

**IF MEN WERE ANGELS**



**ANARCHIST TALKING POINTS**

*If men were angels, no government would be necessary*  
—James Madison

Madison's statement seems intuitive and hard to dispute. It is a simple conditional statement that draws from the logical form *modus ponens* to justify the existence of the state in a rather dismissive, hand-waving way. If men (and women too, of course) were angels, we would not need to impose coercive social arrangements underwritten by the power to exercise overwhelming deadly force, a.k.a. government. Because men (and women) are seldom even remotely angelic, these oppressive social arrangements are obviously essential.

There is a problem with Madison's claim, however, and maybe two problems depending on how you parse the question. First, men have not been angels for at least two million years. And during the vast majority of that time, there were no official governments. Not a one. And yet humans flourished at least enough to reproduce themselves into the present day. So, when he implies that government is necessary, the unanswered because unasked question is "Necessary for what?" or "Necessary for whom?" Government is demonstrably not necessary for the survival of the species. So why exactly is it necessary? And to say that government is

necessary to support a civilized way of life, or some such, is to talk in circles. It is to say that we need government so that we can have the kinds of social organization that result from having government: if it weren't for government, then people's lives wouldn't be externally governed. True enough, but it in no way answers the question. Why do people's lives need to be governed?

The fact that angels were chosen as the comparison group might offer some direction here. Men (and women too, as previously indicated) are decidedly not angels. They can in point of fact act in devilish ways, ways that can cause harm to themselves and to others, so it is necessary for some external force to be recruited to reduce, restrict, limit, and rein in our evil impulses. Without government, we live in perennial fear of our neighbors' covetousness and their murderous pathology. With government, we are free to go about our business without this fear, or with this fear greatly reduced. The only downside to this is that with government we are no longer free to go about our business. Again, two million years of prehistory, along with present-day realities of life in traditional societies with little or nothing in the way of formal government, show Madison's claim is simply not true even when the emphasis is on the lack of angels.

I expect that I will be tossing Madison's dusty wig

around some more later on. He had some very specific “for whats” and “for whoms” in mind when he penned the word necessary. But for now I want to focus on the political targets of his statement, or rather the modern-day targets of those who employ his statement or variations on its theme: those maligned creatures (real or imagined) who would feign to question the legitimacy of government at all. Of course, I’m talking about anarchists.

Anarchism, reduced to its most simple and most direct form, is the idea that relations among people should be non-coercive and that all forms of community participation should be voluntary. Taken at face value, there should be nothing radical about this idea. There is nothing inherently repulsive or controversial about the idea that individuals should be able to go about their lives free from the coercive control of other people. Quite to the contrary, coercion is largely and perhaps universally considered a social evil. And humans, like most other creatures, despise externally imposed restriction and respond negatively when they are forced to act against their will.

Despite this, anarchism is frequently dismissed as an irrational and impractical utopian ideal sponsored by potentially violent nonconformists who are muddleheaded and naïve. It is true that there are a few violent, muddleheaded, and naïve nonconformists out

there who call themselves anarchists, whose quasi-protest antics invariably trend viral. But even if all anarchists shared this flawed personality profile, it would not then follow that anarchism itself is therefore either irrational or impractical or utopian or anything else. The ideas and ideals of anarchism need to be kept separate from media-cultivated anarchist stereotypes.

Although the stereotypes themselves can be informative. Stereotypes are useful mental shortcuts, and while they can lead to bias and encourage discrimination and prejudice, they are, like myths, frequently constructed around kernels of fact. The classic stereotype of the anarchist as a violent and destructive nonconformist—terrorist, even—can be traced ultimately to the incompatibility of anarchist ideals with the presumed imperative of governmental power. Civilized society is built upon layers and layers of coercion, all of which rests on a bedrock of irresistible deadly force.

Anarchism, specifically the suggestion that we need to remove force and coercion from our social world, implies that civilized society itself needs to be removed, or at least changed in fundamental ways. The mere thought of anarchism is dangerous and does violence to the status quo if it is granted even passing validity.

Anarchists, then, are seen as dangerous and violent not only because they may have a tendency as individuals to refuse wholesale acquiescence to the rule of law, but because their very existence raises the question of

government legitimacy and threatens the house-of-cards foundation upon which the civilized order is built.

