



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on September 19, 2016

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## Anarchism Is Not the Path to Liberty

The Holocaust. The Soviet Gulags. Christians fed to the lions during the days of the Roman Empire. All examples of government. Since at least the days of Nimrod and the biblical Tower of Babel, governments have been instruments of the cruelest of atrocities.

Even our own U.S. government has, at times, been responsible for all sorts of criminal behavior, including, in recent times, the infamous episodes at Ruby Ridge and Waco.



Most business owners' experience with government, at all levels, is regularly unpleasant, with heavy-handed regulations, and seemingly never-ending forms that require their attention. Having to deal with a government bureaucrat — federal, state, or local — is usually a very unhappy experience for the average citizen.

So, is anarchy — the absence of government — the answer? Would we be better off to cast off, not just our present government, but all government?

The 19th-century anarchist Lysander Spooner thought so. Even then, he argued that the effort of the Founding Fathers to create a limited government through a written Constitution had failed: "But whether the Constitution really be one thing, or another, this much is certain — that it has either authorized such a government as we have had, or has been powerless to prevent it."

That was a dismal conclusion about our own government then. What would Spooner say about our modern federal leviathan, which has grown far beyond anything any of the framers of the Constitution could have intended? He would definitely conclude that anarchy is the answer: government-less life.

And if not for the sad fact of sinful human nature, I would be an advocate for anarchy, as well. But James Madison summed up the need for human government in *The Federalist*: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to control itself." But anarchists are not persuaded of the need for government.

In our time, the late Murray Rothbard argued for anarchy in the modern world, contending in his *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto* that it was not the anarchist libertarians who were the dreamers and utopians, but rather the "limited government" conservatives.

"The libertarian is also eminently realistic because he alone understands fully the nature of the State and its thrust for power. In contrast, it is the seemingly far more realistic conservative believer in 'limited government' who is the truly impractical utopian," Rothbard wrote. After all, Rothbard explained, "The idea of a strictly limited constitutional State was a noble experiment that failed, even



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under the most favorable and propitious circumstances.”

Rothbard certainly touches a nerve here. We marvel at the document produced by the Founders, and admire the restrictions it placed on the very government the Founders were creating with the Constitution. But we are also astounded at how these plain words are ignored — even ridiculed in some cases — by those occupying government positions today. Are Rothbard and the other anarchists right? Would anarchy put us on a path to liberty?

Or would anarchy only result in a tyranny far worse than anything we have experienced by the repeated usurpations under our own “constitutional” government?

To answer these questions, we need to examine the origins of government and its purposes. We need to look at what anarchists have proposed in the past, and what modern anarchist thinkers offer as a solution today. Then, we need to address the proposals of anarchists to better secure liberty than under our Constitution, and explain why these proposals, although often nobly offered, fall short.

In this survey, we should also keep in mind that there is not a single example in all of recorded history of a civilization or society where liberty flourished for a sustained period of time without any government. Put simply, it has never happened, despite the sincerity of liberty-minded anarchists who believe it can be accomplished, man’s unchanging human nature notwithstanding. However, there are certainly examples in the historical record of anarchy leading to tyranny, including examples of would-be totalitarians using anarchy to bring about tyranny. This has been true even when something very different was promised. According to Marxist philosophy, the State is supposed to wither on the vine after the coercive utopians come into power. But in practice, no communist or socialist regime has ever led to a government-less society.

## Origins and Purpose of Government

It is not unusual for Christians to cite Genesis 9:5-6 as the origin of human government. Noah and his family left the Ark after the Great Flood, and God told Noah, “Who so sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.” While it is certainly possible that human government was created at this time, it is certainly not explicitly stated. God informed Noah that taking the life of a murderer is permitted, because the life of a human being is so important.

While the above Genesis citation might not overtly call for the creation of human government, a connection between the Bible and government can certainly be made in the writings of the Apostle Paul to the Romans. In the 13th chapter of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, he tells his readers that the proper role of the civil magistrate is to “take vengeance upon him that doeth evil,” and that “he [the civil magistrate] beareth not the sword for nought.” Not only is government given biblical approval, the purpose of government is quite clear, from a Christian, or Western, perspective — to punish those who do evil.

John Locke theorized in his *Civil Government* that man originally lived in a state of anarchy, but such a condition became intolerable. Private vengeance led to family feuds, conflicts that probably made the Hatfields and McCoys seem tame by comparison. It made more sense to choose some individuals by contract to perform the role of government. As Locke put it, this proper role of government is to protect the life, liberty, and property of all members of a society. This is known as the *social contract*, or as some put it, the *social compact*. In short, Locke contended that government replaced anarchy because



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human government was necessary to protect rights.

