

Anarchism for Civilians

What Unitarians, Bonobos, Midwives and Pirates taught me about
Anarchism

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Introduction

“I’m an anarchist,” said Rhyd.

“Sure you are!” I thought to myself, inwardly rolling my eyes.

We were at Pantheacon, a large Pagan convention in San Jose, California, several years ago. Rhyd, who I had only known online before this, was sitting across a dinner table from me.

At the time, I didn’t know what anarchism was. I had in mind punk teenagers wearing black t-shirts with big red A’s painted on them. I also had in mind the adolescent antinomianism of so many Pagans I knew. If I had known Rhyd better at the time, I would have known he didn’t fit either of these stereotypes.

I didn’t know Rhyd well, but I also didn’t know anything about anarchism. I didn’t know at the time that there is a difference between anarchism and being anti-social. I didn’t know that anarchism is actually a sophisticated political philosophy with a long and respectable history. I didn’t know that, for decades in the United States and elsewhere, anarchists formed the backbone of movements for economic and political justice. I didn’t know that there have actually been real communities which have practiced forms of anarchism more or less successfully. I didn’t know that there are many different forms of anarchism. And I didn’t know that my own political orientation was, even then, drifting toward anarchism.

After having learned more about anarchism since, I feel more than a little embarrassed about my earlier eye-rolling. Now, whenever I mention anarchism to people, I’m the one getting the eye rolls. And it’s not just from conservatives. Progressives and even some leftists don’t know what anarchism is. I was surprised when a friend who was a “red diaper baby” and a lifelong communist admitted he didn’t know anything about anarchism—despite the fact that the two movements were closely related at one time.¹

This isn’t entirely the fault of the eye-rollers. I have discovered that a lot of writing about anarchism can be abstruse.² Even many introductory texts fail to build a bridge between the average reader and anarchist thought. I have read several introductions to anarchism, which I thought I was understanding as I read them, but as soon as I closed the book, I realized I was still confused about exactly what anarchism is. And I suspect I’m not alone in this.

Most introductions start with the fathers of anarchism, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, and Peter Kropotkin, in the 19th century. And then things get *really* complicated from there. The term anarchism is heavily contested today, and there are people on completely opposite ends of the political spectrum who claim the term. It is easy to get bogged down in these internecine conflicts.

For a while, I’ve wanted to write a short introduction to anarchism for folks who have no background in the subject.³ It is inevitable that there will be some people who will disagree with my representation of anarchism here.⁴ For one thing, I’m still learning about it. In any case, I could never do justice to the complexity of anarchism. So rather than attempting any kind of authoritative definition of anarchism (which would really be contrary to the spirit of the thing), I want instead to dispel some of the myths

¹ Communism and anarchism diverged over the role of the state: communists seeing it as a necessary means to an end, and anarchists believing it to be the root of all social evil. Early anarchist Mikhail Bakunin anticipated the Soviet Union when he predicted that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” would become a dictatorship *over* the proletariat, and it “would conceal the despotism of a governing minority, all the more dangerous because it appears as a sham expression of the people’s will.” Bakunin wrote, “When the people are being beaten with a stick, they are not much happier if it is called ‘the People’s Stick.’”

² Another challenge for many people is the name itself, “anarchism”, which is associated in people’s minds with bomb-throwers and punk rockers. There is a place for both bomb-throwers and punk rockers in anarchism, but reducing anarchism to those things is not accurate. Sometimes, the fact that a word is commonly misunderstood is indicative of its potential power and a reason for keeping it.

³ The playful name of this series, “Anarchism for Civilians”, comes from a play on the words “civilized” and “civilian”.

⁴ My own interpretation of anarchism has been most influenced by green anarchism, anarcho-primitivism, and anarcho-communism. The “anarcho-capitalist”, for example, will not find much to agree with here.

that I had to unlearn, in order to grasp what anarchism is about—starting with something I learned from Unitarians.

Lesson 1: Anarchy does *not* mean chaos. Anarchy *does* mean the absence of hierarchy.

In the minds of most people, “anarchy” has come to mean a state of social chaos. But anarchy is not chaos. Anarchy is simply the absence of social hierarchy.⁵ It is the absence of domination of some people by other people. This includes all forms of hierarchy, including authoritarianism, classism (which capitalism is a form of), racism, sexism, hetero- and cis-normativity, and even anthropocentrism. Anarchism recognizes the interconnectedness of all of these forms of oppression and, thus, how opposition to these different forms of hierarchy must also be connected.⁶

Contrary to what some people may believe, there *are* ways to order society that don’t involve hierarchy. In its essence, anarchy is simply pure democracy. It means letting people make decisions for themselves *in community with others*, without abdicating power or responsibility to a group of elites. This necessarily requires keeping things small, because the bigger things get, the more people are involved, the harder it is to maintain real democracy.

This is actually something that the American “Founding Fathers” understood. They were terrified of pure democracy, because it was a threat to their (unearned) wealth and their privileged positions in society.⁷ James Madison, himself a slave plantation owner, justified the need for a large federal government by arguing that identification with large political entities tends to alienate people from each other. In the *Federalist Papers*, he explained that, in smaller societies, it is easier for people to act in concert. Whereas in larger societies, it is harder for people to discover their “common motive”, and it becomes “more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.” A lot of people might be surprised to learn that the Founders understood that a large central government was an obstacle to real democracy, and that’s why they wanted it!