But the happily governed denizens of civilization have an additional motivation to dismiss anarchism, a deeply personal one that results from the ease with which it can trigger an uncomfortable psychological state known as cognitive dissonance. When we are made aware of a contradiction between our actions and our values or beliefs, we are motivated to resolve the inconsistencies. We can live with a certain amount of ambiguity in our lives, but internal incongruity within our core values, or inconsistencies between these values and our actions, is psychologically painful. Among other things, cognitive dissonance is what gives accusations of hypocrisy their bite.

We have several psychological tools—defense mechanisms—at our disposal for resolving dissonance when it emerges. Perhaps the simplest is rationalization. If we can justify the apparent disconnect, find a reason why we acted counter to our values, for example, the internal contradiction vanishes. Suppose that I call myself an environmentalist, and I espouse energy conservation, and someone points out that although I live within easy walking distance of my job, I nonetheless drive my car to work every morning. I experience a brief pang of dissonance when confronted with the contradiction between my beliefs and my

actions. But it is short-lived because I immediately respond by pointing out that the distance is so small that it really doesn't matter. Or maybe I focus on a knee injury that would surely flair up if I walked each day. Or maybe I point out that my wife also works where I do, and she would drive even if I walked, so whether I ride or walk comes to the same thing. In situations where simple rationalization isn't feasible, when the contradiction seems unresolvable by simple justification, something more profound can happen: the values and beliefs themselves can be altered or distorted in order to resolve the inconsistency.

It can go the other way, of course. It is sometimes possible to change our actions. But our actions are not always under our control. Much of our behavior is being channeled and directed externally. We are living under the coercive control of "government," after all. I believe it is wrong to support sweatshops, but I am economically coerced to sell my time and labor, and my job requires that I wear nice clothes and at the same time doesn't pay enough for me to afford to buy clothes that aren't made in a sweatshop. So, my anti-sweatshop attitudes are modified: "Yeah, the sweatshop issue is a problem, but there are more important things to worry about."

Back to anarchism. The anarchist ideals of voluntary community action and power-equality in social

relationships should be consonant with everyone's personal core values on some level. Every creature on the planet wants to preserve and maintain its own freedom. Yet these ideals are in direct opposition to every oppressive fiber of civilization. The potential for cognitive dissonance is overwhelming. We are all being forced daily to relinquish our freedom in countless ways, and this should be a serious problem for each of us. But our psychological tools for reducing cognitive dissonance work their magic, and we come to believe that it is our free choice to surrender our freedom, and besides it is for our own good. The powerful dissonance produced by the contradiction between our desire for personal autonomy and our de facto docility triggers equally powerful defensive reactions. Our individual acquiescence to civilized order requires immense and persistent justification, and anarchist ideals—and the anarchists who espouse them—need to be rationalized away.

Justification of the oppressive status quo has become a culture-wide obsession of modernity, and has led to the construction of an elaborate fairytale worldview in which global civilization is the expression of the very soul and essence of humanity. This fairytale, as it turns out, is just another defense against cognitive dissonance. There must be a great and glorious reason for all of the pain and suffering and death and genocide and environmental devastation that built our modern world,



and for all of the ongoing pain and suffering and death and genocide and environmental devastation that is necessary to keep it standing. And like magic in a children's story, the power of this fiction derives entirely from the extent to which other people believe it—or at least the extent to which they are willing to pretend they believe it with all their heart—too.

Saying you believe doesn't make it true, but there are real consequences to acting even if you are acting on a false belief. However, despite what appears to be overwhelming social pressure to drink the Kool-Aid along with everyone else, it is still possible to set the cup back down on the table. Perhaps all that is necessary is a simple reminder that every moment carries with it the possibility of making a free choice.

In what follows, I poke holes in some common justifications of the coercive status quo by providing rejoinders—talking points, if you will—to a few of the more typical kneejerk defensive reactions to anarchism and anarchists. I have numbered the anti-anarchism statements below for ease of reference. They are not listed in any particular order, although I address what I think are the most obvious ones first. Also note that this is in no way a comprehensive list, and the ones I've included tend to bleed into each other and share the same misguided assumptions because they are ultimately based on the same fairytale.