This is the heart of the argument between those who favor limited government because they favor maximum liberty, and those who are anarchists for the same reason. Anarchists argue that our rights are better protected without government, while America's Founders believed, as did Locke, that human nature necessitated a limited constitutional government to secure basic human rights.

Under Locke's philosophical argument, basic human rights such as life and property do not emanate from the State — the State's role is to protect rights that already exist. The Declaration of Independence declares these rights "unalienable," meaning a person cannot be separated from these rights by government because these rights come from the Creator.

As John F. McManus wrote in *An Overview of Our World*, "Here is the core of Americanism. This small sentence [that we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights] says two very important things. First of all, it says that *there is a God*; and secondly, that the rights of personal freedom and private property and freedom of movement — these *rights come from no place else but from God*. Consequently, no government can take them away."

So government has powers, and the people have rights. Again, according to Jefferson, the *just* powers of government are those that are used to protect the unalienable rights of the people. Rights come first, then government. In the end, if government fails to fulfill this role, the people themselves have a right to "throw off" such government. Unlike anarchists, once they separated from the British Empire, the Founders undertook to create a government to protect freedom.

## **Anarchism, Religion, and Property**

On the other hand, the foundational beliefs of anarchists, which hold that there is no God (meaning there are no immutable rights — only freedoms that each individual must force others to recognize through power) and, hence, no "right" to property, would logically lead to the strongest members of society influencing all the others around them: totalitarianism.

While limited government under the Declaration of Independence anchors our liberties to a literal God, anarchists throughout history (with exceptions) have tended to atheism.

A Bavarian anarchist, Johann Kaspar Schmidt, born 1806, was very explicit in this regard. "I am entitled to overthrow Zeus, Jehovah, God, etc., if I can." The Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, born 1814, had similar views: "All religions, with their gods, demigods, and prophets, their Messiahs and saints are products of the credulous fancy of men who had not yet come to the full development and entire possession of their intellectual powers." Bakunin's one-time associate, Karl Marx, famously dismissed religion as "the opiate of the people."

Another common target of the 19th-century anarchists was the concept of private property. Bakunin said, "Private property is at once the consequence and the basis of the state." As such, he believed, "If one would make a thorough revolution, therefore, one must attack things and relationships, *destroy property* and the State." Sounding like Karl Marx himself (before they split on philosophical grounds), Bakunin called for a revolution to "destroy the clergy," and called for "the confiscation of all productive capital and instruments of labor in favor of the associations of laborers, which use them for collective production."



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This sounds amazingly similar to Marx's "dictatorship of the proletariat." As Art Thompson wrote in his *To the Victor Go the Myths and Monuments*, "Anarchists always seem to end up socialists or communists."

Why? Nature abhors a vacuum — in the political realm as in physics. Having no government (anarchy) will ultimately result in some political system filling the vacuum, usually tyranny, despite the good intentions of some liberty-minded people who honestly believe anarchy would work.

Others, who recognize that anarchism does not work, promote anarchy as a means to an end — to replace the existing order with a new order controlled by themselves, a process that has been used with success in the past. Hitler's Brownshirts created near-anarchy in Germany, but they were not working to end government, per se, but rather were using anarchic conditions as a means to establish the totalitarian government of National Socialism.

Self-proclaimed anarchist Benjamin Tucker, born in Massachusetts in 1854, made clear that his devotion to anarchy was not for the purpose of advancing liberty. He opposed usury as "surplus wealth," including not only interest on money, but the rent of land and houses and profit in exchange in his definition. Explaining the opposition to government shared by anarchists, Tucker said these so-called usurers get their power from a "monopoly maintained by the State." Tucker opposed the state monopoly not because he wished to advance liberty, but rather because he hated its protection of property.

Tucker railed against patents, which are specifically authorized in Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution. Tucker claimed, "The patent monopoly protects investors and authors against competition for a period long enough to enable them to extort from the people a reward enormously in excess of the labor measure of their services."

This ties the 19th-century anarchists to many modern anarchists, who generally oppose patents and copyrights — commonly termed "intellectual property" — as well. Certainly, such laws can be abused, which is why the Constitution instructs them to be in place for a "limited time." The purpose of this constitutional provision is explicitly stated. If a person can expect a reward for the fruit of his labors, whether a musician, a writer, or an inventor, the person is much more likely to produce a new song for the public to enjoy, a novel, or a better mousetrap. As Adam Smith put it so memorably in his *Wealth of Nations*, the butcher does not prepare us our supper for our benefit, but rather for his own. Acting in his own self-interest, he prepares us our supper.

