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Anarchy and community

1.1 Introduction: the scope of the book

I set out in the studies which have resulted in this book to discover whether anarchy – doing without the state – is viable and, if so, what sort of anarchy that would be and whether it was compatible with certain fundamental ideals of communitarian anarchists and other socialists, notably those of liberty and equality.

It seemed to me that the critical test of the viability of anarchy was whether its members could maintain social order, in the basic sense of security of persons and their property (however much or little property there is). Most writers in the communitarian anarchist tradition do not recognise this as a problem for the anarchies they desire or predict for the future, where it would be solved or obviated by a transformed human nature, appropriately socialised. But the maintenance of social order has always been a problem, in every kind of society, even in those where private property or possession is limited to the barest, easily replaceable goods; and there are no grounds for the anarchists' optimism that the problem would resolve itself as effortlessly as they suppose even in societies of the sort they envisage. When I speak of it as a problem, I mean that individuals will not voluntarily refrain from doing those things which threaten social order. The reason for this (as I argue in Section 2.1) is that there is an important element of social order which is a 'public good', that is to say a good which (roughly

speaking) benefits every member of the public regardless of whether he contributes in any way to its provision. If a good is public in this sense an individual may be tempted to be a 'free rider', to benefit from whatever amount of the good others provide without contributing himself; and if many people attempt to be free riders little or none of the public good will be provided.

It is this problem about the provision of the public good of social order which justifies the state, in the view of many people. Of course, only a minimal state is justified, a 'night-watchman' state whose only functions are the maintenance of internal order and external defence (which is also a public good). In an earlier work, *Anarchy and Cooperation*, I argued that this way of justifying the state, even a minimal state, is fundamentally flawed. Here (in Section 2.2) I summarise very briefly the parts of that argument which are relevant to my present argument.¹

Without the state, how is social order to be maintained? One answer is that the goods and services which go to make up social order can and should be provided by private firms competing in the marketplace. This 'libertarian' or anarcho-capitalist approach is currently enjoying a revival, especially in the United States. In Section 2.3 I shall contend that social order cannot satisfactorily be put on the market, and in the remainder of Chapter 2 I shall argue instead that in the absence of the state social order can be maintained only if relations between people are those characteristic of *community*.

Community has largely been ignored in recent political theory. It is a horribly 'open-textured' concept, that is to say there is not and there cannot be an exhaustive specification of the conditions for its correct use. But there are what we might

¹ This brief section and a few pages on public goods in Section 2.1 are the only areas of overlap between the earlier book and the present one.

call core characteristics of community, attributes possessed in *some* degree by *all* communities, and among these are the requirements that relations between members of a community be direct and many-sided and that they practise certain forms of reciprocity (Section 1.4). Community is central to my whole argument. The book is therefore a book about socialism, if 'socialism' is taken, as I think it should be, to be primarily about the quality of relations between people, and only about the right kinds of ownership and distribution of resources (or anything else) insofar as these are necessary to relationships of the desired kind.

A very rough equality of basic material conditions is one of the necessary conditions of community. But according to a traditional argument, even an approximate economic equality would not survive for long in the absence of the state. If this is so, then anarchy, which (according to my argument in Chapter 2) depends on community, is not viable. The survival of equality in an anarchy is the subject of Chapter 3.

Egalitarian anarchic communities did in fact survive for millennia. *Homo sapiens* lived in such communities for nearly all of his forty or fifty thousand years. But eventually – in most cases during the last few centuries – they all but disappeared: absorbed, undermined or destroyed by states. How and why this happened throws an interesting light on the vulnerability of the egalitarian anarchic community and on the future prospects for a durable anarchy. This is the subject of Section 3.3.

The small, stable community which is at the centre of my argument is nowhere in this book assumed to be good or right in any sense; it is nowhere defended as an ideal, or viewed as a happy and continuously harmonious place, free from conflict or from constraint and coercion. The contention is simply that community is *necessary* – if people are to live without the state. But I do defend community (in Chapter 4) against the claim,

made especially by liberal writers, that it is incompatible with or even inimical to individual liberty. This view is no more accurate than the contrary one, which is little more than an assumption in the writings of many communitarian anarchists and other socialists, that liberty is possible only in community.

For evidence and illustration, I draw on the experience of stateless 'primitive' communities and of quasi-anarchic 'intentional' communities and peasant communities of the closed, corporate kind, for these constitute the chief, almost the only empirical cases of anarchy and quasi-anarchy. But my argument about the necessity of community is meant to apply to the present and future as well. If we want to do without the state or substantially reduce its role, we have to revive and rebuild communities. What does this mean, and what are the possibilities for such a renewal, in a crowded world of powerful states? I try to answer this question in the final chapter.