## **1. Without top-down government, all would be chaos**

This is a common claim that for those making it is assumed to be tautological: it is obviously true by simple definition. Anarchy means chaos; in common parlance they are synonyms. And perpetual government containment is all that is preventing the world from spinning out of control in kaleidoscopic confusion into the void.

My first question here is to ask “What do you mean by all?” Surely the seasons will continue to progress in their previous order, the sun will rise and set on schedule, water will boil when it is heated sufficiently, and rabbits will still have a remarkably short gestation period with or without government intervention. Perhaps the word “all” is meant to cover only the human social world. Without government, we would have social chaos. But this doesn’t work either. The human species has spent over 99% of its time on the planet in the absence of any legally supported and militarily armed governments. From what we can tell from the archaeological evidence and from existing hunter-gatherers, human life in the absence of an official government proceeds in a demonstrably non-chaotic fashion.

Maybe “all” is meant to refer to the myriad of economic relationships that emerge from state society, the

uncountable contractual obligations and bureaucratic arrangements that are being concocted and directed and regulated and controlled. Without government, there would be no way of establishing and supporting systematic (and systematically unequal) access to resources. Actually, without government the idea that natural stuff could be a “resource” to be exploited would itself border on incoherence. In addition, we would not have corporations or roads or sewers or schools that “educate” kids to become docile citizen-consumers. We would not have insurance providers or medical facilities or petroleum refineries or nuclear weapons plants. It would mean the end of cell phones and high-tech surveillance systems and the internet. It would mean the end of factory farmed meat and sweatshop clothing. There would be no banks nor bankers—nor any need for them. There would be no globally accepted currency. This I will grant. If top-down government were suddenly eliminated, our consumer economic system would implode, and in the immediate aftermath things could get extremely dicey—chaotic, even. That does not, however, mean that chaos would be the ultimate outcome. But the “all will be chaos” criticism of anarchism is seldom if ever qualified with “in the short-term.”

So let’s give it that qualification. What if a sudden transition to an anarchistic situation (if it were ever to happen, and if it did it wouldn’t necessarily have to be

sudden and dramatic) would include considerable upheaval, confusion, death, destruction, and general mayhem? The potent pillars of state power and control have been amassed over thousands of years; their effects are unlikely to disappear overnight. So what? When I get a sliver, I don't let it continue to fester because removing it is likely to be more painful in the short-term. In addition, the turmoil of the end of government would not be universally experienced as a negative. It would likely be far worse for the rich and powerful and a potential boon to many of the folks presently at the lower end of the pecking order to have the pecking order removed.

It is informative to see what happens in the immediate aftermath of natural disasters. The media are quick to provide images of looting and intentional property damage and people out of control running amok. Simple acts of neighborly cooperation during times of crisis don't grab the ratings all that well. Notice who the typical "victims" of the property damage and looting are. Notice that they typically aren't people. Notice the corporate logos on the merchandise being smuggled away. Also, the very fact that some people engage in destructive behavior when the oppressive state systems of control are temporarily offline can be used to make the anarchist point. What might slaves do when the master can no longer apply the whip? What happens when people who have never had the opportunity to

develop the psychological tools for dealing with individual freedom and autonomy, people whose behavior has always been under external surveillance and control, are suddenly handed the rudder? Think of college freshmen the first semester away from their parents' watchful eyes—but I have never heard anyone make the argument that college should be avoided because college freshmen might have some problems adjusting to the change of lifestyle.

Regardless of how it is qualified, it is easy to see how the claim of chaos can serve as a prophylactic to cognitive dissonance both now and in the future. No matter how bad it gets, no matter how coercive and abusive the state becomes, no matter how much personal autonomy I am forced to relinquish, statelessness will always be much, much worse. Really, it will. So, I shouldn't complain too much about the chafing of my shackles.

**2. We need government to protect us from other people, and**

**3. Anarchism would be good for the strong but bad for the weak**

These are just re-workings of Madison's quote, and reflect Hobbes' well-worn sentiment that life outside the protective walls of civilization would be a "war of all

against all.” Humans, like all animals, have instinctual drives that place their own self-interests in potential competition with the self-interests of others. Government is necessary to protect the weak from the strong and the minority from the majority.

