

The Libertarian Temperament

J. Hospers

The Libertarian Temperament versus the Anarchist Temperament

by John Hospers

I want to distinguish the libertarian *temperament* from the anarchist *temperament*; and this distinction is quite important because there are many "anarchists" within the Libertarian Party. While anarchism as a theory may have a lot of arguments in its favor; I do not wish to question these here, or to raise the philosophical issue of anarchism here. I could even assume that all anarchist arguments are quite valid, and yet make the same point. I am concerned here only with psychological aspects of anarchism or, I should say, anarchists. In traveling here and there about the United States during the recent presidential campaign and since, I have come up against many an anarchist. And more than 90% of the poison pen letters I have received have come not from statist but from libertarian anarchists. I certainly do not want to be guilty of over-generalization, or to tar everyone with the same brush; but I have certainly noticed, as doubtless many of you have, a recurring personality pattern among those who label themselves anarchists.

Part of it can certainly be called rebellion against authority; but this, to a libertarian, is quite all right if it means that no one else has the right to rule your life without your consent. This is indeed the basic principle of libertarianism. But there is more: there is a strong, usually I would say a neurotic, rebellion against all forms of discipline, especially self-discipline. There is a childish insistence on the obviousness of all points of anarchist doctrine, and of the evil and malevolence of anyone who makes an honest point against it. There is either an unwillingness to enter into calm sustained argument

about it, or a childish frenzy in which they conduct argument, which makes it difficult for anyone to enter into it with them without being at the receiving end of name-calling and numerous personal slurs. I have seen this tendency reach the point of petulant screaming and stamping of feet, so that any impartial observer, regardless of whether or not he understood the arguments at issue, would exclaim, "These are a bunch of spoiled children!" Can it be that they have never grown up, that they love to dish it out but can't bear to take it the way they give it, because they really have no experience in the cultivation of rationality? Many of them take to anarchism because it seems to give them a theoretical justification for their own psychological tendencies: they can't really get along with anybody for a sustained period of time, and anarchism is the ultimate extreme in decentralization in one's relations with other human beings. One doesn't have to do anything he doesn't want to in relation to anyone, not even the state, since in the anarchist ideal "the state" of course is absent. Thus, it is not an accident, I think, that the unconscious formula that the typical anarchist projects is: "Go screw yourself!" The view provides a convenient intellectual camouflage for their psychological propensities. (Egoists vs. egotists.)

Now, all this is very unfortunate from the standpoint of the Libertarian Party. It simply cannot grow as long as it is fractured into warring splinter groups, with the anarchists shouting from the housetops for all the world to hear what stupid idiots or fiendish devils all the other libertarians are. With a group so small to begin with, it is not difficult to imagine what picture the outside world will form of a party some of whose factions at least parade their differences as if they had no principles in common. Most people try to reduce everybody else to a slogan anyway, and the Libertarian Party is not accurately represented by any quick and easy slogans; the first impression people have of us from a couple of sentences in the daily paper is that we are a bunch of crackpots anyway, and this initial impression is only reinforced when they hear the anarchists berating the rest of us. They then feel that their initial impression of us is

justified, and don't bother to go on to investigate our views further; they have already got us tagged, and the tag is as far as it goes in their subsequent attitude toward us. The result is that every time this happens we have lost a possible ally.

Anarchism, as I see it, is an issue for the far future as far as practical application is concerned. If we get to the point where 9/10 of the present government functions are government functions no longer, then we can consider the question whether what remains is best performed by government or by private individuals and organizations. But it is virtually certain that we shall never reach that point if we do not present a united front to the world. What we should be working for together is the progressive limitation of the governmental apparatus, not its immediate elimination. On this point we can all unite against all the other political parties; and, moreover, millions of people are so fed up with big government that they will surely listen to us if we get a chance to speak to them. The principal way in which we ourselves stand in the way of this, I think, is not only the anarchist doctrine but the anarchist psychology. They will not listen to self-styled defenders of reason who simply rant and scream. They already have a big mental block to overcome in even entertaining the word "anarchism" with any sympathy since the word in most minds conjures up images of Trotskyites, bomb-throwers, and saboteurs. And they will surely be turned off totally by a person whose main attitude toward them seems to be that it would be somewhat preferable if they didn't exist.

Libertarians can't do without creative disagreement and free discussion within their ranks, but they can jolly well do without the-attitudes of contentious and badly brought up children.