1.2 Anarchy: what it is

The twin notions at the centre of this study, then, are 'anarchy' and 'community'. Since there are no ready-made standard usages of either of these terms, I need first to give some explanation of how I shall be using them.

I have said that anarchy is, roughly speaking, a condition of statelessness. I want now to modify this first approximation and tighten it up, and I shall do this in a way that frees 'anarchy' from dependence on an account of the 'state' as a list of specific types of institutions (and criteria concerning their articulation as a centralised system and the differentiation and autonomy of the system itself) and at the same time in a way that prepares the ground for the discussion (in Section 3.3) of the emergence of the state.

My starting point is Max Weber's well-known definition of states as 'human associations that successfully claim the mon-

opoly of legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'. Either as a necessary or as a sufficient condition for the existence of a state, this clearly won't do. *Claiming* the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force (which, admittedly, states do – well-developed states at any rate) entails nothing about the actual possession of means of exercising force. Any group can claim a monopoly of the use of force or of the legitimate use of force, but this does not make it a state.² To be a state, it must actually possess at least some means of exercising force. So Weber is right to require that this claim must be successful. But then his test is far too stringent; and no instances of a state in this sense could be found. Obviously states never do possess an *actual* monopoly of the use of force (there are always individuals and often organised groups, other than those which are part of the state system, which continue to use force, even under a powerful, highly developed state), and presumably this is not what Weber meant by a 'successful' claim. But nor could a claim to a monopoly of *legitimate* use of force ever be fully successful in the sense that everyone or nearly everyone granted the state legitimacy.

What is left of the Weberian account is the notion of a concentration of force and the attempt by those in whose hands it is (incompletely) concentrated to determine who else shall be permitted to employ force and on what occasions. Both of these elements, it seems to me, *are* characteristic of states. The first is obviously basic, and I shall say that a minimum test, a necessary condition, for the existence of a state is that there is *some* concentration of the means of using force, or equivalently some inequality in its distribution. (How much concentration or inequality is a question I shall leave open.)³ Conversely, in a

² Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), p. 23.

³ In my view it cannot be specified independently of other characteristics of the state. Whether a given degree of concentration of force suffices would depend in a particular case on the extent to which other criteria were

pure anarchy force is perfectly dispersed, not concentrated at all.

If pure anarchy requires that there be no inequality at all in the distribution of the means of using force or of the actual use of force, then no historical example of a perfectly anarchic society could be found and none is likely to be found in the future. The closest approximations are those primitive societies described by anthropologists as 'stateless' or 'acephalous' or even 'anarchic' (as in Evans-Pritchard's description of Nuer society as an 'ordered anarchy'). In these societies, the use of force is widely dispersed, but not perfectly so. Typically, those males who are neither too young nor too old to fight (the 'warriors') use force – and are expected by the community to use it – more than other groups: usually, they alone are charged with the defence of the society against external enemies, and in some of these societies it is a group consisting of close male kin of fighting age ('the vengeance group') which is responsible for coming to the defence of an aggrieved person and which in particular must exact vengeance if one of their members is killed. So in these societies there is *some* concentration of force, an inequality based on differences of sex and age. But the concentration goes no further than that and it is *ad hoc* in use. There is no standing, specialist group or organisation or centralised system of groups which possesses or endeavours to possess a monopoly on the use of force and the right to license its use, no group which has absorbed or aspires to absorb the rights of individuals or of 'vengeance groups' to use force in their pursuit of 'self-help' justice. Furthermore, even where, in societies of this kind, some individuals or groups have more influence on collective decisions than others – where disputes are settled with the help of a third-party mediator, for example,

satisfied. But I would argue that necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of a state cannot be specified, because 'the existence of a state' is an open-textured concept. The notion of an open-textured concept is explained in a later section.

or where policies are decided by the elders – their decisions cannot be enforced; they are not backed up by the threat of force and have only the status of advice and recommendation (though their advice is usually followed, because it is deemed to be ‘authoritative’, in a sense I shall specify later).

In many bands of hunters and gatherers, the *de facto* use of force may be even less concentrated, because both internal violence (as in the pursuit of vengeance) and fighting with other societies are rare.

I have said that a necessary condition for a *pure* anarchy is that there is no concentration of force at all. A society of the sort I have just described, where there is a limited concentration of force but no means of enforcing collective decisions, is the closest empirical approximation and I shall call it an *anarchy*.