First of all, this assumes that self-interest naturally leads to competition rather than cooperation. Given our evolutionary status as social primates, I would think that voluntary cooperation is at least as likely an outcome in all but the most extreme cases of scarcity, and maybe especially then as well. But probably the biggest problem with these claims is that they have things completely backward. Government, as a social technology designed specifically for expressing power over the masses, provides a potent tool for those in power to direct large numbers of people for their own self-interested purposes. Government is the muscle that the strong use to intimidate and corral the weak. The bureaucracies of the state are staffed with exactly those “other people” that these same bureaucracies are supposedly needed to protect us from—only this elite minority of “other people” has been granted a level of exploitive power that would be impossible otherwise, along with the tools to exercise that power. Without government, you have potential competition from numerous other people—some of whom you might be able to out compete and some, perhaps not. But with government in place, power that would otherwise be

diffuse and broadly distributed is now amplified beyond reckoning and concentrated in a single beast that nobody can compete with. So, assuming that the Hobbesian war-of-all-against-all notion has even remote validity (it doesn't), we've traded a bunch of petty bullies for a single deadly tyrant.

Again, our foraging cousins can serve as models. Egalitarian hunter-gatherer bands have numerous extremely effective ways of reining in those who would use their physical strength or personality to coerce or control others. Never underestimate the power of social approbation—or a neighbor armed with poison arrows who has finally had enough of your shit.

#### **4. It's too late to change, anarchism might have worked for small isolated groups but it would never work for our present global society**

The last part of this claim is certainly true, and derives directly from the definition of anarchism. Global society requires a planetary level of coercive deadly force. It requires massive systems of corporate exploitation and layer upon layer of involuntary bureaucratic participation. If anarchism is incompatible with even minimal state government, it is completely irreconcilable with international commerce or any other feature of a globalized economy.

There are two hidden and unquestioned beliefs lurking beneath this claim: first, that our present society is the result of some kind of natural and inevitable progression rather than an arbitrary accumulation of historical accidents, and second, that our present global society is something that should be preserved at all cost. Neither of these beliefs can withstand the slightest objective scrutiny. While it may be true that you can't put toothpaste back in the tube, that says nothing about whether you need either the tube or the toothpaste to begin with.

Also—and this is the most potent rejoinder to this claim—the idea that anarchism is something that could be judged in terms of whether and how well it “works” misses the point entirely. Anarchism is not just another political option, like democratic socialism, or parliamentary communism. Anarchism implies the absence of all political organization that relies on involuntary participation. What makes democratic socialism, for instance, “work” is its ability to direct and control people against their free will (or, even better, to convince them that it is their free will to perform the will of the state). Once again, we run up against the unasked “for what?” and “for whom?” To judge whether or how well something works you need first to be clear about what it is supposed to be doing and who it is doing it for.

So, what is global society supposed to be doing other



than further concentrating power and wealth?

Well, it feeds hungry people for one thing. Given that the number of people on the planet right now far exceeds natural carrying capacity, there is some merit to this response. Without the machines and the factory farms of civilization, it would be impossible to supply food to the billions of people who are too busy generating wealth for their corporate masters to be actively engaged in food procurement themselves. The very fact of industrial civilization creates the preconditions for scarcity—hunter-gatherers seldom go hungry—so to claim that global civilization is therefore necessary to our survival is fallacious. It's like forcing someone to climb to the top of a tall ladder at gunpoint and then telling them that they are lucky you put the ladder there for them because without it they would fall straight to the ground.

It might be too late to change. But it is never too late to walk away.

**5. Anarchists are destructive, antisocial hooligans; rebellious adolescents; radical libertarians; hedonists who oppose all rules and laws**

The popularity of the ad hominem approach is due to the ease with which it can dissolve dissonance. Denigrating the person makes it a simple matter to dismiss her ideas.

The denigration of anarchists can involve any of a number of loosely related allegations of unsavory-ness. Let's take each of the ones listed above in turn.