A lot of objections which people raise to anarchism take the scale of our society for granted. Leopold Kohr was someone who did not. Kohr was an Austrian economist and journalist who reported on anarchist communities during the Spanish Civil War. After fleeing the Nazis and settling in the United States, Kohr wrote *The Breakdown of Nations* (1957), in which he theorized that small communities are more peaceful and prosperous than the great nation-states. He argued that social problems are not caused by particular political or economic arrangements, but by their size. In his view, any political/economic system could work well on what he called the “human scale,” the scale at which people can play a determinative role in the governance of their lives. But once it grows too large, then any political or economic system becomes oppressive.⁸

⁵ “Anarchy” comes from the Greek *anarkhia*, which means the lack of a leader. The word derives from *an-* (“without”) + *arches* (“leader”). For example, in ancient Athens, it was used to describe the Year of Thirty Tyrants (404 B.C.), when there was no *archon*. *Archon* comes from *arkhein* which means “to be the first”. Online Etymological Dictionary (<https://www.etymonline.com/>)

⁶ The grandfather of anarchism, Pierre Proudon, also recognized the intersection of multiple forms of oppression:

“The economic idea of capitalism, the politics of government or of authority, and the theological idea of the Church are three identical ideas, linked in various ways. To attack one of them is equivalent to attacking all of them. ... What capital does to labour, and the State to liberty, the Church does to the spirit. ... The most effective means for oppressing the people would be simultaneously to enslave its body, its will and its reason.”

— *Les confessions d’un révolutionnaire* (1851)

⁷ For more on this, I recommend *A People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn.

⁸ Unitarian Universalists do have an umbrella organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), but participation in the association by individual congregations is voluntary. The UUA advises, but does not dictate to, its member congregations. And the UUA is itself democratic. Its leadership is elected and member congregations send delegates to general assemblies to vote annually.

Americans like to claim to be the paragon of democracy, but in reality we embrace authoritarianism in many aspects of our lives.

I was raised in a hierarchical and authoritarian religion, Mormonism. Mormons have a “prophet” (also called the “president” of the church) who is at the top of the hierarchy. Below him are twelve “apostles”. Below them is a council of seventy. And so on. (Of course, they are all men.) Mormons believe that the will of God flows down from the prophet to the individual members of the church. The same structure is replicated in the Mormon home, with the father at the top, followed by the mother, and then the children. (Of course, the structure is cis- and hetero-normative.)

While Mormons do believe in “personal revelation”, this does not disturb the hierarchical structure, as there is no upward flow of revelation. Those above you in the hierarchy can receive revelation which is authoritative for you, but you cannot receive revelation which is authoritative for them.

About ten years ago, I joined a Unitarian congregation. It was very different from my experience with the Mormon church. Unitarians are congregationalists, which means that their church governance is democratic. Number five in the Unitarian Universalist Principles is “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large”.

In practice, this means that every member has a vote on important issues. And the day-to-day running of the church is delegated to a board which is elected annually. Important decisions are made through formal congregational meetings and recording of votes. But other decisions are made less formally through a consensus-style of decision making.⁹

Mormons would find the Unitarian-style of democratic governance very strange. While the hierarchical structure of the Mormons will seem strange to many who were not raised in an authoritarian religion, it will be familiar to others who were, such as current and former Catholics. And while you may not have experienced a hierarchical religion, you have experienced hierarchy in other aspects of your life. For example, your family of origin may have been patriarchal. You probably were educated in a school that was authoritarian—not just in its discipline, but in its pedagogy as well. Did your teachers strive to produce freethinking individuals, or did they want copies of themselves?

The point is that, we tend to reject hierarchy instinctually in some parts of our lives, while accepting it uncritically in others. Anarchists strive to eliminate all hierarchy, in every aspect of life: government, work, religion, family. This is called “total liberation”.

Americans like to think of their government as democratic, but it is actually very hierarchical. “A person no less a slave because they are allowed to choose a new master once in a term of years,” wrote 19th century anarchist, Lysander Spooner. “But our elected representatives embody the will of the people!” you might object. But do they really? In the United States, democracy has been undermined by elites in myriad ways: The electoral college. Voter suppression. Gerrymandering. The revolving door of government and industry. The absence of campaign finance reform. *Citizens United*. The focus on national over local politics.

The anarchist asks, Why does hierarchy belong in any part of our lives? Many of us uncritically accept hierarchy in the workplace, for example. But why should the capitalists (the people who own property) be the bosses? Why doesn’t everyone who participates in the functioning of a workplace, right “down” to the janitor, have an equal say?

Or to give you a more radical example, the green anarchist asks, Why doesn’t the more-than-human world have a say in how a society functions? Isn’t human society part of an ecosystem (or, more accurately, ecosystems, plural)? Shouldn’t other-than-human beings—animals, plants, and even so-called “inanimate” nature—have a say? Could not human assemblies have spokespersons for the rights of other-than-human beings with whom the human society is in relation?¹⁰ Pagan activist and science fiction writer, Starhawk, imagined such an arrangement in her book, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*.

