

Anarchism vs. Limited Government -- Let's Stop Fighting

In the past two years or so, I have seen an increasing amount of space in various libertarian publications devoted to an escalating "debate" over the relative merits of a limited-government system versus an "anarchist" system. Having patiently sat through this verbal brouhaha for all this time, I would now like to suggest that a cease-fire is in order, for two very compelling reasons.

And, just to get my biases out in the open, I will state that I personally am inclined toward the limited-government side of the controversy—but I will hasten to add that my devotion to this position is far from wholehearted, and that in relation to the points I will herewith attempt to make, it is not important.

Having done this, I will now turn to the substance of my plea for peace. In essence, it rests on two points—one fairly simple, and one rather complex.

To begin with the simpler—and, in my mind, more important—of the two points, I will merely state that as I see it, the whole debate is almost entirely irrelevant to the problems we face in the real world. This, I believe, is evidenced by the fact that almost all of the arguments—pro and con—which have been presented to date have had to fall back on desert-island-or ideal-society situations.

Like it or not, let's face it: whatever system we might *like* to have, the system we actually *do* have is very, very far removed from the ideal. And, judging from present trends, it is getting worse, not better. Thus, for any foreseeable span of time, the problem we face is not one of deciding between two fairly similar libertarian systems, but rather one of reversing present trends toward an increasingly statist system.

In today's context, even the relatively "mild" Liberty Amendment (proposed Constitutional amendment to eliminate income tax and get government out of business-type ventures) is considered "far out" by 90% of the population, and of the political leaders in this

country. This proposal, which is considered "soft" even by Objectivists—let alone anarchists—has been approved by only seven state legislatures, despite over ten years of efforts by the Amendment's supporters. At best, it might get ratified in another ten years, if everyone who favors reduction or elimination of government (and I mean *everyone*, from Bill Buckley to Karl Hess) were to make it his sole concern for that period of time.

Our battle, today, is with the ADA, the Kennedys and Rockefellers, and others who seek to expand the state—and any time spent arguing amongst ourselves over relatively fine points is simply wasteful and enervating.

To make an analogy, we are on a train that is heading in the wrong direction, at an ever-increasing speed. When there are so many people working in an organized and active manner to increase its speed, it is foolish for us to waste time and energy fighting over how far we want to take it in the opposite direction. First it must be slowed down, stopped, and turned around. After we do this, and have moved an appreciable distance in the right direction, *then* we can sanely concern ourselves with just how far we want to go.

Enough on this point. My second reason for urging an indefinite suspension of the debate on limited-government versus anarchy is that I believe that there is no black-and-white, clear-cut case to be made in favor of either alternative. Both have their advantages; both have their disadvantages. In many respects, it is simply a case of "you pays your money, and you takes your choice."

I say this for a number of reasons, the primary among them being that no society can be perfect, because people aren't perfect. If everyone were infallible, any political-economic system would work; if everyone were totally evil, society would be hellish regardless of its form. To elaborate briefly, I think it can be reasonably postulated that if all men were

perfectly moral, they would act in a moral manner regardless of what type of system they were ostensibly operating under; even if they had a nominally Communist system, they would all act as if they were in a free society, and the net effect would be the same as if they had formally decided to *have* a free society. Conversely, if everyone resorted to coercion at the drop of a hat—killing, stealing, etc. every time it suited their whims—*no* system would be truly satisfactory. The net effect would be gang-rule, whether you called it Naziism or anarcho-capitalism.

Which brings us to the key point regarding the essentially futile nature of "the great debate"—namely, that as long as there are people who will resort to coercion (initiation of force or threat thereof), you cannot have a "society without coercion." At best, you can have a society which *minimizes* coercion.

This being the case, the question at hand then becomes "Which form of social organization—limited government or anarchism—will result in the greatest reduction of coercion?" And the answer, as far as I can determine, is that it is pretty much of a trade-off. Each will reduce coercion to a certain level—that level being primarily dependent on the nature of the people in the society—and the main difference between the two is in the *nature* of that coercion, not in the amount.

First, under either system, you will have problems regarding the establishment of "rules of conduct"—law-making, as it were. In an anarchist society, there are *no* laws, technically speaking—simply commonly accepted rules of conduct, if that much. Each individual is bound only by those rules he wishes to be bound by. If Mr. Smith doesn't like what Mr. Jones is doing, he has no authority to fall back on, other than community sentiment, and, if he can afford one, his hired "protective" agency. Although moral right and wrong still exist, there is no final arbiter regarding the moral rightness or wrongness of any position.

Under a limited government, the

problem is different, but no less thorny. It is fairly easy to pass laws—but no guarantee that those laws will be moral. Depending on the ease with which laws can be passed, and the degree of irrationality and immorality present in society, you *might* get a good bunch of laws, but then again, you might not. Thus, your choice between the two systems is likely to boil down to one of organized, legalized coercion versus unorganized, unpredictable coercion.

Under a limited-government arrangement, the root problem, in fact, is that of keeping it "limited." As many people have noted, constitutions can be amended or circumvented (and a constitution which *couldn't* be amended wouldn't be desirable, anyhow); usually, such amendment takes the form of loosening the restrictions on government power. Thus, in the long run, a constitution is no guarantee against despotism. Another way to try to keep a "limited" government under control is to make provisions for secession by dissatisfied parties. Unfortunately, there is nothing to guarantee that this provision will be adhered to, and even if it is, you run the risk of simply creating a lot of little totalitarian mini-states.

The other big problem with a limited government is—how do you finance its operation? Taxation is simply legalized theft, voluntary contributions probably wouldn't provide the necessary revenues, government enterprises are rarely profitable, even under today's system where they are given special privileges, and pay-as-you-use-the-services is impractical for things like defense. At best, you will have some coercion—perhaps a combination of pay-as-you-use and death taxes (if you must tax anyone, it is better to tax the dead than the living; inheritance taxes also have the not-wholly-undesirable effect of preventing the accumulation of unearned wealth).

So much for limited government; it obviously has its faults. Anarchy has its drawbacks, too, however. The primary one is enforcing the "laws,"

even if you can get everyone to agree what they are. Another problem under an anarchic system is—how do you protect those people unwilling or unable to protect themselves? A man has the right to his own life and property even if he can't or won't defend them, and any system which does not make sure that *rights* are protected has a gaping flaw in it. Thus, the question comes down to "Are we going to force other folks to pay for this man's protection, or are we going to let anyone who wants to violate his rights get away with it, just because he can't (or won't) defend himself?"

Anarchic societies are at a disadvantage when it comes to defense against outside aggressors, too—a group which can draw on only some of its members for support against an invader is obviously less likely to stave off conquest than one which can draw on everyone's resources. And what do you do about enemy sympathizers in an anarchistic society? If they want to sell guns or give aid to the enemy, what's to stop them? I realize that to draw on the support of unwilling citizens by force is immoral, and so is restraint of trade—but then again, being conquered by a totalitarian enemy results in coercion, too. Sure, you can *hope* that everyone in your society will realize that it is in best interests to support the cause, but if you can't count on it, you may have real problems. So, once again, the choice is between different forms and degrees of coercion, and the best we can hope for is minimization of that coercion.

Enough. I believe I have made my point—namely that both systems leave something to be desired, although either is better than what we have now. Perhaps the best arrangement is a sort of semi-government (corporate society or "covenant" arrangement). But again, this is immaterial. The important thing is to stop fighting over abstract concepts, and spend our energies working for the diminution of the state here and now.

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