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John Hospers and the Libertarian Temperament

Alexander S. Peak

I recently came across an article by former Libertarian Party candidate for president Mr. John Hospers in which he discusses the interaction of both anarchists and minarchists within the libertarian movement. There are, as one might expect, some good things and some bad things to say of Mr. Hospers's analysis. I will first discuss and provide insights on what I like about the article—specifically his call for alliance between the two aforementioned libertarian factions. I shall then explain what I see to be the failings of Mr. Hospers's analysis.

Let me begin by saying I agree with Mr. Hospers when he says,

Anarchism, as I see it, is an issue for the far future as far as practical application is concerned. If we get to the point where 9/10 of the present government functions are government functions no longer, then we can consider the question whether what remains is best performed by government or by private individuals and organizations. But it is virtually certain that we shall never reach that point if we do not present a united front to the world.¹

This is a point Mr. Harry Browne made often,² and it is a point with which I agree.³

¹ John Hospers, "The Libertarian Temperament versus the Anarchist Temperament," p. 3, <http://johnhospers.com/Articles/AnarkistTemperament.pdf> (accessed 26 May 2009).

² See, e.g., Harry Browne, "Limited government vs. anarchy," *Harry Browne's Journal*, 7 September 2004, <http://harrybrowne.org/Journal/Journal0409.htm#907> (accessed 26 May 2009).

³ E.g., see Alexander S. Peak, "Distractions on the Road to Freedom; or, What Would Harry Browne Do?" 28 April 2008, <http://alexpeak.com/ww/2008/009.html> (accessed 26 May 2009).

As an anarchist, and one who is optimistic for the long-run but pessimistic in the short-run, I do not believe we will achieve even minarchy (*i.e.* limited, constitutional government) within my lifetime, let alone *anarchy* (*i.e.* the replacement of the entire state with private, voluntary institutions). Therefore, my own anarchism is explored for predominately philosophic reasons.

That's not to say that I do not also embrace it for practical reasons. As far as I'm concerned, I'm not only an anarchist in theory but also an anarchist *in practice*. That is to say, I "live anarchy" every day.⁴ In my every interaction with people, I always eschew aggression. I do not steal, I do not rape, I do not accept welfare, and, if I were to get elected to some legislative body tomorrow, I would refuse to accept even a cent of taxpayer money for the job. I engage in voluntary action at all times.⁵

But I recognise that America is not going to accept anarchism yet. The people are, unfortunately, not yet independently-minded enough to come to a total and complete rejection of all aggression entirely, nor even is a 50% majority yet going to make such a commitment. Far too many people believe in continuing the war on drugs (as just one of many examples) to as of yet come to a total rejection of aggression.

But this is no reason for me to turn my back on anarchism. Ultimately, reason compels me to embrace anarchy as the only ethical and practical system of government. And I see no harm in promoting this view, in explaining politely and hopefully-

⁴ I do not recall where I first encountered the concept of "living anarchy." Suffice it to say, the concept is not originally mine. A concept that *is* originally mine, however, is what I like to call *libertarian stoicism*, the idea that, even if the rest of the world never conforms to the non-aggression principle, the individual should *still* refuse to aggress nevertheless. One needs not wait for the rest of the world to begin living the ethical life for *you* to begin living the ethical life.

⁵ Among other things, Mr. Hospers claims in his article that anarchists engage in "a strong, usually...neurotic, rebellion against all forms of discipline, especially self-discipline." If this point about "living anarchy" proves anything, it is that this Hesperian statement is (in addition to being extremely insulting) fundamentally wrong.

convincingly to people how the alternative institutions we radical libertarians advocate would function in the real world.

I believe there is no inconsistency in being an anarchist—in promoting anarchism—and in allying myself with minarchists. As Mr. Hospers implies, should we ever get to the point where the vast majority of the government has been eliminated, at *that* point we'll have to get down to the nitty-gritty of what divides anarchist libertarians from minarchist libertarians.⁶ At that point, we'll have to end our alliance. In the meantime, Mr. Hospers is right: we *should* work together toward our common goals.

At the same time, I also hold that there is nothing wrong in trying to convince minarchist libertarians that libertarian anarchism is superior to libertarian minarchism. And I will attempt to do so because it helps to achieve my own aims. Thus far, I'm proud to say, I have helped to turn no less than four limited-state libertarians into no-state libertarians.

It should become immediately clear that I, therefore, have two goals when it comes to the promotion of my political views: (1) to convert non-libertarians into libertarians and (2) to convert minarchists into anarchists. Since I've had far more success with my second objective than my first, I can only conclude that the second objective is easier to accomplish than the former. But the former is just as important, and if I were somehow able to convert the statist of the world into minarchists *en mass*, I would consider this a triumphant victory for Liberty.