Anarchist opposition to intellectual property is shared with Marxists then and now, including Karl Marx himself. Marx and his collaborator, Frederick Engels, argued in the *Communist Manifesto* that inventions are not an individual achievement, but are rather the product of society. "Even when I carry out scientific work, etc., an activity which I can seldom conduct in direct association with other men, I perform a social ... act." Or as modern socialists such as Senator Elizabeth Warren and President Barack Obama would put it, "You didn't build that."

While many decent people are sincerely deluded into thinking anarchism would lead to a society with greater liberty than under constitutional government, McManus warned in *Overview of Our World*, "Anarchy is advocated by some people not because they want no government, but because they do not like what they have. Anarchy can be important as *a means of change*. If an individual does not like the form of government under which he lives, he can advocate Anarchy so that when he has no government,



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he can insert what he would really like to have in its place.”

## **Anarchism and Violence**

Once someone accepts the premise that government is strictly oppressive, logic dictates that violence will be the path used to get rid of government — violence not constrained by the collective moral determinations of a group, i.e., government.

That was certainly the case with Leon Czolgosz. After reading socialist and anarchist literature, he came to believe American society was full of injustice. He blamed government. Inspired by the assassination of King Umberto I of Italy in July 1900 by anarchist Gaetano Bresci, Czolgosz decided to imitate the deed in America.

His target was President William McKinley, whom he murdered in September of the next year in Buffalo, New York. Before his execution, Czolgosz uttered his last words: “I killed the President because he was an enemy of the good people — the good working people. I am not sorry for my crime.”

Since at least the days of the bloody French Revolution, radicals have claimed to be working for “the people.” The anarchist-socialist Emma Goldman later wrote an article in which she compared Czolgosz to Marcus Brutus, who assassinated Julius Caesar. In the article, Goldman called McKinley the “president of the money kings and trust magnates.”

But lawlessness *always* ends up victimizing the weak, invalidating anarchists’ claims.

The key to advancing liberty, maintained 19th-century French philosopher Frédéric Bastiat, is holding government to its proper role. Though, as columnist Walter E. Williams said, “Bastiat recognized the greatest single threat to liberty is government,” Bastiat was no anarchist. Bastiat contended that government had a “proper domain,” which he gave as “the protection of every person’s liberty and property.” And Bastiat insisted that “liberty is an acknowledgment of faith in God and His works.”

Bastiat did not see anarchy as the best path to liberty. On the contrary, he said that was to be found in *the law*. In his classic work of political philosophy, *The Law*, Bastiat asked, “What, then, is law? It is the collective organization of the individual right to lawful defense.” This grew out of the individual’s inherent right to defend himself. “If every person has the right to defend — even by force — his person, his liberty, and his property, then it follows that a group of men have the right to organize and support a common force to protect these rights constantly. Thus the principle of collective right — its reason for existing, its lawfulness — is based on individual right.”

McManus wrote, “Philosophical anarchists overlook a very important feature of human nature: that there are individuals who are robbers and killers and plunderers. It is precisely because there are criminals that we have chosen to hire a police force to protect ourselves. We could either perform this function ourselves, or we can pool our resources and ask somebody to do it for us. This is precisely what we have done, and this is government.”

## **Protection Agencies Instead of Government?**

But modern anarchists believe protection can be done without government, through what are often referred to as “protection agencies.” Anarchist Murray Rothbard, who was certainly no socialist and was a champion of liberty, promoted protection agencies as superior to government in maintaining our rights.





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According to its adherents, protection could be purchased in the free market, much in the same way as we buy a loaf of bread. We could hire a “protection agency” to defend us against those who would threaten our liberty, our property, or our very lives. Instead of calling 911, we could call our protection agency (PA). If someone stole our car, for example, we could place a call to our PA, which would then visit the offender, and demand compensation of some sort. (Anarchists argue that prisons are a waste of resources and the victim of a crime usually never gets compensated.) Under an optimistic scenario, the perpetrator acknowledges his offense, and some form of compensation settles the accounts.

Of course, the car thief could argue his innocence, or otherwise refuse to settle. What then? Well, the PA would simply *take* compensation, such as taking the car back by force — unless, of course, the accused car thief had hired his own PA, in which case the situation would have to be resolved in the court of a judge the two PA’s agreed to use. Under the scenario offered by these modern anarchists, freelance judges would be offering their services, and would be hired based on similar criteria that we use when we hire an electrician: price and ability.

This could, no doubt, work, in some cases. In fact, many disputes today are already settled by either mediation or through arbitration, without resorting to government courts.

