

Anarchist theory and the pitfalls of the *reductio ad politicum*

Against the State: An Introduction to Anarchist Political Theory

Crispin Sartwell

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Anarchism is not just misunderstood, but misunderstood in well-worn and predictable formulas. A shrewd critic could easily catalogue these formulas, just as Aristotle once catalogued the fallacies, and even assign them pretentious-sounding names. Near the top of any such list would be the *reductio ad politicum* – the reduction to the political – according to which anarchism is nothing more than opposition to states, governments, and other properly *political* entities. One encounters this fallacy chiefly, though not exclusively, in the rare attempts of Anglo-American philosophers to take anarchism seriously as a political idea.¹ A.J. Simmons, for example, summarizes it tidily when he claims that ‘commitment to one central claim unites all forms of anarchist political philosophy: all existing states are illegitimate.’² From this ‘central claim’ follows what Simmons calls the ‘minimal moral content’ of anarchism – namely, that the subjects of illegitimate states lack general political obligations.³ In other words, if a state is illegitimate its citizens have no specifically *political* obligations to obey the laws of that state, even though they may have a host of *non-political* reasons (or distinct and separate moral reasons) to obey them.

That the views of so-called ‘classical anarchists’ tend, without exception, to be much stronger and more comprehensive is not surprising, since Simmons’ definition of anarchism, and all others like it, simply does not apply within their tradition. The word ‘anarchy’, which comes from the Greek *anarkhos*, does not principally mean ‘without a government’ or ‘without a state’, but rather ‘without authority’. As David Weick notes, ‘anarchism is more than anti-statism, even if government (the state) is, appropriately, the central focus of anarchist critique.’⁴ As ‘the generic social and political idea that expresses negation of all [repressive] power’,⁵ anarchism is

committed first and foremost to the universal rejection of coercive authority, which includes capitalism, autocratic religions, patriarchy, heterosexism, white supremacy, and imperialism, *as well as* states and governments. It is because they ignore this dimension of anarchism that we accuse Simmons and his ilk of committing the fallacy of *reductio ad politicium*.⁶

Crispin Sartwell is no stranger to this tradition. In the introduction to *Against the State*, he claims to have been an anarchist since the age of 12 and mentions reading Emma Goldman's *Anarchism* and Alexander Berkman's *The ABC of Communist Anarchism* in his youth (p.3). He has written previously on the classical anarchists and recently co-edited a volume of Voltairine de Cleyre's essays.⁷ Even his definition of anarchism – 'the view that all forms of human association ought to be, as far as possible, voluntary' (p.4) – is certainly orthodox. In fact, it's an improvement on most orthodox formulations, since, as Sartwell himself puts it, 'the emphasis on voluntariness [...] gives anarchism a more positive flavor and captures some of the reasons that many idealists have been and continue to be inspired by the idea' (p.4). Lastly, Sartwell goes out of his way to confirm what he stated above – i.e., that anarchism is more than the view that government should not exist. Sounds promising, right?

Unfortunately, Sartwell doesn't really deliver on this promise. On the contrary, he ends up limiting his analysis more or less precisely to the view that government should not exist, thereby lending further credibility to, if not committing outright, the *reductio ad politicum*. Now, in fairness, Sartwell's decision to focus his critique on the state may be a simple matter of emphasis. In subtitling the book *An Introduction to Anarchist Political Theory*, for example, perhaps he intends to make clear that politics is only one aspect of anarchist theory. Nowhere does Sartwell make this explicit, however. Despite his familiarity with the broader anarchist tradition – a familiarity to which, again, he calls brief attention – he simply plunges headlong and without any explanation into an analysis of anarchism as anti-statism. In the book's conclusion ('Towards Something Else') Sartwell seems to be promising a more comprehensive analysis in an eventual sequel, but even here his remarks overlook non-political (e.g., economic, social, sexual, racial, etc) forms of oppression.

All of this being said, Sartwell provides a fairly thorough overview of anarchist political theory. His critique of the state begins with a definition of free action as voluntary (uncoerced) action. From here he argues that 'political liberty is the overcall condition of a life over a segment of time in which one is not subject to coercion by political or state authorities, or is subject to coercion only to some limited extent' (p.23). He then defines anarchism as 'the view that all forms of

human association ought to be voluntary, or [...] that people ought to have maximal human freedom'. If anarchism is true, he claims, it follows quite straightforwardly that there ought to be no government. Sartwell's arguments, though extremely trenchant and comprehensive, are scarcely novel. His basic strategy is to assume that statism – not anarchism – inherits the burden of proof, which in turn implies that anarchism does not require positive justification. (Anarchism is only obliged to refute justifications of statism and to defend itself against statist objections.) On these grounds Sartwell argues for anarchism by refuting arguments for the state. This is essentially the same strategy employed by John Simmons' *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*.⁸ In that book, Simmons defines what he calls the 'principle of voluntarism', according to which the only morally significant relationships are those we voluntarily assume. He proceeds to argue that none of the major theories of legitimacy and political obligation in the tradition can adequately account for voluntarism, which in turn lays the groundwork for philosophical anarchism (there are no legitimate states because we have no general political obligations).

To be fair, some of Sartwell's approaches to particular objections are very creative, and in all events he certainly does more than just parrot Simmons. That said, the overall methodology of *Against the State* is still a bit too close to Simmons for my taste. This is unfortunate, since Sartwell, unlike Simmons, genuinely seeks the abolition of the state so far as I am aware. Instead of arguing that the state lacks justification, he would have been better off making the case for its abolition. Perhaps he will do so in future work. Therefore, although this book arguably contributes to anti-statist philosophy, it does not provide, contrary to its title, an introduction to anarchist political theory. Such an introduction would need to engage with the full range of the anarchist tradition, and this, in turn, would require a much wider analysis than Sartwell provides.

NOTES

1. See, for example, A.J. Simmons, 'Philosophical Anarchism', in J. Sanders and J. Narveson (eds.), *For and Against the State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); R.P. Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).
2. Simmons, p.19.
3. *Ibid.*, p.22.
4. D. Weick, 'Anarchist Justice', in H. Ehrlich, *et al.* (eds.), *Reinventing Anarchy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p.139.

5. Weick, p. 139; cf. Peter Kropotkin, *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, ed. M.A. Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), p.150.
6. R. Rocker, *Anarchosyndicalism* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938), p.20; cf P.J. Proudhon: ‘The economic idea of capitalism, the politics of government or of authority, and the theological idea of the Church are three distinct ideas, linked in various ways, yet to attack one of them is equivalent to attacking all of them.’ (*What is Property: An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*, London: William Reeves, 1969, p.43); cf. E. Malatesta, who claims that in fighting the ‘exploitation and oppression of man by man,’ the anarchists likewise seek ‘the abolition of private property [i.e. capitalism] and government’ (E. Malatesta, ‘Towards Anarchism’, in *Man!: An Anthology of Anarchist Ideas, Essays, Poetry and Commentaries*, ed. M. Graham, London: Cienfuegos Press, 1974, p.75).
7. Voltairine de Cleyre, *Exquisite Rebel: The Essays of Voltairine de Cleyre – Anarchist Feminist, Genius*, ed. Sharon Presley & Crispin Sartwell (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).
8. A.J. Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

Nathan J. Jun
Midwestern State University

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