Because I recognise that both of these tasks are difficult, I try to be respectful when engaging someone in political discourse. I want to win people over, and I realise that name-calling and temper-tantrums is not the way to achieve this. So you can

⁶ Hospers, *op. cit.*

imagine just how embarrassed I was by many of my fellow Ron Paul Revolutionaries when I was reading blogs and whatnot two years ago! I wanted Ron Paul to win, and unfortunately many of his followers were acting like fourth-graders in their discourse with random Internet-users.

Political discourse has been a prime concern of mine for quite some time now.⁷ It's been such a concern because I truly want us to achieve Liberty, and I know that this will not happen as long as we push people away through rudeness.

This brings me to the unfortunate flaw in Mr. Hospers's analysis. He readily recognises a problem exists involving discourse. However, he seems to assume that the problem is entirely on the anarchists' end. Although he does not say so, he implies that minarchists are always respectful and rational in their outlook while anarchists are chaotic, rude, childish, and emotionally-driven. I do not believe this stereotype holds.

The reality is much more nuanced. There are some anarchists, naturally, who are quite rude with people—even with fellow libertarians, much to my chagrin. There are also plenty of anarchists who are extremely respectful individuals. Could you imagine the mild-mannered Jeffrey Tucker throwing profanities at a political opponent, or stamping his foot? I certainly cannot.

Yet this is precisely how Mr. Hospers paints all of us anarchists. Writes Hospers,

There is either an unwillingness [no the part of anarchists] to enter into calm sustained argument about it [the virtues of statism], or a childish frenzy in which they conduct argument, which makes it difficult for anyone to enter into it with them without being at the receiving end of name-calling and numerous personal slurs. I have seen this tendency reach the point of petulant screaming and stamping of feet.⁸

⁷ See, e.g., Alexander S. Peak, "Libertarianism and Confidence—Not Arrogance," 19 January 2009, <http://alexpeak.com/ww/2009/002.html> (accessed 26 May 2009).

⁸ Hospers, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–2.

Hospers does not say that this is simply a problem with specific anarchists he's encountered, but rather that this is a "psychological aspect[] of anarchism."⁹ The implication is clear: if you are an anarchist, you are likely immature. Even if you're not immature, it's not because anarchism does not entail this personality defect, but because you've somehow suppressed your natural anarchist tendency to embrace immaturity.

But this is simply not so. For one thing, I would estimate that most libertarian anarchists are those who were at one time libertarian minarchists. I know that I was a minarchist up until July of 2007, and that I only came to embrace anarchy after years of reflection. Slowly but surely I came around to conclusion after conclusion that this or that aspect of the state was not necessary, that this or that regulation actually caused more harm than good. For me, the straw that broke the camel's back was the environment. I had held that free-market environmentalism was a good and necessary thing, but kept telling myself that we needed the state so that we could have appropriate regulations where needed. The only problem was, I couldn't think of a single regulation that only the state and nothing else could provide. At that point, I had no alternative but to consider the matter of anarchism once more, to consider it objectively and intelligently. I did not embrace anarchism whimsically, but only after a great deal of reflection and thought. Even after embracing it, I still gave the matter a great deal of thought and reflection, as I believe was appropriate. I still question it every once in a while to this day, but every time I do, I come back to the same conclusion: it is the only system that conforms to the way humans really work, the only system that conforms to

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

human nature rather than trying to mould humans in some other image. It is, in short, the only system that can work. (After all, as we all know, government doesn't work.¹⁰)

Thus, since most libertarian anarchists were at one time libertarian minarchists, either Mr. Hospers would have to hold that their personalities changed upon converting to anarchism or that they were just as immature when they were minarchists as they are now. I do not believe Mr. Hospers wishes to concede either of these points.

For another thing, it is simply incorrect to say that all communication breakdowns between minarchists and anarchists are on the anarchists' end. Just as there are some anarchists who are clearly immature, there is a great deal of minarchists who are just as immature. Believe me, I have engaged in my fair share of discussions with immature minarchists, people who embarrass me as a libertarian just as much as the immature anarchists do. I do not pretend, however, that there is any uniform minarchist psychological mindset, or that all minarchists are appropriately represented by the immature ones I've encountered. In short, some anarchists and minarchists alike engage in unproductive discourse, while plenty in both camps understand that mindless name-calling gets us nowhere.

Mr. Hospers writes, "I have certainly noticed, as doubtless many of you have, a recurring personality pattern among those who label themselves anarchists."¹¹ But, alas, if I were to paint minarchists under the same broad brush that Mr. Hospers uses to paint anarchists, would this be anything other than stereotyping?

Where, pray tell, is the respectable discourse in that?

¹⁰ Harry Browne, "Government Doesn't Work," a letter to the editor of *Reason Magazine*, March 1998, <http://harrybrowne.org/articles/GovernmentDoesn'tWork.htm> (accessed May 26 2009).

¹¹ Hospers, *op. cit.*