

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



William Henry van Ornum  
What is Anarchy?  
May 1, 1897

Retrieved on 2020-06-11 from [www.libertarian-labyrinth.org](http://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org)  
*The Twentieth Century* 18 no. 18 (May 1, 1897): 11–12.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**

# What is Anarchy?

William Henry van Ornum

May 1, 1897

The average man has imbibed a general idea that anarchy is something quite terrible; and it is only necessary to brand a man as an anarchist to damn him in the eyes of the unthinking multitude. If you wish to kill a dog you have only to raise the cry of “mad dog,” and the cry will outrun the unfortunate beast until some one will succeed in ending his life, whether he were mad or not, for everyone feels, in duty bound, to help kill him. Just so, must people regard it as incumbent upon them to help destroy any man whom some designing person shall denounce as an anarchist. Not that they have the slightest idea of what anarchy means; or whether the person so denounced is in any sense dangerous or not. It is enough that the cry has been raised. Ignorant prejudice does the rest.

Reader, if I were to ask you what was meant by “monarchy,” you would have no difficulty in answering. You would probably tell me that it is a country ruled by one King, one ruler. And it would be correct; and no one would be likely to raise any dispute about it. Now suppose I ask you about an “hierarchy!” You will tell me that it is a country ruled by ecclesiastical authority; and you will be right again. Nor will anyone raise a dispute. An” oligarchy,” you will tell

me, is a country ruled by wealth; a “patriarchy,” one governed by the family or tribal head; and an “exarchy,” by a chief officer or governor. So far no one will question the correctness of any of these definitions. Then why should they be at a loss to understand the term “archy,” meaning ruler or governor placed after the prefix, “an” meaning no? Then anarchy means a state of society which is free from the despotism of rulers or governors; or a country in which the people are free; no rulership by king or priest; no domination of wealth, no paternalism in the affairs of men; with not even a rulership by a majority—with the abolition of the rulership of man over man ceases the element of force, of coercion, in human society. There remains then no law to compel, and all stand upon an equal footing. It is obvious that in such a society there can be no special privilege: no advantage of one over another; for these things are always the creations of law, and must have the constant support of law to maintain them.

This equality of opportunity is impossible in the presence of law, because those who administer the law necessarily have the advantage and always certainly use that advantage. But equality of opportunity does not imply equality in mental or physical power of members of the community. The question of the equality of men, in these respects has nothing whatever to do with their right to equality of opportunity. If men are, or are not, equal in their powers and attainments, it constitutes no valid argument for placing either the weak or the strong at a disadvantage.

With the elimination of the force which compels, from human society, human association will necessarily become a free and voluntary co-operation. The disorders and turmoils which now afflict society will cease, because their cause will be removed; that cause being the injustices and aggressions which are expressed in human government and law. Then, and not till then, the co-operative commonwealth becomes a possibility, a logical sequence of anarchy.

“But,” you will ask me, “do not anarchists believe in force and violent revolution in order to attain their ends?” I answer, only

so far as that force may be applied to defend themselves from the aggressions of others. Any amount or kind of force may be used purely in self-defense; but it must never go one step beyond that. When it does, those who use it cease to be anarchists and do precisely what they condemn others for doing. But, as a matter of fact, government being a continuous aggression, all acts committed in violation of its authority and with a view to resisting or escaping those aggressions are strictly defensive and proper. Anarchists, if true to themselves and true to their principles, must always seek to rid themselves of government. In doing this, however, the part of wisdom is always to adopt those measures which will realize the best results with the least exertion and the least danger to themselves. The question then arises, what are the most effective measures which can be adopted? The answer seems perfectly obvious. Men submit to the aggressions of governments because they think they are beneficial, and because they think they possess some inherent right to the authority which they exert. The strength of every government lies in these popular delusions; and, so long as they last, governments will last. It would do little good to abolish one government, because another would take its place at once. So that the problem we have to deal with is ignorance; and Ignorance cannot be overcome by force. It cannot be blown up with dynamite or abolished at the point of the bayonet. To adopt violent measures only invites violence in return. To my mind, the most rational and the most effective of all anarchist propaganda is that of peaceful agitation coupled with practical cooperation. Show up the absurdities, the injustices and the abominations of government on every possible occasion and, at the same time, demonstrate by cooperative work that government is not needed and what may be accomplished without its assistance. This is the point at which government can offer no resistance. It is powerless to prevent the spread of ideas except as it can divert the public mind by appeals to passion and prejudice; and whenever anarchists resort to violence they enable governments to do that most effectually. They thus play di-

rectly into the hands of their enemies, and hinder the progress of true anarchist ideas. But the principles of anarchy have nothing whatever to do with the specific measures which anarchists may see fit to adopt in order to spread those ideas, any more than the principles of monarchy have to do with the measures that monarchists might, from time to time, adopt for purposes of propaganda. The vulgar multitude has been taught that without government a state of chaos and disorder would prevail in society. It has been taught that anarchy is synonymous with that disorder. Therefore, wherever the word is used, that multitude immediately associates with it the idea of confusion and riot. But this is always a mark of vulgar ignorance on the part of those who use it in that sense, or else of willful misrepresentation. On the contrary, a state of society, that realizes the ideal which anarchy seeks, is one in which force has been eliminated, in which voluntary co-operation takes the place of capitalism, and in which all the members stand upon an equal footing, with no advantage, no privilege and no monopoly to any. In other words, it is the highest ideal of human society that man can conceive of.