

SLC Punk! and the Finer
Points of Anarchism

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SECOND EDITION

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To Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
and Frédéric Bastiat,
two flawed yet extremely important
nineteenth century French thinkers

SLC Punk! and the Finer Points of Anarchism

IN THE 1998 FILM *SLC Punk!*, “Stevo,” a fictional punk living in Salt Lake City, speaks on a variety of topics of interest to him. This is quite an interesting film, as you probably know if you’ve seen it.

However, I felt very uncomfortable with a certain portion of the film where Stevo appears to use some circular logic. I couldn’t place my finger on it at the time I saw the film, presumably because the segment was over so quickly, but I think I now know where with it lies my contention.

During one soliloquy of the film, Stevo states the following:

The Fight: What Does it Mean and Where Does it Come From, An Essay

Homo sapiens: A man. He is alone in the universe. A punker: Still a man. He is alone in the universe, but he connects. How? They hit each other. No clearer way to evaluate whether or not you’re alive.

Now, complications. A reason to fight. Somebody different. Difference creates dispute. Dispute is a reason to fight. Now, to fight is a reason to feel pain. Life is pain. So to fight with reason is to be alive with reason. Final analysis: To fight, a reason to live.

Problems and Contradictions: I am an anarchist. I believe that there should be no rules, only chaos. Fighting appears to be chaos. And when we slam in the pit at a show, it is. But when we fight for a reason, like rednecks, there’s a system: we fight for what we stand for:

chaos. Fighting is a structure, fighting is to establish power, power is government and government is not anarchy. Government is war and war is fighting. The circle goes like this: our redneck skirmishes are cheap perversions of conventional warfare. War implies extreme government because wars are fought to enforce rules or ideals, even freedom. But other people ideals forced on someone else, even if it is something like freedom, is still a rule; not anarchy.

This contradiction was becoming clear to me in the fall of '85, even as early as my first party. "Why did I love to fight?" I framed it, but still, I don't understand it. It goes against my beliefs as a true anarchist. But there it was: competition, fighting, capitalism, government, *the system*. That's what we did. It's what we always did. Rednecks kicked the shit out of punks, punks kicked the shit out of mods, mods kicked the shit out of skinheads, skinheads took out the heavy metal guys, and the heavy metal guys beat the living shit out of new wavers and the new wavers did nothing.

What was the point? Final summation? None.

Did you catch the error? Either this is a true paradox, or one or more of Stevo's contentions are incorrect. Whereas I do love the nihilistic nature of the final summation, I do not believe this is a true paradox.

Stevo's main flaw is that he characterizes anarchy as "chaos," which it is not, and assumes that since chaos is, in a sense, order, that anarchy is thusly oxymoronic.

This, however, is not the case. As the famous anarchist philosopher, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, once postulated, "anarchy is order." In fact, this is from where the symbolism of the Circle-A allegedly originates: from the ideal that anarchy, symbolized by the 'A,' is order, symbolized by the circle.

Government, I would argue, is a form of chaos, one that ceases to exist under anarchism. Why is it a form of chaos? Because it monopolises power for the purpose of dictating people's lives. In effect, it throws everything out of balance.

Make no mistake, anarchy *is* a system. However, it is a system that differs from democracy, the dictatorship of a majority faction; oligarchy, the dictatorship of a few; and monarchy, the dictatorship of one, in that every person in an anarchy has complete sovereignty over her- or himself. Anarchy, in short, is not chaos.

I recognise that part of the problem may be a misunderstanding of the term *anarchy* itself. To clear that up, the literal definition of *anarchy* is "without rulership," not "without order" or "without law."¹ So whereas anarchy is a system, it is a system devoid of rulers or a state, and thus a system without *statutory* laws.²

¹ The term *anomie* is more applicable in describing that which is "without law."

² When encountering the word "law," it is typical for the many people to picture

Under anarchy, for example, you cannot force your neighbour to build a fence by “passing a law,” even if everyone—save your neighbour—wants him to build a fence. Under anarchy, you have to use your art of persuasion to encourage him to build a fence. You must explain why you think it will be a good idea, and why everyone wants it. But can you force him? If you *force* him, you’re creating a coercive hierarchy, an establishment of statism, and that is not anarchy. It is the opposite: the chaos of coercion.

