Anarchy and human nature

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Simplistically, anarchy can mean two things:

1. Absolute chaos. The assumption is that once you have no central form of power, no law, no state, society collapses into lawlessness and barbarity. Violence reigns.

2. A political theory next to communism, democracy, or totalitarianism, where society has no ruler or central command. As Peter Kropotkin states, "No more laws! No more judges!" (Kropotkin, 1927) or as advertised by anarchists in Montreal, "No gods, no masters; no bosses, no borders!" (http://www.anarchistbookfair.ca/).

So here we have two simple propositions: without laws there will be violence and without laws there will be peace. In this essay, I dispel the first definition of anarchy and ground the second into contemporary life. I do so by way of introducing Marshall Sahlins' essay, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*, pairing it with John Gowdy's essay in *Limited Wants, Limited Means*, and discussing Hannah Arendt's argument against the state. Finally, I relate Zygmunt Bauman's description of contemporary life, and how it is ruled by fear and insecurity. I show how anarchism involves fearlessness. This requires both trust in others and a respect for their individuality. In this way, it is an

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ethos, a way of moving about the world. As Bauman shows, fearlessness and respect are the most important tools we have to ensure peace.

Human nature as we know it, says Marshall Sahlins, is a myth. He explains the dominant idea in the political theories of the minority world[i]: that the human being is "so avaricious and contentious that, unless it is somehow governed, it will reduce society to anarchy" (Sahlins 2008: 1). It seems that, without some form of control, some central command, society will disrupt into chaos, the natural state of human beings. This idea is to be found in intellectual works from the Greeks, to the Enlightenment, to the present. "The United states," he says, "was built on the philosophy of Hobbes and the religion of Calvin, which is to say, on the assumption that the natural state of humanity is war and the human mind is naturally at odds with the good" (74).

Thus the minority world has painted a picture of human nature as something that always comes 'in the way' of society, the just state, and co-existence. Exemplary of this is the idea of 'original sin': we are intrinsically evil and must make up for this through suppression or renunciation of those sins.

Society, in turn, "was the collective outcome of corporeal wants … whose arbitrary satisfactions are mystified as universally rational choices" (87). Necessity brings us humans together. We live amongst each other in order to satisfy our animal needs, but these must nevertheless be repressed so that we may live amongst each other.

History has been defined as a series of nation-states, where sovereign powers controlled the masses through different means. The narrative of history, then, follows an arc from barbarity, savagery, and violence to dominion and control. History is, according to mainstream thought, "the long Western nightmare of natural anarchy together with the politics of its resolution by sovereign authority" (70).

In the minority world there's an idea of the human being that needs control and repression to keep its aggressive urges in line. This is, as we well know, the first assumption behind economic theory: that markets are driven by individual competition, and that management of market forces requires merely the channeling of these competitive urges and allocating scarce resources according to this demand. Similarly, it is known that the state exists as a center of power to keep all individual actors in line.

Society is, then, merely an aggregation of selfish individuals that act for their own benefit. We live amongst each other mostly to achieve higher individual pleasures. But, as Sahlins shows, this notion is not present in all societies.

Sahlins proposes *kinship* as a possible alternative. He quotes Aristotle in defining kinship as a mutual relationship of being; kinspeople are "members of one another" (46). This notion is echoed in many ethnographic reports. Native American tribes believe in a "transpersonal self." Peoples from the New Guinea Highlands "live in a universe entirely composed of persons … in effect, the universe is one big kindred." A person, to communities in the Caroline Islands, is "a locus of shared social relations or shared biographies" (46). As Sahlins says,

> "… [T]he self in these societies is not synonymous with the bounded, unitary, and autonomous individual as we know him—*him* in particular … rather, the individual person is the locus of multiple other selves with whom he or she is joined in mutual relations of being … [this is] the participation of certain others in one's own being" (48).