But what about a murder of a human being? What would be fair monetary compensation for a human life? Advocates of this system differ in their judgments. Some would hold to solely financial compensation, while others agree that prisons of some sort would have to be used in some cases. A few would even agree to capital punishment.

But who would investigate unsolved crimes? Today, police detectives can obtain search warrants and the like, backed by the force of law, to enter private homes and businesses. Under the U.S. Constitution (you know, that document that Spooner despised), even searches by law enforcement are only legal if a judge is convinced by the investigator that there is *probable cause*.

In a condition of anarchy, in which protection agencies punish and control crime, a type of person would most likely emerge who would make the abuses of personal and property rights perpetrated by the present-day bounty hunters — who now trespass and more to catch a fleeing person — mild by comparison. At least now, the actions of bounty hunters are restricted by law.

Under anarchy, who would be the final determiner of the law? Organized thugs would no doubt form their own PAs, and resist any actions against them by the “good” PAs. Perhaps the most difficult hurdle to jump for anarchists who propose these PAs is what to do about foreign powers who ignore this anarchist “paradise,” and invade to take over. I once heard an anarchist during the Cold War explain that if the Russians invaded, “We could just hit them with guerilla warfare.” That would certainly be an unpleasant scenario.

And we would not have just *foreign* socialists such as the Soviets to contend with. Domestic leftists would continue to exist in a “government-free” society, just as much as they do now. Many on the Left are insistent that a proper role of government is to redistribute wealth. What is to stop these radicals from forming their own socialist PA to take, by force, from Mr. Smith, who is wealthy, and give it to Mr. Jones, who is not? And like the modern bureaucrat, the socialist PA could deduct a “fee” for this “service.”

Due to these intolerable situations, some enforcement system would have to develop to impose a final verdict. Either one agency would achieve a monopoly position, enforcing its edicts by force, or groups of



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agencies would work together to do the same thing. After all, would you want to hire a mom-and-pop PA, or a very large PA, with lots of power? Which means we are back where we started — with a government of sorts.

Doesn't that sound a lot like Locke's social contract theory, modified by our Founders in the Declaration of Independence? Out of anarchy, a government arose for the purpose of protecting the rights of the people.

## **Libertarians Who Oppose Anarchy**

It should be noted that not all Libertarians equate freedom with anarchy. While Murray Rothbard was certainly a scholar to be admired for his writings on economics (e.g., *America's Great Depression*), this flirtation with anarchism by him and his followers, desiring more liberty, is not supported by many other renowned libertarian scholars, such as Ron Paul, Frederick Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Ludwig von Mises.

Mises explained his opposition to anarchism in his book *Liberalism*:

Anarchism misunderstands the real nature of man. It would be practicable only in a world of angels and saints. Liberalism [by which he meant a limited, constitutional government that protects the unalienable rights espoused in the Declaration of Independence] is not anarchism, nor has it anything whatsoever to do with anarchism. The liberal understands quite clearly that without resort to compulsion, the existence of society would be endangered and that behind the rules of conduct whose observance is necessary to assure peaceful human cooperation must stand the threat of force if the whole edifice of society is not to be continually at the mercy of one of its members.

In his *Human Action*, Mises said, "Society cannot exist if the majority is not ready to hinder, by the application or threat of violent action, minorities from destroying the social order. This power is vested in the state or government."

Finally, in *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science*, Mises, expressing similar sentiments as Madison, said that anarchists pass over "the fact that men are not angels."

## **The End Result**

McManus issued a warning to those who would favor anarchy as some sort of libertarian ideal: "Anarchy is a frightful thing. Americans have often wondered how Asian and South American governments can be toppled or greatly influenced by student rioting, or general strikes." Someone living in Los Angeles during the Watts riots, or more recently during the riots in Ferguson or Baltimore, can certainly understand. As McManus explained, "If you find yourself as they did in a situation where you fear for your life; where you stand behind your own front door with a gun or a baseball bat to protect your family; where you can't go to work to earn a living; and where you can't even go to the corner store either for fear of being shot or because looters have cleaned the place out, you obviously cannot exist in a situation like that for very long." So a new government takes over, promising to remedy the social disruption.

And this is why anarchy rarely, if ever, leads to limited constitutional government, but rather to an authoritarian dictatorship. "After a matter of just a few days," McManus predicted, "[you and others] will go to the best person able to put an end to that Anarchy and ask him to 'do something! Please take



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over.”

And he will.

During the “Directory” period of the French Revolution, with the nation degenerating into anarchy, there emerged the dictator Napoleon, who explained, “I found the crown of France on the ground, and picked it up with a sword.”

Anarchy is not the path to liberty, but rather a road to despotism. The better road is to restore our constitutional Republic, as it was intended by the framers of the Constitution.

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