Victor Yarros
Individualist or Philosophical Anarchism
1897

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Victor Yarros (1865–1956) was a famous American individualist anarchist born in Russia and immigrated to the United States.

He was a regular contributor of *Liberty*, the paper edited by Benjamin Tucker.

Later on he became critical of anarchism and accepted the existence of the State. This change of mind is briefly examined in Roderick T. Long, *How Victor Yarros Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the State.*

Nevertheless, during his time as an individualist anarchist, Victor Yarros expressed his convictions in a very effective way and some of his writings are still worth of being circulated and read.

This text is taken from from *The Encyclopaedia of Social Reform*, Funk & Wagnalls Co., New York & London, 1897, edited by William D. P. Bliss.

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specific measures of repeal, would depend largely on circumstances. It is to be remembered that, while the anarchists are strenuous in their opposition to every vestige of government, they do not expect to realize their entire program at one stroke. They are prepared for very slow and gradual reform, and would welcome the success of any single libertarian proposal. They would rejoice in the triumph of the free-trade idea, the repeal of the laws perpetuating land monopoly and monetary monopoly, and the abolition of special privileges. If they do not form themselves into a political party for the purpose of attaining one or more of these objects, it is because they can do more by other methods.

Moreover, to enter into the political arena is to recognize, by implication, the principle of government. To vote is to coerce or to threaten coercion. Behind the ballot is the bullet of the soldier ready to force the defeated minority into submission. The voter does not merely assert his right to self-government; he sets up a claim to govern others. The anarchist cannot employ a method which would put him in such a false light.

Thus the anarchist is neither a government bomb-thrower nor a revolutionary bomb-thrower. He objects to the use of violence by the government as well as against it. He restricts himself to the method of education and such passive resistance as is exemplified by a refusal to pay taxes or rent or import duties on commodities purchased in foreign countries.

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erwise impose its will upon them. Public opinion would not approve of a government campaign of violence against a number of intelligent and perfectly honest individuals banded together for the sole purpose of carrying on their legitimate activities and asserting their right to ignore injunctions and prohibitions having no authority from an ethical point of view.

"Even if anarchists believed in the use of violent methods, and if they thought that violent resistance to government would hasten their emancipation they would certainty resort to it since it is not immoral or invasive to use force *against* invaders, there would be one important difference between them and other schools of reformers. Anarchists would not prevent others from living under government side by side with them, while other reformers seek to impose their schemes on the whole community in which they live. Thus the State socialists, in pursuance of their program of State monopoly of capital, intend to suppress all competition and all rivalry on the part of individual owners of capital. The anarchists, on the other hand, if allowed to remain outside of the governmental organization, would force no one to join them or follow their example. Still, as a matter of fact, anarchists abjure violence even in their own interests, vividly realizing the truth that the progress of justice and freedom is arrested in a state of war. Peace is an essential condition to the spread of rational ideas and the growth of the sentiment of toleration. Appealing, as they do, to the ideas and feelings of justice, it would be suicidal for anarchists to encourage violence and excite the lowest passions of men by revolutionary tactics.

To reform by ordinary political methods the anarchists are also opposed, at least under present conditions. As they do not seek any new positive legislation, they can expect nothing from politics. They demand the repeal of the legislation which improperly restricts men's freedom of action, and such repeal they cannot secure while being in a minority. Whether they would cooperate with other parties in attempting to carry

becomes the sole guide and authority. The social laws require to be applied and enforced as long as predatory instincts and invasive tendencies continue to manifest themselves in human relations, and this necessitates the maintenance of associations for the protection of freedom and the punishment of aggressive. But the governmental method is not adapted to the promotion of this end. Government begins by coercing the noninvasive individual into cooperation for defense and offense, regardless of the fact that a benevolent despotism is not a whit more defensible than a selfish despotism.

Methods

In general it may be stated that any methods, not in themselves invasive, are regarded as legitimate by the anarchists in the furtherance of their cause. But they rely chiefly, if not entirely, on the methods of education — theoretical propaganda of their views — and of passive resistance to government. In violence, so-called propaganda by deed and subterranean plotting against existing institutions, they do not believe. Political changes may be brought about by revolutions, and possibly also such economic changes as are contemplated by the State socialists. But freedom can rest only on ideas and sentiments favorable to it, and revolutionary demonstrations can never abolish ignorance and the spirit of tyranny.

Freedom cannot be forced on those who are not fit for it. The emancipation of the people from the aggression of government must come through their own deliberate choice and effort. Anarchists can but disseminate true political teachings and expose the nature and essence of governmentalism. Anarchists, however, do not believe that it is necessary to convert the whole people in order to carry their principles into practice. A strong and determined minority could, while remaining passive, successfully resist the attempt of government to tax them and oth-

The individualistic or philosophical anarchists favor the abolition of 'the State' and government of man, by man. They seek to bring about a state of perfect freedom of anarchy.

