socialist revolution would have to be fought under the banner of 'Liberty to do what everyone else judges to be safe for you and them, equal shares in everyone else's product, brotherly yielding of your own wealth to the common pool — or else.'

I do not think an anarcho-capitalist society could be brought about by revolution. If it appears at all, it will be peacefully and piecemeal. If it has a slogan, it will have to be: 'Freedom from other people'. Pursuing the goal of equality would be so clearly in conflict with this ideal that it would not even be seen as desirable. As for brotherhood — that would be a private matter between consenting adults.

In such a society it would not be necessary for everyone to accept the criticisms of socialism that I've made here: in fact it is certain that there would be vast disagreements about this and all other topics. But it would not be necessary for anyone to do any insisting, any consciousness-raising. It would be necessary only that people be allowed to live communally or individualistically, as they choose, provided they do it with their own property.

An anarcho-capitalist society would require some measure of agreement, of course: there will have to be a general willingness to leave other people alone, to respect their property and to abide by peaceful decision-making procedures when it is not clear what counts as whose property. Where such agreement exists, anarchy could flourish; where it does not, it would be self-defeating to attempt to impose it.

Socialists, if they wish to mould a whole society, unfortunately do have to insist. If individuals are wayward enough not to care and share — or do so insufficiently or in unapproved ways, they must be made to go through the motions of caring and sharing by means of taxation and redistribution. (In an anarcho-socialist society different names would have to be found for these procedures to disguise their blatantly governmental nature. The hallowed motto 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his need' has been coined to meet this need.) It is not necessary to have too many scruples about compelling people to fall into line, however; only the selfish and the uncaring could possibly wish to resist their social obligations and, since these are bad traits, how could the use of *force majeure* against them be wrong? Hence the fact that, while all politicians attempt to manipulate and dominate assemblies in which they take part, only the ideologists of the Left regard it as a sound moral principle to do so.

## CO-OPERATION

In a society where the kind of agreement concerning property that I have described was deeprooted, certain truths of economics would be accepted as platitudes, imbibed with mothers' milk. It would be obvious to everyone that economic wealth is almost wholly created, not shared out from a 'common heritage'. It would be understood that in a free market the growth of personal wealth is brought about by exchange, not by plunder — and that this exchange is mutually, not one-sidedly advantageous. It would be understood that prices are not determined by the whims of the sellers. It would be clear to everyone that every gain that anyone achieves is paid for by someone; and that we have the choice of a society in which the beneficiary pays for it (or is freely given it) — or one in which someone else is compelled to pay the bill.

Anarchists are constantly having to explain to others that 'anarchy' is not a synonym for 'chaos'. They agree that order, security and co-operation are necessary for human life and the production of wealth to continue. They haven't always understood that order and security, like other goods, have to be paid for — and that, in justice, they must be paid for by those who enjoy them. And they haven't often realised that people can honestly differ about the ways in which they wish to co-operate. (For 'co-operate' read 'make exchanges'.) When anarchists do understand this, they will advocate that people should be free to search for these goods in the marketplace — and not be compelled to try to win them from a political forum that masquerades as 'society' or 'the people'.