

John T. Sanders and Jan Narveson (eds.)
For and Against the State: New Philosophical Readings

Reviewer: Brian Martin

Give a theorist a topic to study, and the result may well spin off in directions that are of interest only to other theorists. Anarchism is one such topic. The theorists in this case are certain political philosophers who argue about the pros and cons of "philosophical anarchism." One good example of such work is *For and Against the State*. It is actually a good selection of treatments, including quite a vigorous difference of opinion and perspective. It is also a good illustration of how irrelevant most of this sort of philosophical work is for anyone besides philosophers.

The book has 13 chapters by 13 contributors. All are men, almost all are philosophy academics and all but one are based in the United States, Canada or Britain. As the title indicates, the contributors are concerned about arguments for or against the state. They address whether a coercive authority is needed to settle disputes or to provide public goods. This is of course a central issue for anarchists.

A characteristic of philosophical writing is an attempt to present a careful, logical case for a position. This includes being clear about definitions, establishing principles for argumentation and proceeding carefully, raising proposals and dealing with objections systematically. For those versed in philosophical discourse, this collection will present few challenges, but most others will find much of the book heavy going. The first chapter, for example, is quite a laborious discussion in order to reach the unexciting conclusion that political obligation — such as whether people should or do obey the law even when they think the law is wrong — can't be assumed nor proven from evidence.

Many of the authors deal with social contract theory. The classical philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued that people in a hypothetical "state of nature" — as independent agents — would benefit from cooperation but need a coercive state to ensure that it occurs. Does Hobbes' model provide a justification for the state? One angle on this question leads into models of human interaction based on the theory of games, with special attention to the so-called prisoners' dilemma. If you know much about the prisoners' dilemma game, you'll know how much ink can be expended debating its merits and solutions; if not, you haven't missed much. The assumptions needed for this model to apply are very strict, for example that people's preferences are fixed and that they have only a few discrete choices. Yet justifications for the state are said to hinge crucially on operations of this model.

Several authors deal with the objection that anarchism requires morally perfect people, with one arguing that "even morally perfect people would need government," which turns the usual anarchist argument on its head. Anarchists argue against government because of the corruptions of power: because people can't be morally perfect, no one can be trusted as a ruler. The dangers of misuse of power by governments are mentioned by a few authors but not given sustained attention. This issue does not generate anything like the same intellectual interest as social contract theory and prisoners' dilemma games.

As the arguments become more esoteric, the discussions become more exclusively debates between philosophers. The arguments of John Rawls and Robert Nozick are given plenty of attention (they are not contributors). Some of the chapters are entirely devoted to critique of some other philosopher's arguments.

In its own terms, as political philosophy, the book is a useful contribution. It also illustrates the barren aspects of the bulk of this sort of philosophical discussion. These philosophers deal with anarchism solely as a question of justifying either the state or statelessness. Anarchism as a political practice is much more than this. The classical anarchists were concerned not just with state domination but also domination by the church and capitalism. Many contemporary anarchists are concerned about all forms of domination, including state domination but certainly not restricted to it. It's useful to look at *For and Against the State* noting whether any contributor mentions various forms or systems of domination.

- Workers are subject to the power of employers, which may be governments or private enterprises. Many of the contributors analyse market anarchism at length, yet there is not a single mention of domination by employers or by the market as a system.
- Women must deal with the realities of patriarchy. Many of today's anarchists adopt a feminist or profeminist position as a matter of course. Neither patriarchy nor feminism are mentioned by any of the contributors.
- Children are subject to the power of parents and the state, especially through compulsory schooling. Children are not mentioned.
- Ethnic groups are subject to racial oppression and discrimination. These issues are not mentioned.
- People with disabilities are subject to discrimination and sometimes virtual dehumanisation. This is not mentioned.
- Lesbians and gays are subject to heterosexism. This is not mentioned.

- Prisoners are subject to control over their liberty, usually by the state but sometimes by private groups. This is not mentioned.
- Soldiers are subject to military domination, and many civilians are victims of the military. Only one author, Cheyney Ryan, deals with the close connection between the state and war, in what I found to be the most useful chapter in the book.
- Church members, and sometimes entire populations, are subject to the power of church hierarchies. This is not mentioned.
- Non-human animals are subject to exploitation and killing by humans. This is not mentioned.
- The environment is subject to human assault. This is not mentioned.

Most contemporary anarchists are concerned about multiple sources of oppression and their linkages, even though they often disagree about just what constitutes oppression or about what are the most important source of oppression. For this group of philosophers, though, this complexity is completely missing. The focus is entirely on the state—and an impoverished model of the state, at that.

Part of the problem may be that in formulating the philosophical problem of the legitimacy of the state, any wider connection with anarchist thought was jettisoned. It is disconcerting to read a book talking about anarchism throughout in which there are so few references to actual anarchists, their beliefs and activities. There is one single passing mention of the classical anarchists Bakunin and Kropotkin (by co-editor John Sanders) and a reference to Herbert Read, Dorothy Day and Paul Goodman (by Cheyney Ryan), but that's it. Arguments and writings from political anarchists are conspicuous by their absence.

There is a similar narrowness in vision when it comes to dealing with anarchist alternatives. The only model of a stateless society given much attention is market anarchism. Indeed, the market gets plenty of attention whereas "social anarchism" (the term is not used) is most frequently either dismissed or not mentioned at all. Consider some non-market anarchisms.

- *Federalism*. The classical model of an anarchist society is based around self-managing groups, tied together in a federal system with elected delegates in decision-making bodies. Remarkably, this model is not mentioned by any contributor.

- *Local autonomy*. This model is based on decentralisation and local self-reliance, perhaps using a canton-like system based on local self-management. It is not mentioned.
- *Demarchy*. This model is based on random selection of volunteers to form functional groups to make decisions on separate topics, without either the state or bureaucracies. Proposed by philosopher John Burnheim in his 1985 book *Is Democracy Possible?* (reviewed in *Social Anarchism* #15), this model has had considerable impact in some circles, but it is not mentioned in *For and Against the State*.
- *Sarvodaya*. Gandhian-style anarchism is based on village self-government, local self-reliance and nonviolent action to oppose oppression and aggression. It is not mentioned.

There are quite a few things that philosophers could do that would be relevant to social anarchism and perhaps even useful to anarchists, such as exposing contradictions, clarifying arguments and pointing to neglected alternatives. Furthermore, there are some philosophers who are anarchists, activists and attuned to current issues of relevance to a wider public. Unfortunately, the issues addressed by most contributors to *For and Against the State* are strictly for other philosophers. *A*

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