Definition and Statement

To comprehend the precise import of this statement it is essential to grasp and bear in mind the definitions given by the anarchists to the terms employed in their expositions. The current misconceptions of the anarchistic doctrines are chiefly due to the persistent, though largely unconscious habit of interpreting them in the light of the popular definitions of the terms 'State', 'government', etc., instead of in the light of their own technical use of these terms.

The average man, on being told that the anarchist would abolish all governmental restraints, not unnaturally concludes that the proposition involves the removal of the restrictions upon *criminal* conduct, the relinquishment of organized defence of life, liberty and property.

Those who are familiar with the doctrine of nonresistance to evil, preached by the early Christians and by the modern Tolstoians, generally identify anarchism with it.

But such interpretations are without any foundation. The anarchists emphatically favor resistance to and organized protection against crime and aggression of every kind; it is not greater freedom for the criminal, but greater freedom for the noncriminal, that they aim to secure; and by the abolition of government they mean the removal of restrictions upon conduct intrinsically ethical and legitimate, but which ignorant legislation has interdicted as criminal.

The anarchistic principle of personal liberty is absolutely coincident with the famous Spencerian 'first principle of human happiness,' the principle of 'equal freedom', which Mr. Spencer has expressed in the formula, 'Every man is free to do what he

wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man.'

It is, in fact, precisely *because* the anarchist accepts this principle without reservations and insists on the suppression and elimination of *all* aggression or invasion all conduct incompatible with equality of liberty that he declares war upon the 'State' and 'government'. He defines 'State' as 'the embodiment of the principle of invasion in an individual or band of individuals, assuming to act as representatives or masters of the entire people within a given area.' (The definitions here given are those formed and consistently used by Benjamin R. Tucker, the editor of *Liberty*, the organ of the philosophical anarchistic movement.)

Government he defines as 'the subjection of the noninvasive individual to an external will'; and 'invasion' as conduct violative of equal freedom.

Program

Perhaps the clearest way of stating the political program of the anarchists will be to indicate its relation to other better known theories of government. The anarchists agreeing with the view of the true Jeffersonian Democrats; that the best government is that which governs least, sympathizing with the position of the old Manchester individualists and *laissezfaireists*, who believed in a minimum of government interference, as well as with the less value doctrines of the more radical modern individualists of the Spencerian school, who would limit the State to the sole function of protecting men against external and internal invaders, go a step farther and demand the dissolution of what remains of 'government' viz., compulsory taxation and compulsory military service. It is no more necessary, contend the anarchists, that government should assume the protective military and police functions, and *compel* men

Apart from the question of compulsory taxation and compulsory military service, on the abolition of which anarchists alone lay stress (although they readily admit that the police functions of government will be the last to disappear), there is little, if any, difference between anarchists and Spencerian individualists on the question of government interference. The cessation of such interference with economic relations — with the issue of money, banking, wages, trade, production etc. is advocated on the ground that the solution of the social problems is to be found in liberty rather than in regulation, in free competition rather than in State monopoly. On the subject of public education, postal service, poor laws, sanitary supervision, etc., anarchists, in common with advanced individualists, hold that government interference is as pernicious practically as it is unwarranted ethically. Corruption and inefficiency are evils inseparable from government management, and there is nothing which government does that could not be done better by private enterprise under free competition.

In short, the anarchists object to governmentalism because it is unethical, as well as unnecessary and inexpedient.

Government is either the will of one man or the will of a number of men, large or small. Now, the will of one or many is not a criterion of right and justice, while for the adjustment of the conflicting interests of the members of society such a criterion is an absolute necessity.

Majority Rule Discredited

Majority rule, and even the rule of a despot, may be, under certain conditions, preferable to a state of civil chaos; but as men advance and study the facts of their own development, they begin to realize the truth that there is no relation whatever between right and numbers, justice and force. Majority rule is discredited along with despotic rule, and ethical science

Government means the coercion of the noninvasive, the taxation of those who protest at being forced to join the political organization set up by the majority. It enacts statutes and imposed restraints which find no sanction in the law of equal freedom, and punishes men for disobeying such arbitrary provisions.

It is true that governments profess to have the public welfare in view and to enforce nothing save what morality and justice dictate. Justice, however, is invariably confounded by governments with legalism, and by the enforcement of justice they often mean the enforcement of the very laws which they enact in violation of justice. Thus laws in restraint of trade and of exchange are enforced in the name of justice, whereas justice demands the fullest freedom of trade and exchange.