But if your neighbour aggresses (*i.e.* initiates physical force or fraud) against you—through starting a fight with you without your consent, for example—you have the right to use equal and opposing force to defend yourself.³ This is because you are not the aggressor, and thus not the *establisher* of the coercive hierarchy or “state.” Statutory government, simply stated, is force. By using force to defend yourself, you’re not establishing government, but rather *disestablishing* the “government” (*i.e.* force or coercive hierarchy) he has established. You are, in short, restoring order, restoring anarchy.⁴

Under anarchism, you are responsible for protecting your own rights from tyrants. This does not mean, however, that you must

statutory laws in particular. But this is not the only form laws can take. There is also common law, which is established through arbitration based upon the mores of the community, and natural law. Natural law is particularly important for many anarchist and classically liberal theorists, for it is the theoretical foundation for human rights. As the nineteenth century individualist anarchist, abolitionist, and lawyer Lysander Spooner pointed out in his amazing short essay *Natural Law; Or the Science of Justice*, any statutory law in concert with natural law is simply redundant and unneeded while any statutory law in defiance of natural law is inherently and naturally criminal. “If there be such a natural principle as justice, it is necessarily the highest, and consequently the only and universal, law for all those matters to which it is naturally applicable. And, consequently, all human legislation is simply and always an assumption of authority and dominion, where no right of authority or dominion exists. It is, therefore, simply and always an intrusion, an absurdity, an usurpation, and a crime,” Lysander Spooner, *Natural Law; Or the Science of Justice* (Boston: A William & Co., 283 Washington Street, 1882), Chap. II, § V, ¶ 1. Available online at <http://alexpeak.com/twr/nl/>.

³ You are, of course, not *obligated* to defend yourself under anarchy. Not only can one be an anarcho-pacifist if one so chooses, but in fact every truly consistent pacifist, who recognises the state for the agent of violence it is, is *already* an anarcho-pacifist. Examples of famous anarcho-pacifists include Leo Tolstoy and Robert LeFevre.

⁴ “Minarchism” is very similar to anarchism, except that under minarchism, there is a small government present which has the sole purpose of protecting rights. If this government fails to protect rights, or even worse, actively infringes upon rights—as virtually all do—you are justified in altering or abolishing it, according to the classical liberal John Locke. See John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), Chap. XIX. Originally, minarchism played a more important role in this essay. Since my own conversion to anarchism in 2007, I have decided to relegate it merely to a footnote.

act alone—sitting, for example, on your porch with a rifle. Although that’s certainly an option, you may also seek the voluntary help of others. In a free society, therefore, one can (1) purchase this protective security from private protection agencies, (2) rely on the voluntary charity and good nature of your neighbours to donate their time in assisting to protect you, or (3) go it alone. Although Stevo may believe that constant and irrational fighting are the hallmark of anarchy, not only are the coercive hierarchies it creates contrary to the order that is anarchy but moreover anarchy allows for a variety of voluntary and social solutions to the problem of—among other things—unwarranted violence.⁵

Lastly, I feel I must add that anarchism is not inherently “anti-capitalist,” depending of course on how one defines “capitalism.” Anarchism certainly *is* inherently opposed to the *state* capitalism—what could also be called mercantilism, neomercantilism, or corporatism—just as it is inherently opposed to *state* socialism. But, as the anarchist Dr. Murray Rothbard writes, “The difference between free-market capitalism and state capitalism is precisely the difference between, on the one hand, peaceful, voluntary exchange, and on the other, violent expropriation.”⁶ Anarchism is only opposed to capitalism *per se* if one defines capitalism as aggression aimed at promoting a privileged elite.⁷

These comprise the bulk of my objections to the Stevo quote above. Ultimately, the quote is itself still fun in a twisted, nihilistic sense. But as to the question of whether it presents an accurate reflection of anarchism, the answer one must arrive at is: no.

⁵ An example of violence that would be warranted that we have already mentioned is defensive force. One has a right to repel an attack with equal and opposing force, or to use defensive force so as to ensure restitution is paid by an aggressor to her or his victims. But there is another type of violence that we would have to permit in a free society: *i.e.* any violence in which all involved parties have agreed in advance to permit. For example, if two men have agreed to engage in a duel, and have ensured that no third party or the property of any third party would be harmed in the process of engaging in the duel (without the prior consent of said third party), we would have to permit the duel to take place. To step in and force the dueling parties to cease dueling would be an act of aggression, and thus a crime against the duelers. Also, although some may see assisted suicide as an institution of violence, this too would have to be permitted and on the same grounds.

⁶ Murray Newton Rothbard, “A Future of Peace and Capitalism,” *Modern Political Economy* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1973), Chap. 28, p. 419.

⁷ There have been market anarchists, especially those associated with left-libertarianism, in recent years who have opted to start considering “capitalism” a term that can inherently and definably denote statist privilege, and thus something to rightfully oppose. Take for instance Alex Strekal, “Against Capitalism,” *Polycentric Order*, 22 September 2008, <http://polycentricorder.blogspot.com/2008/09/against-capitalism.html> (accessed 29 September 2008). See also the works of Brad Spangler.