

What's Wrong With Anarchism?

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

The title of this essay implies that there is indeed something wrong with anarchism as an ideology or strategy of action. Here are my reasons why.

To begin with, we must distinguish between anarchy as a political ideology and anarchy as a form of radical activism. The former version of anarchy simply insists that all types of rulership are undesirable and worthy of demolition. The latter form of anarchism rather than advocating a particular political model is more a mind-set based on acute individualism and involves a set of ideas that revolve around the sentiment that all authority and hierarchy is inherently bad and must be undermined, usually through militant action.

This radical “popular” anarchism is the stuff that bloody revolutions and insurrections are made of, and it is easy to see how this orientation would appeal to a certain personality type and, I contend, be associated with a measure of psychopathology. It is also obvious how political anarchism and militant radical anarchism could readily interface with each other and, indeed, have done so.

Anarchism, which is coming to the fore again in discussions about Peak Oil and the collapse of modern civilization, is riddled with radicalist thought fuelled by frustration and anger at the rampant consumerism of developed societies and governmental inaction at the worsening environmental crisis.

Derrick Jensen’s two-volume work *Endgame* perhaps best embodies the viewpoint I am addressing here, and it also provides sufficient anchorage to argue against it. Rejecting Gandhian-, Christian-, and Buddhist-style pacificism, he observes:

I would have no moral or existential problem destroying the lifestyles of those in power. The politicians, CEOs, generals, capitalist journalists. Those who, if faced with a Nuremberg-style tribunal, should and would find themselves at the end of a rope for their crimes against both the natural world and humanity. But what about Americans just trying to love their children and take them to the amusement park once a month, to them toys, to get them an education so they can get a job? . . . The question quickly becomes: what rights do people have? More specifically, does anyone have the right to enslave another? More specifically yet, does any group of people have the right to enslave others—human or nonhuman—simply because they have the power to do so, and because they perceive it as their right (and because they have created a propaganda system consisting of intertwined religious, philosophical, scientific, educational, informational, economic, governmental, and legal systems all working to convince themselves and at least some of their human victims it is their right)? . . . How far will you go in order to stop those in power from enslaving—and killing—the mass of humans, and in fact the planet? (*Endgame*, vol. 1, pp. 94-95)

Jensen believes, and I think rightly so, that our abusive, enslaving civilization is driven by a death wish, which can be satisfied only with the obliteration of our home planet. In light of this recognition, what indeed ought we to do about it? Does it not seem morally justifiable to start dismantling civilization, if need be by violent means? Jensen is an honest thinker, who is tortured by his insights about the darkness of civilization. He makes a curious radical anarchist, however, for he has scruples. In a number of places he admits that he is even scared by his own wrathful thoughts.

I share his anger at the ongoing devastation of the environment, nonhuman beings, and the underprivileged, and the immense suffering inflicted by so-called civilized people, directly or indirectly, on the uncivilized. He compares it to rape, which he himself experienced as a child. He seems to have qualms about causing further suffering by forcing civilization's demise, and he is concerned about the victims of civilization—not least the sexually abused and battered women. And yet, he nonetheless encourages others to take militant action like blowing up dams to free the rivers and their creatures, or to knock out electrical infrastructures. Here I cannot follow him on account of the same kind of sensitivity and conscience with which he seems to be endowed and which appears to be (temporarily?) eclipsed by his righteous anger against individuals and the "system" that is ravaging our common home.

Jensen is limiting himself to a writer's weapons—words—to fight civilization. As he puts it: "I am not a bomb maker . . . I am not a general. I am a writer. I am a philosopher. I can do what I can do. The rest is up to you." (vol. 2, p. 883). A hardnosed activist would dismiss this attitude as milk-toast. Yet, for a writer—and one with three children—he is gutsy and maybe even foolhardy, because *Endgame* could easily be construed by Homeland Security as an incitement to terrorism. One can only hope that Jensen's rhetoric is merely intended as an exhortation to his readers to do something other than being mindlessly swept along by civilization's overpowering style.

He seems to be in conflict not only with present-day civilization but with himself. In one place, he adds, tellingly:

Do not listen to me. I do not live where you do. I do not know how to live there sustainably. I do not even know how to live here sustainably. I do not know how to live sustainably at all. If you want to know what to do, go to the nearest river, the nearest mountain, the nearest native tree, the nearest native soil, and ask it what it needs. Ask it to teach you." (vol. 2, p. 887).

Jensen's kind of anarchism has a historical context: the collapse of civilization. It also has a psychological context: the collapse of his childhood innocence through the emotional and sexual abuse by his father. Thus, while he is contemptuous of rote pacifism, which deals in stock ideals but is too gutless to challenge the power elite, he makes an imperfect radical whose battles are fought on paper rather than on the barricades. He clearly is sensitive and, as he himself states, "a genuinely nice guy." His warfare remains on the plane of rhetoric, however, and is powered by his smoldering anger at our flawed world.

Jensen does, however, afford a good contrast to the militant anarchist whose excessive egotism, dogmatism, and aggressiveness are highly unenviable character traits. I am not

saying that militant anarchists are necessarily sociopaths, but one would expect this psychological makeup to be prominent in the ranks of anarchistic groups.

One can point to individuals like Theodore Kaczynski, the “Unabomber,” who, after a brilliant career in mathematics, took to the woods of Montana to live a lonely and embittered existence apart from society. He sees industrial society, particularly computer technology, as the great evil to be fought. He fought back, rather irrationally, by sending letter bombs to select individuals, managing to kill three people (including a friend) and wounding twenty-nine. He avoided the death penalty by pleading guilty and was sentenced for life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. A court-appointed psychiatrist diagnosed him as a paranoid schizophrenic—a diagnosis that would predictably be meted out to all militant anarchists with a history of homicidal violence.