Some anthropologists have been unwilling to concede that even primitive societies of this kind are anarchies. This is because they give a functional account of the state, characterising it by what it importantly does, and then argue that since these things get done in all primitive societies, including the alleged anarchies, they cannot after all be anarchic or stateless. (Or sometimes a weaker claim is made that they are not without government or not without law.) In particular, it is pointed out (correctly) that the most basic function of the state is to ensure that internal social order is maintained (possibly so that extraction can continue smoothly to the benefit of a dominant class – I leave this question open); and since all primitive societies have means of maintaining order none of them can be anarchic. (On this account of the matter presumably a society would become anarchic when order broke down, so that ‘anarchy’ is identified, as it is popularly and journalistically, with disorder and chaos.) Bicycles and motor cars can be lumped together because they have the same basic function, but there are differences between them which are interesting from certain points of view (the bicycle is thermodynamically

more efficient than the car, is less destructive of people and environment and community, and so on). So too are there differences between societies with a state (in the non-functional sense) and those which maintain order (or defend themselves or redistribute resources) by other means, and these differences are what I am interested in here.

There is another reason why it could be denied that some or even all of the primitive societies of the kind I take to be anarchic are in fact not so, namely that some individuals or groups in them play political roles and others do not. For example, in many of these societies there is a role occupied by an individual who alone acts as a mediator between parties in dispute, or a group – the elders, say – which acts as a court and also perhaps as a rudimentary kind of legislative assembly. These are examples of what I shall call a *division of political labour* or *political specialisation*. For such a division to exist, there must be political roles – positions which are recognised and enduring though possibly (in primitive societies, always) part-time, and which play a part in the maintenance of internal social order, dispute settlement and other collective decision-making, defence of the community, and redistribution of resources within the community. In chiefdoms (to be described in a later section), the chief occupies such a role; but individuals whose advice is sought and heeded simply because they are believed to possess superior skills or wisdom or knowledge do not occupy political roles.

I have referred to only one kind of division of political labour, namely the differentiation between those members of the society who play political roles and those who do not. This is the fundamental division and the only one relevant to a characterisation of ‘anarchy’. But note that the development of this sort of political specialisation – the progressive exclusion of parts of the population from the political arena – tends to proceed hand in hand with two other (closely related but not

necessarily identical) kinds of division of political labour; the first kind differentiates political roles from each other and the second makes roles functionally more specific.⁴

Empirically, and unsurprisingly, political specialisation tends to develop together with the process of monopolisation of force (though the correlation is far from perfect); but as we shall see in Section 3.3 when we look at the origin of the state, the division of political labour can develop considerably before there is any further monopolisation of force beyond concentration in the hands of adult males. Just as long as the occupants of the political roles which emerge in the early development of political specialisation are not backed by organised force, so cannot enforce their decisions throughout the community, I shall say we are still dealing with a stateless society. Nevertheless, since the ideal of some anarchist writers is a society in which force concentration *and* political specialisation are both at a minimum, and since it *is* useful to emphasise that anarchies vary greatly with respect to the degree of political specialisation, I shall say that the absence of any concentration of force and the absence of any political specialisation together constitute necessary and sufficient conditions for a *pure anarchy*.

This characterisation of ‘anarchy’ (only a limited degree of concentration of force) and ‘pure anarchy’ (no force concentration and no political specialisation) does not entail that movement away from the ideal of pure anarchy toward the formation and further development of a state can be measured by some variable – call it ‘stateness’ – which is a monotonically increasing function (holding other things constant) of concentration and of specialisation over the whole range of these two variables. It is not clear that, at least beyond a certain stage in its development, the state becomes ever more effective with

⁴ Compare David Easton, ‘Political anthropology’, in B. J. Siegel, ed., *Biennial Review of Anthropology 1959* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).

increasing concentration of force at the centre and with increasing political specialisation. Some degree of dispersion, affording divisions and local units of the state partial autonomy and hence a measure of flexibility in dealing with local conditions, may enhance the overall control and extractive capability of the state.

Nevertheless, we can say that, to the extent that a society lacks political specialisation and to the extent that force is dispersed, to that extent also must there be *equal participation* in whatever political functions remain. All societies, including anarchies, use social controls of some kind to maintain social order; they redistribute resources amongst their members; and they make collective decisions; nearly all societies also defend or make preparations to defend themselves against actual or imagined external enemies and competitors. In an anarchy, there must be wide participation in all these activities.

Seen in this light – as a society in which there is equal, extensive participation – the anarchy I am interested in is not far from the political association which Rousseau’s ‘social contract’ was to found. Only in a participatory political order of this kind do individuals owe political obligations and they owe them not to a state but to each other.⁵

1.3 Power, authority and what anarchy is not

Anarchist writers themselves have not been given to careful analysis of concepts, even those which are central to their systems of ideas. Some of them (and a few other writers too) have defined or written of anarchy as simply an absence of power or coercion or authority, or as an equality of one of these things. This has provided opportunities and excuses for all

⁵ On Rousseau’s radical break with the ‘fraudulent liberal social contract’, see Carole Pateman’s excellent book, *The Problem of Political Obligation: A Critical Analysis of Liberal Theory* (London: Wiley, 1979).