First: anarchists are destructive and antisocial. We dealt with this one earlier: the mere idea of anarchism is potentially damaging to the status quo. Also, it is a natural thing for a healthy animal to resist being caged and to bite at the hand around its throat. In order for the antisocial accusation to stick, you first have to equate being social with capitulation to power. People who rock the boat invariably make things uncomfortable for everyone else. The Jews who refused to get on the train were being antisocial in just this respect.

The rebellious adolescent allegation has both an empirical and a psychological kernel of truth to it. Empirically, people who call themselves anarchists tend to be young white males. The “white male” part stems directly from the fact that the additional chains of racism and sexism make it more difficult for members of other demographic categories to express themselves freely. The young part stems from a similar source. The older you are, the more deeply you have been absorbed into the machine—especially in terms of its ability to exploit you through economic coercion. Debt is an anchor that keeps the ship of freedom from ever leaving the harbor. Psychologically, adolescence is a time of intense identity formation, when previously unquestioned

beliefs are examined and issues of free choice and autonomy become salient and palpable features of the social environment. The US incarcerates more persons under the age of 18 than any other country, a clear indication of how this developmental period is being dealt with.

Libertarians are sometimes called anarchists because of their antagonism toward government regulation and taxation. Nevertheless, persons of a libertarian persuasion have no problem using the government's monopoly on deadly force to support their own economic interests. Libertarians are interested in the lack of government control when it suits their own interests. They are either totally for the privatization of all social services (fire protection, prisons, highway maintenance) or they have the incoherent notion that these things are not necessary for industrial consumer society to function. Anarchists are not just against central government, they are against any institution that would demand involuntary relinquishment of personal autonomy. This would include national, state, and local governments along with any other private body or corporation sanctioned to limit individual freedom in any form. And whereas anarchists want to reduce or eliminate government in order to reduce or eliminate the capacity for systematic exploitation, Libertarians want government-imposed restrictions on systematic exploitation reduced to an absolute minimum. These are

entirely different things.

As far as hedonism goes, yes there are a few narcissists out there who make use of the anarchist label in order to justify their own impulsivity and self-indulgence.

However, anarchism actually increases personal responsibility; it might be argued that true self-control is only possible under anarchism. Anarchism removes external controls on behavior, and when that happens, you are suddenly the only person responsible for your actions—in fact, anarchism may be the only condition in which you have such responsibility.

There are also a few folks who embrace the anarchist label who aspire to be artists or musicians but who have little real talent, or not the kind of talent that would get them mainstream notoriety. For these folks, the association with anarchism is a means to justify their eccentricity and, quite likely produces in some a fertile space for real creativity. There is nothing wrong with this. It's just not, in and of itself, anarchism. It's a lifestyle preference, or an alternative way of pursuing status. I'm thinking of the Punk movement as a historical case in point.

And finally, because laws are tools for exercising power and control, anarchism by definition implies lawlessness. But laws are different than rules. Most anarchists have no problem with agreed-upon rules of

decorum, voluntary social arrangements, personal commitments to other people, traditional expectations, norms of etiquette, etc.

Ad hominem attacks are an attempt to use emotions as a diversion from the facts. Because a person is unsavory, it does not logically follow that his or her ideas are flawed. But more to the point, the claim that all anarchists (or even most anarchists) are unsavory is simply untrue. I am an anarchist, and I assure you that I am a very nice, polite, and friendly person—or at least I am on most days—and while I can be self-indulgent and impulsive on occasion I live a far too stoic lifestyle to ever be considered a hedonist, and I am several decades away from adolescence.

## **6. Anarchism is an archaic idea and advances in technology will soon make it completely irrelevant**

The thinking here is that anarchist movements in the past have typically emerged as a response to tyrannical monarchs or during times of political upheaval. The world is a different place now. Tyrants are few, and soon liberal democratic ideals will have made their way into even the most oppressive parts of the globe.

Perhaps the simplest way to counter this is to point out that “spread of liberal democracy” is really just code for the expansion of powerful parasitic international

corporations and the globalization of exploitation. The more “democratic” a country is, the more open its citizens are to consumerist propaganda, and the easier it is for international corporations to buy the cooperation of government officials. There is a strange bastardization of language going on here, where “democracy” has been equated with a kind of fascist corporate plutocracy.