⁹ For more on this, see my essay, “Do Trees Have Rights?: Toward An Ecological Politics”.

¹⁰ Unitarian Universalists do have an umbrella organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), but participation in the association by individual congregations is voluntary. The UUA advises, but does not dictate to, its member congregations.

Whatever aspect of life we're talking about, anarchists invite us to ask, Why can't this be done with more participation from the people it affects?

Lesson 2: Anarchism *isn't* about hyper-individualism. Anarchism *is* about community and cooperation.

When people think of anarchists, they often have in mind a loner, a rebel, somebody who rejects all social norms. This is because we wrongly associate the absence of hierarchy with the absence of social order. Though there are some individualist forms of anarchism, many are actually *communalist*. Communalist forms of anarchism recognize that no person is an island, that we are already a part of society even before we are born, that our very identities are formed in relation to one another.

This runs counter to the hyper-individualist philosophy that informs much of American politics today, which assumes that individuals exist prior to our relationships and that human relations are inherently adversarial. "Your rights end where my rights begin," we are told. According to that logic, the more freedom you have, the less freedom I have. The anarchist sees things differently:

"Freedom is not a tiny bubble of personal rights. We cannot be distinguished from each other so easily. Yawning and laughter are contagious; so are enthusiasm and despair. I am composed of the clichés that roll off my tongue, the songs that catch in my head, the moods I contract from my companions. When I drive a car, it releases pollution into the atmosphere you breathe; when you use pharmaceuticals, they filter into the water everyone drinks. The system everyone else accepts is the one you have to live under—but when other people challenge it, you get a chance to renegotiate your reality as well. Your freedom begins where mine begins, and ends where mine ends."

— To Change Everything: an anarchist appeal"

The individualist view of society can be traced to the philosopher John Locke, who theorized that individual human beings exist "naturally" outside of society in a state of war of all against all. Eventually, he imagined, individuals enter into a "social contract" in which they agree to respect the individual rights of others in exchange for the same respect of their own rights. This view of social relations is atomistic and adversarial.

This idea got a boost in the mid-1800s with social Darwinism. An example of social Darwinism is the use of the "survival of the fittest" meme to justify preexisting hierarchical relations in human society. Darwin gets a lot of blame for this idea. But the ideas which came to be called "social Darwinism" were already circulating before Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Social Darwinism was the ideology (and the propaganda) of the emerging industrial capitalist class. In fact, the phrase "survival of the fittest" was coined not by Darwin, but by Herbert Spencer.

Darwin himself recognized that cooperation is an important driver of evolution:

"There can be no doubt that the tribe including many members who are always ready to give aid to each other, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over other tribes. And this would be natural selection."

"In the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed."

— The Descent of Man (1875)

And the UUA is itself democratic. Its leadership is elected and member congregations send delegates to general assemblies to vote annually.

The late-19th/early-20th century anarchist, Peter Kropotkin, believed that competition had been given too much credit for human progress and that cooperation was at least as important. In his journeys through Eastern Siberia and Manchuria, he was surprised by what he *didn't* find when he looked at animal life:

“Even in those few spots where animal life teemed in abundance, I failed to find—although I was eagerly looking for it—that bitter struggle for the means of existence among animals belonging to the same species, which was considered by most Darwinists (though not always by Darwin himself) as the dominant characteristic of struggle for life, and the main factor of evolution.

— *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902)

Kropotkin concluded that there was as much cooperation in nature as there was competition, and this inspired his philosophy of “mutual aid”:

A soon as we study animals...we at once perceive that though there is an immense amount of warfare and extermination going on amidst various species...there is, at the same time, as much, or perhaps even more, of mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defence amidst animals belonging to the same species or, at least, to the same society. Sociability is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle...if we resort to an indirect test, and ask Nature: “Who are the fittest: those who are continually at war with each other, or those who support one another?” we at once see that those animals which acquire habits of mutual aid are undoubtedly the fittest. They have more chances to survive, and they attain, in their respective classes, the highest development and bodily organization...we may safely say that mutual aid is as much a law of animal life as mutual struggle; but that as a factor of evolution, it most probably has a far greater importance, inasmuch as it favors the development of such habits and characters as insure the maintenance and further development of the species, together with the greatest amount of welfare and enjoyment of life for the individual, with the least waste of energy.

— *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902)

Today, many biologists are confirming Kropotkin’s observations. Cooperation is found, not only between individuals within the same animal and plant species, but also between different species! (This is called “mutualism” in biology.)

The story we have been taught about our innate selfishness is only part of the truth. As such, it is capitalist propaganda, and something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Psychological studies have shown that, as they advance in their studies, students of orthodox (i.e., capitalist) economics gradually become more self-interested, less trusting of others, and more competitive. Primatologist Frans de Waal has warned:

“Don’t believe anyone who says that, since nature is based on a struggle for life, we need to live like this as well. Many animals survive not by eliminating each other or by keeping everything for themselves, but by cooperating and sharing.”

— Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society* (2010)

De Waal has spent his life studying bonobos, who together with other great apes (chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans), we human share the name “hominid”. Bonobos and chimpanzees are the closest living relatives to homo sapiens. We share 98.7% of our DNA with bonobos and 99.6% with chimps. De Waal reports that bonobos are less aggressive and more altruistic than chimps. Among bonobos, there’s no deadly warfare, no male dominance, and enormous amounts of sex. Some researchers even call them the “make love, not war” apes.

Chimpanzees

- prominent sexual differences in anatomy
- strong male-male bonds
- weak female-female bonds
- hierarchical relationship among males
- males dominate
- aggressive control of territorial boundaries
- will kill other chimps
- avoid others from neighboring territories
- high ranking males monopolize sexual access to females
- sexual behavior limited to reproduction
- use tools

Bonobos

- few sexual differences in anatomy
- strong mother-son bonds
- strong female-female bonds
- weak hierarchy
- females exert dominance over males
- territorial boundaries overlap
- no lethal aggression
- will mate with others from neighboring territories
- sexual behavior between partners of all types
- frequent non-reproductive sexual activity, including homosexuality
- more food sharing, social cooperation, and play

Honestly, which of these lists would you choose?

De Waal argues that our ideas about human nature have been shaped by an incomplete or selective view of animal nature. “The book of nature,” he says, “is like the Bible: Everyone reads into it what they want.” Because we have spent so much time studying chimpanzees, who are competitive and hierarchical, he says, we tend to view human beings in the same way. If we had instead spent more time studying bonobos, who are cooperative and egalitarian, then we would have a very different conception of human nature. In fact, de Waal says that *the reason* bonobos have gotten less scientific attention was because they didn’t confirm pre-existing ideas about human nature.

Unless people are socialized otherwise, there’s evidence that they can be more cooperative than competitive. In *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit has documented how, in the face of natural disasters, when we might expect people to be at their most selfish, they often come together to create new communities to take care of one another:

“These remarkable societies [disaster communities] suggest that, just as many machines reset themselves to their original settings after a power outage, human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful and imaginative after a disaster ...”

— Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009)

This is not to say that there aren't people who will sometimes violate others if given the opportunity. But from an anarchist perspective, the best way to respond to these acts is not to create an oppressive police state, but rather to allow communities to enforce their own standards of conduct.

There is good reason to believe that a lot of anti-social behavior is actually a self-fulfilling prophecy. We are taught to believe that, without the order imposed by large government, people would revert to a bestial state and start “raping and pillaging”. As a result of this indoctrination, when the state order does break down, some people will act anti-socially simply because they anticipate other people doing the same. The recent hoarding during the Coronavirus pandemic is a good example of this.

In this time of pandemic, we are witnessing the collapse of many state and market functions. Many people have been surprised at how fragile these systems are. Now that we are being forced to find alternative ways of doing things, many are realizing that neither the state nor capitalism were very good at taking care of people in the first place. In response, both anarchists, as well as people who have never heard of anarchism as a political philosophy, are turning to mutual aid.¹¹

Mutual aid means creating new ways of organizing ourselves—horizontally rather than hierarchically—new ways of meeting our needs, making decisions, and solving problems, without the force employed by the state and the competition employed by the capitalist system. Mutual aid isn't unidirectional charity, nor is it quid pro quo transaction; it is a network of reciprocal care built on the idea that we are all better off when each of us is taken care of. These networks depend on relationships of trust, which can take a long time to build, but can also arise spontaneously in times of disaster and collapse, like right now.

Anarchists invite us to question the myths we've been taught about human nature and consider ways of being together that don't involve competition or force.

Lesson 3: Civilization does *not* make our lives better. Civilization robs us of the the good things in life.

What about all the benefits of civilization? Of large-scale, complex social organization? We've all been taught the story that the history of humankind has been a progression from barbarism to a civilization and from less civilization to more civilization. And we've been taught that this is a good thing. But what if it wasn't?

Civilization is a term which is often used, but rarely defined. Civilization involves the geographical concentration of people into cities.¹² The word “civilization” comes from the same root as “city”. The earliest states were city-states like Sumer and Babylon, Athens and Greece, Tenochtitlán and Iztapalapa, Venice and Florence. The concentration of people into cities coincides with the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of an elite class, because it is easier to extract the surplus of people's labor when they are concentrated in one place.¹³

¹¹ To read about how anarchists are using mutual aid to respond to the Coronavirus, check out these articles:

- Surviving the Virus: An Anarchist Guide (Crimethinc)
- Autonomous Groups Are Mobilizing Mutual Aid Initiatives To Combat The Coronavirus (It's Going Down)
- Radical solidarity through Covid-19 (Mutual Aid Disaster Relief)

¹² This was true at least until human beings discovered how to harness the sunlight stored in fossil fuels, whereupon civilization began to grow into its current global form.

¹³ In addition to (1) the concentration of economic wealth and political power in the hands of a small elite and (2) the geographical concentration of people in cities, for the purpose of extracting the surplus of their labor, other salient characteristics

It's really impossible to pinpoint when exactly civilization began. It's easier to think of it as a process, rather than a point in time. What anarchists call "the state" is the result of the process of civilization creating a class of people whose sole function is to govern others. This includes rulers like monarchs and aristocrats, but also professional politicians, bureaucrats, judges, lawyers, police officers, and soldiers.