In these societies, people aren't viewed as autonomous, acting only on their own behalf, and living amongst others solely for the purpose of aggregating personal benefits. Here an 'individual' is seen as a collection of relations, a person acts as a node in a network. In these societies, acting for individual self-interest scarcely applies:

> "Natural self-interest? For the greater part of humanity, self-interest as we know it is unnatural in the normative sense: it is considered madness, witchcraft or some such grounds for ostracism, execution or at least therapy … it follows that the native Western concept of man's self-regarding animal nature is an illusion of world-anthropological proportions" (51).

By contrasting the minority world's perception of human nature to that of numerous other cultures, Sahlins aims to show, not necessarily that the other is more 'true,' but that

the idea of human nature as aggressive and to be controlled (muzzled) by state power is not final: there are other possibilities.[ii]

The idea that we need a strong legislative infrastructure to keep people under control is disproved, says Sahlins, by the peacefulness of contemporary hunting societies not under surveillance by any state.

The 'Western illusion,' then, is that we must have a sovereign power to control the masses, that without that power, there will be anarchy. From evidence of other societies, sovereign power is not necessary to keep people civil. These societies aren't a function of mutual competition either. On the contrary, society is kept together because of shared relationships and non-atomizable selves. The subsequent idea that we need a dominant power to keep us under control lest we turn into savages is disproven by societies that get along fine without the concept that human beings are intrinsically violent.

This argument is strengthened by the work of John Gowdy. In one anthology he edited, *Limited Wants, Unlimited Means*, Gowdy examines what hunter-gatherer societies mean for our conception of human nature and for modern political thought.

Research into the lives of past and present hunter-gatherer peoples shows that "hunter-gatherers, people who lived with almost no material possessions for hundreds of thousands of years, enjoyed lives in many ways richer and more rewarding than ours" (Gowdy, 1997: xv). This is because these societies had plenty of leisure time (they worked a maximum of six hours a day), no fixed capital (no belongings, everything is shared), and no separation of work and social life. In this way, the hunter-gatherer represents 'the uneconomic man':

1. They don't link individual well-being to individual production.
2. They don't live in a 'scarce' world.
3. Selfishness and acquisitiveness aren't natural traits.

In these societies, there are 'limited wants and unlimited means', meaning, they aren't limited by *supply* but limit their *demand.* Hunter-gatherer societies, then, are not selfish, but at the same time live equally amongst each other: they are 'aggressively egalitarian.'

Sharing and mutuality are stressed but this doesn't come with long-term commitments: no one is dependent on another.

In short, hunter-gatherer societies further show that humans aren't intrinsically aggressive and selfish. It is often assumed that humanity is faced with an either/or question: either we have infrastructure, laws, and police, or we have chaos, violence, and inequality. But from the example of hunter-gatherer societies, social relationships are enough to control aggression and inequality.

The notion that human beings live together merely from necessity is, according to Hannah Arendt, mostly a recent myth. In *The Human Condition*, she shows that the French Revolution signified a 'moment' when politics could have turned to open discussion concerned with freedom and the ability for each to live as they wished. Instead, the state became a means to control necessity. Through normalizing and equalizing technologies such as statistics, officials, administrators, and police assimilated ethnicities, normalized practices, and brought matters such as the freedom to live, eat, and have relations down to state decisions. In this sense, politics became an institution that normalized biographies and determined biology. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt shows that it was precisely these practices that resulted in the Second World War. National Socialism didn't invent racism, it merely used the tools already present and used by England and France to further assimilate and normalize the population.

The king might have been decapitated after the French Revolution, but the political subject was still determined by sovereign powers. Arendt thus finds 'society' hugely problematic: it is a tool by which truth was normalized, discourse was essentialized, race was assimilated or liquidated, and life was objectified. The state only recognizes those subjects with specific backgrounds, specific biographies, and allows for the treatment of very specific necessities. By describing these tools, Arendt shows that society is a construct and it is the state's function to enforce it.

The idea that a state is needed to keep people in control and to channel the necessity of living together and the need to control society is a self-fulfilling prophecy: only in implementing these tools did the state *create* necessity and society. In the wake of the

Second World War, biological control of the population was unethical. The state, as an institution that controls life biologically, was itself put into question by Arendt.

