Against the Green State

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The most firmly held myth of our time is that no society can exist without a government and that we need the state to protect us – including from environmental destruction.

Let's begin by not confusing two terms. Anarchy is the condition of a society without a ruler. Anarchism is a rich nineteenth-century political philosophy. Anarchists are not against democracy, they want to deepen it and make it our servant, not our master.

While it does reject the idea of governments and the state, anarchism does not reject order or the collective rule of the people. As Pierre Joseph Proudhon, the great French anarchist, said: "Liberty: not the daughter but the mother of order".

The question, then, is not whether there should be order but how it is organised and agreed upon.

So anarchism is a set of ideas, it's an attitude, not an endpoint. It doesn't claim to have all the answers – and so shouldn't be judged as such.

Examples

Most pastoral and hunter-gatherer societies before colonisation were much more egalitarian than ours and there are many examples of wide-scale anarchist experiments like the Diggers, the Cathars, and the Anabaptists, and the two big examples from the Russian and Spanish revolutions.

There are also countless micro-examples – village life and kinship networks, city states, intentional communities, community gardens, the Situationists, the Zapatistas, free communes like Christiania, and the Indymedia network.

But the key thing is that anarchism is an everyday idea that's around us all the time in our everyday interactions – how many times do you actually co-operate, support or help someone compared to competing with them? Think about making a cup of tea or holding a door open. It isn't really the state that keeps us in check – most people play by the collective rules of the game which we all agree to.

The real tyranny is state tyranny – it might reduce visible violence like street fighting or robbery but how many people die unnecessarily from war, road deaths, industry, pollution, poverty?

Anarchist ideas are intuitive and most people are not likely to argue too much against them. Rather their quarrel is that at the moment their implementation doesn't look very likely – especially in our complex society.

But what's the alternative? A diet of ridiculous policies and false solutions from the state. Those who constitute this institution can never give us what we need to be free.

We just can't trust them, especially since their paymasters are now giant corporations. And the UN and other agencies of international community? They are weak and there is no sign of bold proposals for world democracy emerging from that quarter.

In light of this mess, the anarchist grassroots alternative looks much more credible. How could it be any worse?

The khaki green state

We have to reject the idea that the state can help us out of the problems we face. If it could have solved it, it would have – look at all the resources it has.

We also don't want to sleep-walk into a khaki-green state – where, in order to save us from the ecological crisis, the state persuades us of the need for tight migration controls, carbon rationing, or centralised work plans.

There is no credible "Plan B" at the moment, which is terrifying. But it is people together that constitute the real Plan B.

So let's remember that people are the real experts in their own lives – we shouldn't be scared of our abilities to take control. It is us who run society, often in spite of the state.

Anarchism is pragmatic – there's no big plan waiting in the wings. People will come together to figure out what needs to be done – as they always have.

Democracy is a process and it needs working at all the time. Getting rid of the state is about unlocking the creative genius of all of us. Anarchism is a new deal for everyone.

What would be some of its features? Direct democracy, accountable and recallable delegates, systems to prohibit the concentration of power, probably more planning and meetings but certainly less pointless work, voluntary associations between producers and consumer councils, less mobility but stronger community life, federations of local and national assemblies which scale up accountable decision making.

But let's be realistic – we can't expect anything quick, especially after years of disempowerment. Where governments collapse it is asking a lot that grassroots egalitarian structures would simply take their place.

Sure, we can all embark upon a long overdue dependency detox. We will still have to expect a rocky ride and probably some violence. But this will surely be far less than what happens at the moment.

Anarchism is not some utopia just over the hill where there is a brotherhood or sisterhood of human goodness waiting for us. It is all around us now in the everyday acts of freedom, co-operation, friendship and love that we show to each other. There is no good or incorruptible human essence – this has to be worked at and built every day. We are already the signs of what could come. We are the seeds under the snow.

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