Though they're often used synonymously, civilization is not the same thing as culture.¹⁴ (The fact that the two are often equated is a testament to the dominance of civilization over our minds.) When we think about civilization, we tend to think about things that we like—such as the arts, modern medicine, technological gadgets, and so on. But many of the things that we like, such as art and healing, existed before civilization and outside of states. And many of the lauded "improvements" brought by civilization were not really improvements, or else they were improvements which came at a terrible cost.

Modern medicine is a good example, and one of the first benefits of civilization that comes to people's mind. Yes, "we" can now treat cancer, something that was (probably) not possible before. But we have also lost a lot of indigenous wisdom about natural medicines in the process, due to the exclusion of certain classes of people (women, indigenous people, people of color) from the medical profession. We have also lost a lot of the ecosystems from which those natural medicines came, due to destruction by civilization. These are not accidents of civilization, but the very nature of the beast.

Homebirth is a good example of a practice which has been almost lost to the advance of civilization. Long before I started calling myself an anarchist, my wife gave birth to our second child in our home. Both our families thought we were crazy. They thought it wasn't safe. In fact, my wife had been told by medical professionals, that because our first child had been breach and because she had had a Cesarean section, she could not deliver vaginally again. Her OB-GYN even told her that home birth was a form of child abuse. And yet, not that long ago (and for thousands of years before), it was the norm for women to give birth at home, usually with the assistance of midwives. But the dominance of the medical elite has all but wiped out the practice of midwifery—and *not* because OB-GYNs are better than midwives most of the time.

The birth of our first child, which happened in a hospital with a doctor, had been a traumatic event—though at the time it was normalized for us. My wife was induced by her OB-GYN early and without her consent, in order to fit the birth into *his* vacation schedule. At the time of the last exam, the doctor said he could feel my son's head. Yet, the next day, when she went into labor, he was found to be in the breach position (bottom down). As a result, she was rushed off into surgery for a C-section. No one asked her what she wanted. She was given no options. She was drugged, her arms were tied down, and a curtain was placed in front of her face. All the power was taken away from her by the

of civilization which I have identified from my reading include: (3) the alienation of people from the land by the gradual artificialization of our environments (*artificial*: the product of human "artifice" or craft), (4) the monopolization and depersonalization of violence by the state, and (5) the psychological domestication of human beings through an internalization of state violence.

¹⁴ The anarchist and radical environmentalist, Edward Abbey, illustrated this distinction between culture and civilization, though he flipped the two terms. What matters more than the terms, however, is the distinction itself. In the quote below, from Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, I flip the terms to be consistent my usage above.

Culture is the vital force in human history; civilization is that inert mass of institutions and organizations which accumulate around and tend to drag down the advance of life;

Culture is Giordano Bruno facing death by fire; civilization is the Cardinal Bellarmino, after ten years of inquisition, sending Bruno to the stake in the Campo di Fiori; ...

Culture is mutual aid and self-defense; civilization is the judge, the lawbook and the forces of Law & Ordure (sic);

Culture is uprising, insurrection, revolution; civilization is the war of state against state, or of machines against people, as in Hungary and Vietnam;

Culture is tolerance, detachment and humor, or passion, anger, revenge; civilization is the entrance examination, the gas chamber, the doctoral dissertation and the electric chair; ...

Culture is a youth with a Molotov cocktail in his hand; civilization is the Soviet tank or the L.A. cop that guns him down;

Culture is the wild river; civilization, 592,000 tons of cement; ...

— Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*

medical professionals. And the doctors made a game of seeing if they could beat their previous time record!

Later, we were introduced to home birth by a friend. When my second child was born, my wife was the one in charge. She decided *where* she wanted to deliver (in a baby pool in our living room). She decided *who* would be present (me, her mom, our toddler son, a midwife and two midwife assistants). She decided *when* she would deliver. (At the time, I was working three hours away, so she intentionally prolonged her labor while I raced home for the birth—she delivered minutes after I walked in the door.) It was beautiful and empowering for her. Had my daughter been breach, the midwife knew how to turn the baby in the womb—something which doctors today have neither the skill nor the inclination to do. They'd rather cut. For this, and other reasons, the hospital model of birth can be less healthy for mother and child than an assisted home birth.¹⁵

But in order to experience an assisted home birth, our midwife had to risk jail because, where we lived, practicing midwifery (outside of a hospital system) is illegal. In addition, if the department of child services had been notified, we might have been labeled child abusers and our children taken away from us by the state. The state would have claimed to be protecting our children, but what they really would have been protecting was the privileged position of the medical elite.

Not only has much been lost to the advance of civilization, but its purported benefits have been distributed unequally. We've been taught that civilization has led to a better life for everyone. In actuality, what it did was allow a concentration of power in a class of elites who consume a disproportionate share of the community's resources. Thanks to the Occupy movement, we've all heard the statistics about economic inequality in the United States: the richest 1% in the United States now own more wealth than the bottom 90%. In fact more than half the wealth in the United States is owned by just 400 people.