Strictly speaking, the enforcement of justice cannot be undertaken by government at all, since a government that should attempt to enforce justice would have to begin by signing its own death warrant.

A government that would enforce equal freedom and let the inoffensive alone would be, not a government, but a voluntary association for the protection of rights.

In republican countries men loosely speak of their 'free government', their 'government by consent'. In reality there is no such thing as government by consent. Majorities rule, and the minorities are forced to acquiesce.

The principle of consent is clearly fatal to governmentalism, for it implies the right of the noninvasive to ignore the State and decline to accept its services. Ethically a man has a perfect right to do this, for the mere refusal to join the political organization (which is merely an insurance association) is not a breach of the principle of equal freedom.

Our 'free governments' deny this right, hence they are immoral. They cannot become moral except by ceasing to be governments and becoming purely voluntary associations for defence.

to accept its services, than it is that government should meddle with production, trade, banking, education, and other lines of human activity.

By voluntary organization and voluntary taxation it is perfectly possible to protect liberty and property and to restrain crime.

It is doubtless easy to imagine a society in which government concerns itself with nothing save preservation of order and punishment of crime, in which there are no public schools supported by compulsory taxation, no government interference with the issue of currency and banking, no customhouses or duties on foreign imports, no government postal service, no censorship of literature and the stage, no attempt to enforce Sunday laws, etc.

The *laissezfaireists* of the various schools have familiarized the thinking public with such a type of social organization. Now the anarchists propose to do away with the compulsory feature of the single function reserved for government by the radical *laissezfaireists*. In other words, they insist on the right of the non-aggressive individual to 'ignore the State', to dispense with the protective services of the defensive organization and remain outside of it. This would not prevent those who might desire systematic and organized protection from combining to maintain a defensive institution, but such an institution would not be a government, since no one would be compelled to join it and pay toward its support. Anarchy therefore, may be defined as a state of society in which the noninvasive individual is not coerced into cooperation for the defense of his neighbors, and in which each enjoys the highest degree of liberty compatible with equality of liberty.

With regard to the question of putting down aggression, the jurisdiction of the voluntary defensive organization would of course extend to outsiders, and not be limited by its membership. The criminals are not to secure immunity by declining to join defensive associations. As the freedom of each is to be

bounded by the equal freedom of all, the invader would be liable to punishment under anarchism no less than under government. Criminals would still be tried by juries and punished by executive officers. They would not be allowed to set up ethical standards for themselves and to do what is right in their own eyes."

Such a doctrine involves not the *abolition* of government but the widest possible extension of it. It repudiates all ethical principles and abandons all attempts at enforcing justice and protecting rights. Every man is allowed under it to govern his fellows, if he has the will and the power, and the struggle for existence in the simplest and crudest form is revived.

Anarchism, on the other hand, posits the principle of equal liberty as binding upon all, and only insists that those who refrain from violating it should not be interfered with in any way, either by individual governors or combinations of would be rulers.

Anarchists reject governmentalism because they find no ethical warrant and no practical necessity for it. It appears to them self-evident that society, or the community, can have no greater claims upon the individual than the component members of it have. The metaphysical and misleading analogies between society and organism, upon which is usually founded the governmentalist's theory of the prerogatives of the State, anarchists reject with undisguised contempt.

Arguments for Anarchism

The community', or 'the State,' is an abstraction, and an abstraction has neither rights nor duties. Individuals, and individuals only, have rights. This proposition is the cornerstone of the anarchistic doctrine, and those who accept it are bound to go the full length of anarchism.

For if the community cannot rightfully compel a man to do or refrain from doing that which private and individual members thereof cannot legitimately force him to do or forego, then compulsory taxation and compulsory cooperation for any purpose whatever are wrong in principle, and government is merely another name for aggression. It will not be pretended that one private individual has the right to tax another private individual without his consent; how, then, does the majority of the members of a community obtain the right to tax the minority without its consent?

Government Aggression

Having outgrown the dogma of the divine right of kings, democratic countries are unconsciously erecting the dogma of the divine right of majorities to rule. The absurdity of such a belief is apparent. Majorities, minorities, and other combinations of individuals are entitled to insist on respect of their rights, but not on violating the rights of others. There is one ethical standard, not two; and it cannot be right for government to do that which would be criminal, immoral, when committed by individuals.

Laws of social life are not made at the polls or in legislative assemblies; they have to be discovered in the same way in which laws of other sciences are discovered. Once discovered, majorities are bound to observe them no less than individuals.

As already stated, the anarchists hold that the law of equal freedom, formulated positively by Spencer and negatively by Kant, is a scientific social law which ought to guide men in their various activities and mutual relations. The logical deductions and corollaries of this law show us at once our rights and our duties. Government violates this great law not only by the fact of its very existence but in a thousand other ways.