Nowadays this story as Arendt tells it seems unnecessary, exaggerated. Of course the state normalizes, but this doesn't always lead to totalitarianism. The state and good governance, after all, have been very effective in distributing wealth within its borders, allowing for scientific and technological progress and, a general increase in the welfare of human beings. We tend to argue that bureaucratic democracy is better than civil war or a dictatorship. Scandinavian countries, which feature extensive state regulation, are doing exceptionally well. It can be said that the social and biological state has been a success story, judging from the improvements that the world has seen in the past half-century.

But what Arendt points out isn't that all state control leads to fascism, but that the idea that the state ought to control the lives of its citizens only came about quite recently, and that these methods of control have often been at the expense of certain groups with biographies that don't fit in to the state's idea of human nature: minorities and the stateless. Between the two World Wars this was all too clear, but it is also very obvious now: immigrants and minorities are at a far greater economic and social disadvantage in all countries, and millions of refugees, whom Arendt calls the "stateless", still live behind barbed wire. To Arendt, minorities and the stateless are "the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics" (Arendt 1959: 277). They signify that the idea of a citizen is inherently exclusionary, and human beings that don't fit in to citizenship are most often excluded from their rights.

Acknowledging this allows us to see the problems that come along with statehood: it is by its very definition racist in excluding others from membership. [iii] Furthermore, its racism is symptomatic of a greater worry: that it defines what it is to be a human being, decides that humans need to be controlled in order to live amongst each other, and derides all those who do not live under a state as individuals with less rights. And as was revealed by the work of Sahlins and Gowdy, none of this is true. Human nature has many possibilities, it can't be objectively defined by an institution or by membership to that institution. Human beings, as we know, do not need a state to live amongst each other peacefully.

And of course Arendt, writing in the fifties and sixties, wasn't aware of the changes that would take place in the decades to come.

Today, says Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Times*, we are part of "a society impotent, as never before, to decide its own course with any degree of certainty, and to protect the chosen itinerary once it has been selected" (Bauman 2007: 7). Liberalism, where the state's function is to facilitate enterprises and market forces to act as easily as possible—essentially lowering the center of gravity of the state and making it a facilitator rather than a decision-maker—is in full swing. As more and more state organs are dropping, in processes now termed 'subsidies' or 'contracts,' the social state has become a plaything of international market forces.

With the decline of state control, government-initiated safety nets, and unions, we are now expected to be 'free choosers' and to bear in full the consequences of our choices. As individuals, we are forced to seek "biographical solutions to systemic contradiction … and individual salvation from shared troubles" (2001: 144, citing Ulrich Beck). The biographical solutions are apparent by the meaningless nationalistic or ethnic stories we create for others and ourselves and then enforce through laws, policy, or publicity.[2]

Not only that, we are no more governed by the state, but by fear. Whereas the Fordist factory was organized as a panopticon[3], as in a mobile and flexible economy, we live in constant fear of losing our jobs to someone else. We are our own panopticon, and fear of loss of security pushes us to compete. Whereas turn-of-the-century society was identifiable by institutional control, we can be identified by consumer competition. As Bauman observes in *Community*, "instead of marching columns, swarms" (2001: 127).

Bauman regards SUVs in America, gated communities in Brazil, loiter-free public space in major cities, and guarded apartment buildings as indicators for a culture of fear and insecurity. Advertisements prey on 'what if' scenarios and how their product can protect you from the worst. Politicians promise protection if they are kept in power, and incite make-belief fears about the danger of other countries or religious groups. Bauman

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[2] The way in which, for example, Quebec has created its own 'francophone' image, Canada uses hockey as a means to construct national identity, or Israel has excavated archeological sites in order to prove its historical position to its own citizens.

[3] The panopticon is a design, originally conceived by Jeremy Bentham for prisons, which gives the impression that subjects are under surveillance at all times, even if it isn't known whether they are under surveillance or not. Thus rebellious impulses are suppressed through fear.

quotes Adam Curtis from the documentary series *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear*, "In an age when all the grand ideas have lost credibility, fear of a phantom enemy is all the politicians have left to maintain their power" (2007: 16). Fear of losing your job, fear of a public enemy, fear of disease, fear of economic crashes: these all keep us in check and encourage the machine to keep going.