Again, health care is a great example of this unequal distribution. Cancer treatment is something that is often cited as an example of the benefits of civilization. And yet, how many people, even in industrialized societies, actually have access to those expensive treatments? In the U.S., even those who do have access are often bankrupted and lose their life's savings due to medical debt.

Contrary to what we have been taught, living outside of civilization has always been better for most people than living inside civilization. Because they were sedentary, people who lived in early city-states had more restricted, and thus healthier, diets.¹⁶ The same is actually true of most people today. Our diets are woefully dependent on monocrops like corn, large amounts of refined sugars, and unhealthy amounts of meat.

Famine was also more common for residents of early cities, because people tended to be reliant on one food source, usually a grain crop, which they were forced to grow, because it was easily taxable by the elite. Today, our current food system is propped up by massive petroleum-based inputs (fertilizers and pesticides), which will become more expensive as oil reserves are depleted. Famine will become a reality again unless people relearn how to grow their own food.

The concentration of people in early cities resulted in environmental degradation, such as soil depletion, which also contributed to famine. In addition, the close proximity of people to each other and to domesticated animals made city dwellers more prone to epidemics. We're realizing that's just as true today as well.

¹⁵ My knowledge of this subject is all second-hand, of course. In this, I am indebted to several wise women who have shared their experiences, not the least of which is my wife. If you want to learn more about the technocratic model of birth, I highly recommend *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (1992) by anthropologist Robbie Davis-Floyd, another woman whose wisdom has guided me in this subject.

¹⁶ Many anarcho-primitivists equate the advent of agriculture with the rise of cities and civilization. However, in *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2017), James Scott observes that a gap of four millennia exists between the first domestication of plants and animals and the rise of city-states. During that time, people combined hunting and gathering with some degree of horticulture. Note, it is important to distinguish between agriculture and horticulture.

And civilized people had less power of self-determination, because they were ruled by an elite class. Civilization domesticates human beings, just as human beings domesticated other animals. Initially, this was accomplished through force. Civilization is not the result of free people seeking to protect themselves, but of would-be elites seeking power over people. It is the result, not of a social contract, but of slavery. Throughout history, a large majority of people living in early city-states lived in some degree of bondage, including forced resettlement, unpaid (corvée) labor, debt bondage, serfdom, conscription, communal tribute, and outright slavery. Elites built walls around cities as much to keep people in as to keep threats out.¹⁷

Later, elites could use less overt force and more subtle techniques of manipulation to domesticate people.¹⁸ We have largely internalized the mythos of civilization, so that we now believe there is no alternative to it. And yet, force remains essential to maintaining civilization (as will be discussed in the next installment of this series). David Grabber has noted that, by some estimates, “a quarter of the American population is now engaged in ‘guard labor’ of one sort or another—defending property, supervising work, or otherwise keeping their fellow Americans in line.”

For all these reasons, civilization itself is highly precarious and prone to collapse. What historians call the “dark ages”, periods of civilizational collapse, were actually periods of freedom for most people—freedom from domination by elites, freedom from large scale war, freedom from pandemics. These periods only appear “dark” from the perspective of the elites, who were the ones who wrote the histories. As the poet Robinson Jeffers reminds us:

... the wise remember
That Caesar and even final Augustulus had heirs,
And men lived on; rich unplanned life on earth
After the foreign wars and the civil wars, the border wars
And the barbarians: music and religion, honor and mirth
Renewed life's lost enchantments.

— Robinson Jeffers, “Hope Is Not For the Wise”

Anthropologists now tell us that, far from living lives that were “nasty, brutish, and short”, non-civilized people were healthier, lived longer lives, worked less, and were probably happier as a result.¹⁹ Rather than leading to a better life for most people, civilization does the opposite. And the whole order has to be maintained through violence, both externally through large-scale war and internally through a police state.

Anarchists invite us to examine whether civilization really has been the boon to humankind that its defenders claim and to look back to a time, before civilization, when life was simpler and better for most people.

¹⁷ For more on the rise of early states and the condition of their citizens, see James Scott's *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2017).

¹⁸ In *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Neil Postman, contrasts two dystopian futures, that of Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, and concludes that Huxley, not Orwell, was right:

“Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, *people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.*”

“What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. *Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism.* Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. *Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.* Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. *Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture ...*”

“In the Huxley prophecy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours.”

¹⁹ See Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (1972). An excerpt, “The Original Affluent Society”, can be found here.

Lesson 4: Civilization does not protect us from violence. Civilization is itself violent.

The violent nature of civilization is everywhere around us, if we are willing to look. In the homelessness of people sitting and standing on city streets. In the shootings of Black men by police. In the burning of the Amazon rainforest. In the poisoning of the drinking water in Flint, Michigan. In almost two decades of American occupation of Afghanistan. In the incarceration of 1 in every 140 people in the U.S. In an industrial agriculture system which destroys biodiversity, topsoil, and human health.

We are taught that these are exceptions. But this is the rule of civilization. This really came home to me, oddly enough, while watching a television series, called “Black Sails”, about pirates in the West Indies during the early 18th century. What struck me was how the pirate characters talked about “civilization” as being something oppressive and violent. Though the pirates themselves were very violent, they also had communities and practiced a form of democracy. The show inspired me to learn more about historic piracy.