Also, this claim taps directly into the progressive delusion, the notion that history is leading us in the direction of some utopian paradise and that technological growth and change is the magic elixir that will eventually solve all of our current problems. There are at least two problematic features of this “technology will save us” notion. First, advances in technology have historically served to intensify the power of those who are in control. There is no reason to suspect that things will be different with future technology—and every reason to suspect things will be even worse: consider for example how recent changes in the capacity for surveillance and monitoring have led to more ubiquitous and intrusive surveillance and monitoring. Second, advances in social technology are making meaningful resistance to power more and more difficult to achieve. For the progressive utopians, these are both good things, especially with respect to our social technology’s ability to manufacture docile personalities—domesticated humans who don’t mind being told what to do.

In the future all will be peaceful and serene because all of humanity will be as compliant as a well-trained flock of sheep. If that future arrives, it is true, anarchism will indeed be irrelevant.

## **7. Anarchists are Hypocrites**

I have saved the most irritating accusation for last. As the poison of the status quo starts to seep deeper and deeper into the civilization-Kool-Aid drinkers' neural tissues, creeping dissonance will inevitably lead to an ad hominem attack. A good offense is the best defense. And the go-to ad hominem tool of choice is the accusation of hypocrisy. By deriding the status quo while simultaneously making use of its many accoutrement benefits, I am obviously a flaming hypocrite. I call myself an anarchist but I have a job and a mortgage. I also obey most laws on most occasions. I am not presently conspiring to fly a plane into the Whitehouse or planning to blow up a police car anytime soon. Although I have seriously considered damaging the railroad lines that funnel coal to the local power plant and freeing the cattle from the factory farm just outside of town—and someday I am for sure going to toss bricks through the windows of each of the payday loan centers that just opened up down the street—I have yet to carry out any act of sabotage whatsoever. How can I rail against the system while I continue to live a

life entirely embedded in that same system?

In many ways, despite its irksomeness, the charge of hypocrisy is the easiest to counter.

First off, the charge of hypocrisy, like all other ad hominem attacks, has no logical potency. So what if I'm a hypocrite? That doesn't mean that I'm wrong. Because an idiot says it's snowing, that doesn't somehow make it a warm sunny day. But more importantly, the accusation of hypocrisy simply cannot be made to stick. It assumes that I have some real choice in the matter. If an evangelical vegan finds herself shipwrecked on a sandbar where the only food is shellfish, she is not suffering a mental defect if she chooses to set her vegetarian ways aside for a time. Likewise, a prisoner does not relinquish his claims of innocence by eating prison food or obeying the commands of the armed guard directing him to his cell. You and I are, in a very real sense, prisoners of civilization. I literally cannot move from where I am presently standing without participating in civilization; any direction I choose to walk contains only ground that is paved or parceled into private property. Even if I were to abandon my job and house and family and live homeless on the street, I am nonetheless forced to acknowledge the system on pain of death. If I have decided that the idea of government is not acceptable to me, and I have successfully divorced myself from any feelings of loyalty to nation or state or



any other political abstraction, and I have learned to recognize these things as the fictions that they are, I am yet living amongst the mass of people who believe wholeheartedly and without question in what I know to be false.

## **The core argument**

My goal here has been to show that reflexive anti-anarchist rhetoric is just that, and that typical anti-anarchism allegations are flimsy and insupportable rationalizations logically on par with those used in the antebellum south to justify black slavery when that was the status quo. The specific examples covered above all derive from the same source: the person's need to justify their own docility.

There are in fact real reasons that you and I are not free. The fact that all governments rely on the capacity and unflinching resolve to exercise overwhelming force is not just a trivial feature of state authority. Every moment of every day we bend to the will of power and conform and comply and obey because we have convinced ourselves that that is the only reasonable response. And we have several ways of continuing to convince ourselves, ways of rationalizing that our continued acquiescence is our own choice or that it is really in our

own best interest or that even if it is not in our best interest there is nothing we can do to change things at this point.

It is important to recognize that there are other ways of responding to power. Resistance, for example. Perhaps it is time that we act on the half-truth of Madison's statement, and demonstrate to those in power that men (and folks on all regions of the gender spectrum) are not at all angels.

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