This fear, perpetuated by politics, unstable and competitive livelihoods, and segregated cities, means more and more that the rich are able to put themselves behind walls and the poorest are *put* behind them. For this reason Bauman contrasts the cosmopolitan elite, who *choose* to live in gated communities and hotels that look exactly the same all around the world, and the case of refugees, millions of whom have been put under the care of international programs designed to keep them alive, safe, and behind fences. Refugees play the opposite role of the cosmopolitan elite: they don't choose to be behind walls, they are put there by force, they don't choose to be nationless, they are torn away from their own land. "Refugees," says Bauman in *Liquid Times*, "are the very embodiment of 'human waste,' with no useful function to play in the land of their arrival and temporary stay, and with neither an intention nor a realistic prospect that they will be assimilated and incorporated into the new social body" (2007: 41). As a result, society is choking on its own waste products—it can't assimilate, annihilate, or detoxify. While in Arendt's time the stateless were a symptom of social racism at the hands of nationalism, now they are also symptomatic of a globalized—but hugely stratified—world.

Fear—which drives people to elect warmongers, buy insurance, install CCTV cameras, exclude minorities, and build walls—is built on security. It seems that, for all its riches, security is something that the corporate, globalized, and individualized world has been unable to provide. Thus the antidote to fear and segregation, says Bauman in *Community*, is a feeling of security. This makes sense: if we *feel* safe, then we won't be afraid of losing what we've got. Security is, then, the necessary condition of a 'global community.' This is a community in which fear of the other does not play a role.

In a world where no one is secure in their livelihood and everyone is competitive, a fundamental necessity is concern and care for each other. If another falls, one must try to help them get up. Similarly, if another loses their job or their business shuts down, there

must be a social safety net to catch them and help them get back on their feet. Thus, security and non-competitiveness requires concern, responsibility, and mutual care.

In sum, what Bauman calls for is essentially *fearlessness*. Fearlessness entails respect, care, mutuality, and a sense of security. This, in turn, provides the opportunity of living amongst each other safely and equally. And this is absolutely necessary in a world of walls and fences.

Anarchy's central tenet, that laws and hierarchy are unnecessary, isn't far off from such fearlessness. Laws, it is said, are meant to provide security, without which no one could be held accountable. The desire to do away with all laws doesn't implicate the wish for total chaos. It actually implies the belief that everyone would be able to co-exist without laws. To hold this belief, anarchists must be very trusting.

In addition anarchism doesn't to play in to the racism and segregation that nationhood connotes. In this sense, it also provides a way to deal with the issue of human nature. Human nature has been seen mostly in negative light by the minority world: it is necessary to suppress it in order for people to co-exist, and this is done through state control, laws, and policy. So not only does anarchism not lay any claim to what human nature is, it implies that co-existence does not require the segregation of peoples into different statehoods. To anarchists, your background does not determine what rights you have or what geographical location you must be beholden to.

With the belief that laws and hierarchies are unnecessary, then, come fearlessness, equality, mutual care, non-competition, and therefore a sense of security. And as Bauman says, these attitudes are all-too-necessary. Anarchism, then, implies not only an idealist political theory, but also an ethic. This ethic is trust in the other.

Anarchism deserves a closer look simply because it provides attitudes that, as Bauman shows, are lacking in modern life. It refuses racism and a negative conception of the human being as driven by competition. Anarchism, in its very basic, stripped-down form, presents us with a much-needed ethos.

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Notes

[i] Instead of using terms like 'the West,' 'First World,' or 'developed countries', this paper uses 'minority world': an attempt to reverse the hierarchies in mainstream discourse.

[ii] The realization of other possibilities, the understanding that one's own idea is not final and objective, often allows us to bring us beyond the prejudices we live by. The project is to show "that things are not as obvious as we might believe ... [and] to render the too-easy gestures difficult" (Foucault 1982).

[iii] Here 'racist' may be too strong a word. But to my knowledge there is no word that means 'discrimination towards someone who doesn't share the same biography.'