Pirates, unlike many depictions of them, were actually quite organized, despite the fact that they could not resort to state institutions (i.e., police, courts, etc.) to enforce order.

“Amidst ubiquitous potential for conflict, they rarely fought, stole from, or deceived one another. In fact, piratical harmony was as common as harmony among their lawful contemporaries who relied on government for social cooperation.”

— Peter Leeson, “An-arrgh-chy: The Law and Economics of Pirate Organization”, *Journal of Political Economy* (2007).

Pirates used democratic practices, like constitutions and checks and balances, to constrain the power of ship captains and minimize conflict among themselves.

The violence of civilization came into stark relief for me when which I learned how people actually became pirates. Some were escaped slaves. Most were first sailors in the “merchant marine”, the private shipping industry. Merchant ships were owned by wealthy capitalists who purchased shares in a vessel and financed the voyage. Some men joined the merchant marine willingly, but many others were forced to join. Press gangs would roam cities and snatch up any poor male who seemed unlikely to be missed. They were then sold to ship captains and forced to labor on the ship for little or no compensation. It was effective slavery. Some later expressed the wish that they had been sent to prison instead.

Much like the navy, the crew of a merchant ship was organized hierarchically. The captain, who was chosen by the ship owners, had absolute authority over their crews, and they often exercised their power tyrannically. Order was maintained through corporal punishment. Captains could abuse, and even kill, sailors with little cause and little risk of consequence. So when a merchant ship was captured by pirates, it was not uncommon for the sailors to *volunteer* to join the pirates without any threat of violence. Little wonder that these men rejected civilization.

On a pirate ship, their lives were very different. Captains were elected and could be removed from office in the same manner. Their authority was absolute only during times of battle. And all the sailors had an equal stake in the profits.

“The early-eighteenth-century pirate ship was a ‘world turned upside down,’ made so by the articles of agreement that established the rules and customs of the pirates’ social order. ... Pirates distributed justice, elected officers, divided loot equally, and established a different discipline. They limited the authority of the captain, resisted many of the practices of the capitalist merchant shipping industry, and maintained a multicultural, multiracial, multinational social order. They sought to prove that ships did not have to be run in the brutal and oppressive ways of the merchant service and the Royal Navy.”

— Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2013).

According to some historians, piracy represented a threat to the state, not just because it interfered with commerce, but because pirates challenged the obviousness of the need for the state, and they raised the possibility of an alternative to civilization. As one of the characters on *Black Sails* explains to the leader of a colony of escaped slaves (maroons):

“If no one remembers a time before there was an England, then no one can imagine a time after it. The empire survives in part because we believe its survival to be inevitable. It isn’t. And they know that. That’s why they’re so terrified of you and I. ... we are able to expose the illusion that England is not inevitable.”

— Captain Flint, *Black Sails* (Starz)

We have been taught that our only choice is between civilization and something called “barbarism” or “savagery”. We have been taught that, in the absence of civilization, human beings would devolve into characters in a Mad Max movie. And yet, the truth is that, for most of the history of humankind, there was no civilization. And yet life went on—and for most people, it was much better.

People had communities, just not large-scale, complex social organization. People had social order, but not massive bureaucracies. People had economies, but not stock exchanges. People had healers, but not HMOs. People had human-scale tools, but not tech startups. People had art, but not philanthropic foundations.

For most of history, civilization has been the exception, rather than the rule. Even after the appearance of the first city-states, the vast majority of people continued to live outside of the reach of civilization for millennia. Until the 17th century, at least one-third of the globe was non-civilized.

We tend to forget these facts, because history was literally written by the winners. Most non-civilized people had oral cultures. Writing developed out of civilization because the elites needed a technology to keep track of their surplus property and to tax people. Because we are “civilized”, we tend to only recognize “history” after the advent of writing.²⁰ But what we call “pre-history”, is just the time before written records. Before “history”, people still had society. They still had art, religion, technology, economies, and so on. They still had joy, love, beauty, meaning, and all the rest.

Civilization brought large scale violence into the world. While war and slavery did exist before civilization, these forms of violence were systematized by the state. States carried on large-scale warfare in order to increase their populations through the taking of slaves, as well as the plunder of other forms of wealth. Citizens of states were then forced to farm monocrops—usually grains, because grains are easily measured and, therefore, easily taxed.

²⁰ James Scott explains how state societies came to dominate our history books in site of the fact that, for most of history, they were “tiny nodes of power surrounded by a vast landscape inhabited by nonstate peoples”:

“That states would have come to dominate the archaeological and historical record is no mystery. ... Aside from the utter hegemony of the state form today, a great deal of archaeology and history throughout the world is state-sponsored and often amounts to a narcissistic exercise in self-portraiture. Compounding this institutional bias is the archaeological tradition, until quite recently, of excavation and analysis of major historical ruins. Thus if you built, monumentally, in stone and left your debris conveniently in a single place, you were likely to be ‘discovered; and to dominate the pages of ancient history. If, on the other hand, you built with wood, bamboo, or reeds, you were much less likely to appear in the archaeological record. And if you were hunter-gatherers or nomads, however numerous, spreading your biodegradable trash thinly across the landscape, you were likely to vanish entirely from the archaeological record.