As Kaczynski declared in his essay “Industrial Society and Its Future”—the so-called “Unabomber Manifesto”—which was published by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*:

The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. They have greatly increased the life-expectancy of those of us who live in “advanced” countries, but they have destabilized society, have made life unfulfilling, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to widespread psychological suffering (in the Third World to physical suffering as well) and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world.

Who would seriously want to argue against this indictment? Much of Kaczynski’s manifesto is perfectly reasonable, perfectly logical, as one would expect from a mathematician. But then, in paragraph 96 comes a curious short-circuit. Here Kaczynski, after cogently arguing that the masses are excluded from the “power process,” he makes his own bid for power. He seeks media attention for his ideas by killing and maiming people, and succeeds. In his own words:

Even if these writings [meaning his essay] had had many readers, most of these readers would soon have forgotten what they had read as their minds were flooded by the mass of material to which the media expose them. In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we’ve had to kill people.

If readers of, say, Internet blogs (which Kaczynski considered) would be quickly subject to amnesia, what would make a reader of the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* any different? The fact is that neither his published manifesto nor his violence have had the desired effect of a lasting social change or even a sustained consideration of his ideas by the public at large.

Another short-circuit occurs in paragraph 135, where Kaczynski offers a parable: A strong neighbor steals land from a weak neighbor, but then the strong neighbor falls ill. The weak neighbor now has the opportunity to get his land back. But, argues Kaczynski, the weak neighbor would be foolish not to avail himself of the opportunity to kill the strong neighbor. He transfers this to the socio-political situation under discussion: “In the same way, while the industrial system is sick we must destroy it. If we compromise with it and let it recover from its sickness, it will eventually wipe out all of our freedom.” As he

puts it in paragraph 179, which consists in a single sentence: "It would be better to dump the whole stinking system and take the consequences."

Kaczynski's morality is clearly Machiavellian, that is to say, egotistical in the extreme. He would use an opponent's weak moment to kill him over land and dignity. No other factors are considered. There is not the slightest doubt in his mind that theft justifies the murder of the thief and to strike the enemy while he is down. Here we have, I believe, the sociopathic side of Kaczynski's personality emerging loud and clear, and we cannot consider his revolutionary contentions apart from his moral failure.

I further believe that we must exercise the same circumspection in regard to all radical militant anarchists: What is their moral character? What, if any, sociopathic tendencies are present? Do they have any harmonious interpersonal relationships at all? And so forth.

Whatever the individual character of a militant anarchist might be—and there seem to be no identifiable common traits, militant anarchism itself is thoroughly nihilistic in that it focuses on tearing down old structures rather than building new ones. In the extreme, it corresponds psychologically to the temper tantrum of a child who is displeased and now wants to destroy everything, including him- or herself.

Political anarchism, by contrast, is a considered response to the injustices and inequalities of society. It points to power hierarchy as the central evil and posits nonhierarchical arrangement as a better alternative, which more beneficial to the individual. As a rule, political anarchists set out to reform rather than revolt, because revolutions and terrorism tend to undermine the very principle of personal liberty that is at the core of their political outlook. To put it succinctly: to blow up people is not to help liberate them.

Then again, to destroy existing structures—though essentially a violent act—is in keeping with the kind of militant anarchism envisioned by Jensen and others. But what if this sort of violence accidentally maims and kills people?

Does the intended greater good justify inflicting suffering on unwitting victims? Is it morally sound to engage in activities that could accidentally harm others, regardless of the presumed nobility of one's objectives? Let us assume that Hitler were still alive and that, for sure, he was about to cause mayhem leading to the murder of millions of people.

Would we be justified in assassinating him, as some of his generals attempted? Many people would probably respond affirmatively. But what if, say, our car bomb would not only kill Hitler but several other possibly quite innocent folk? Some people, myself included, would no longer be so sure.

As a spiritual practitioner who believes in the continuity of the mind after death, I would be concerned about karmic fallout. Preventing Hitler from causing even greater harm—even if this could be accomplished only by killing him—might feel justifiable and might not lead to an irredeemable karmic boomerang effect. But would the accidental killing of innocent bystanders be justified and karmically negotiable in light of the fact that Hitler's death would prevent far greater destruction? Perhaps. But could we assassinate him

without marring the act with our anger or feelings of revenge, simply out of compassion for those Hitler was about to kill and even for Hitler himself? I could not claim such purity of intent and therefore certainly ought not to take such drastic action.

Those to whom the traditional notion of karma is anathema might find the above reasoning strange. Be that as it may, I am trying to make the point that whenever anyone considers militant action, he must not fail to go beyond the level of visible cause and effect in his consideration. So long as he clings to a one-dimensional view of reality, in which only material circumstances matter, he can be sure to get it wrong.

As a theory, political anarchism appeals to those who want to be self-ruling and see no merit in any outside authority. While we may fruitfully argue over the dysfunction of civilization, corporatism, hierarchical power structure, and especially governments, we cannot deny the historical fact that anarchism has never as yet created a viable society. In my view, it never will, at least not as long as people are mostly arrested at the juvenile stage of emotional development.

For any form of anarchism to work, the adult population must actually be fully adult, emotionally, intellectually, and morally. Anarchism will always falter for the same reason that democracy is faltering: The population at large has thus far failed to demonstrate consistent maturity without which the socio-political life of nations remains a haphazard and even hazardous affair.

By the same token, the kind of revolution envisioned by anarchists is bound to lead to similarly undesirable outcomes, because it will inevitably encounter the same immature and irresponsible public, which even resists gradual change and has an astonishing capacity to adapt to the status quo. Anarchists have an equally astonishing capacity to resist it, against all the odds. The real question is: to what degree are they mature and responsible?

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