“Once written documents—say, hieroglyphics or cuneiform—appear in the historical record, the bias becomes even more pronounced. These are invariably state-centric texts: taxes, work units, tribute lists, royal genealogies, founding myths, laws. There are no contending voices, and efforts to read such texts against the grain are both heroic and exceptionally difficult.¹⁰ The larger the state archives left behind, generally speaking, the more pages devoted to that historical kingdom and its self-portrait.”

— James Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2017)

Civilized societies are not less violent than non-civilized societies—though they may appear so to the more privileged citizens. Not so much to the citizens who are not privileged. One of the defining characteristics of civilization is the depersonalization of violence. In a civilized state, there is social stratification and a division of labor that separates those who command the violence and those who carry it out. This gives the violence the appearance of inevitability and the mask of “justice”.

The actual historical pirate Captain Samuel (aka “Black Sam”) Bellamy expressed this well in a speech he reportedly made to the captain of a captured merchant ship:

“You are a sneaking puppy, and so are all those who will submit to be governed by laws which rich men have made for their own security. ... They vilify us, the scoundrels do, when *there is only this difference, they rob the poor under the cover of law, forsooth, and we plunder the rich under the protection of our own courage.* Had you not better make then one of us, than sneak after these villains for employment?”

“But without the state, who will protect the vulnerable? Who will protect the rights of minorities?” I wonder.

“Who protects them now?” responds the anarchist.

“The courts. The police.” I respond.

It’s a knee jerk reaction. The response I’ve been taught my whole life. But when I think about it, I realize I know better. As a lawyer, I know perfectly well that the courts are not accessible to most people and they are not treated equally even when they do have access. Courts protect the rights of minorities imperfectly at best.

As for the police, well, I’m White and economically privileged, so naturally, for most of my life I have had a positive view of the police. They have protected me, or so I believed, from a mass of invisible people who wanted to hurt me or take my property. But participating in public protests brought me face to face with the reality that the police don’t exist to make me safe.²¹ They exist to protect the wealth of the over-privileged. And they do this by carrying out a campaign of terror against the under-privileged.

The police are used by capitalist elites as a means of quashing protest by workers. They are used to systematically enslave people in a for-profit prison system. They are used as a means of checking rebellion during a time of social collapse brought on by the end of cheap oil. They are used to redistribute wealth in the form of fines from poor communities and communities of color to the state (and hence to the wealthy).

Even for most wealthy White people, the police only provide the illusion of safety. About 90% of police time is spent penalizing infractions of administrative regulations. As David Graeber has observed, the police are essentially bureaucrats with guns. Of the remaining 10% of their time, during which they are responding to violent crime, they are largely ineffectual or actually make things worse. Most of the time, the police don’t really make anybody safer. And some of the time, they make people a lot safer.

Anarchists challenge the idea that civilization actually protects us from violence and invite us to consider all the forms of violence which are perpetrated by elites in the name of civilization.

Conclusion

As I said above, this series is not a complete introduction to anarchism. Instead, my hope was to debunk some of the myths that we have been taught about anarchism and about civilization: the myth that anarchy is social chaos and hyper-individualism and the myth that civilization is healthier, happier, and more peaceful.

²¹ See my essay, “The Police Aren’t Here for You”.

One of the defining characteristics of civilization is the domestication of human beings—both physically and psychologically. In order to accomplish the psychological domestication of people, civilization constructs a mythos to justify its existence. People come to accept their bondage because they believe there is no real alternative. I hope that I have helped open some cracks in that mythos for my readers.

Many of the examples I've used to illustrate my points above aren't actually of anarchists. Neither Unitarians nor midwives, and not even pirates, were necessarily anarchists. (Not the bonobos either.) But each of these groups embody certain anarchist values. And learning about them challenged some of my assumptions about civilization.

Unitarians taught me about small-scale democracy. Bonobos taught me about the naturalness of taking care of others. Midwives taught me about the availability of alternatives to the state and capitalist order. And pirates, those violent criminals from our bedtime stories, taught me about the violence of civilization itself.

Current Affairs writer, Nathan Robinson, suggests that the motto for anarchists should be, "Actually, Both of Those Things Are Bad." Whenever we are presented with two things and told one is good and one is bad—like civilization versus Mad Max, capitalism versus tyranny, competition versus poverty, police versus riots, or hospitals versus death in childbirth—the anarchist invites us to question whether there is a false dichotomy and shows us how the one often creates the conditions of the other. Often, the dichotomy conceals a third (and maybe a fourth and fifth) option. These other options, if they are even acknowledged, are usually rejected out of hand as "unrealistic" or "utopian". And it is the job of the anarchist to ask, "Why?"

"Freedom doesn't mean choosing between options, but formulating the questions."



The Library of
Unconventional Lives

John Halstead
Anarchism for Civilians
What Unitarians, Bonobos, Midwives and Pirates taught me about Anarchism
2020

<https://abeautifulresistance.org/site/2020/5/15/what-unitarians-taught-me-about-anarchism-anarchism-for-civilians-series>

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