

Envisioning a Utopian Anarchism

I've noticed a pattern that I have. Every few years I feel the need to publicly re-think and re-clarify what exactly it is that I personally believe regarding anarchism. This usually corresponds with me affixing a new anarchist label to my beliefs and presenting it as being a new and unique anarchist school of thought. The very first time that I did this I was calling my kind of anarchism "communitarian anarchism" and some friends and I created a short-lived organization related to that, the the Anarchist Communitarian Network, to promote this perspective. Following that, there was compassionate anarchism, then Buddhist anarchism, and most recently humanistic anarchism. Now I am calling my approach "utopian anarchism", and while I have already spoken about this on YouTube as well as in a small informal workshop at the 2022 Online NVC Conference, this is my first time publicly writing about this.

The key thing that sets my current approach apart from my previous ones is that I now view it as being important to place the vision that one has for a radically different world **front and center**. I know that the world that we live in now is shit, many different anarchist writers have penned many different brilliant critiques of our current society, and the various systems and structures in it that brutalize us all have been analyzed by many anarchist thinkers much smarter than I am. However, I have come to believe that without keeping a vision in our heart of the kind of world that we want to see, that eventually the steady diet of only critique and denunciation eventually leads to things like burnout, cynicism, despair and even misanthropy. How can we create the kind of beautiful world that we would want to live in if the only thing that we can see is shit? How can we have hope and inspiration to move towards a better world if the horrors of our current world is all that we can bear? One needs to hold a vision for a better world and radical imagination is needed for this, as well as analysis and forethought. A beautiful ideal needs to be at the forefront of one's anarchism in order to lead one to a place that one actually wants to go to.

The Four Perspectives on the Ideal Society

The broad outline for my vision of a new society is the same as always: a world without domination or top-down hierarchy where people voluntarily associate as equals, where cooperation, mutual aid and sharing are done without coercion, and where everyone who is affected by a group decision has a voice in the process and collective agreements are based on consent. This vision remains the same, but I now have four different perspectives that I use to look at it. Each perspective is vitally important to keep in mind for the understanding, realization and maintenance of such a society. These four perspectives are the individual, the relational, the structural and the physical.

1) The Individual Perspective

I start with this perspective here because each person goes through life experiencing things as an individual. And since a goal of anarchism is for everyone to be liberated and free, a basic question would then be “does everyone perceive their life as being liberated and free?” The door is opened here for a whole plethora tools and tactics from the areas of psychology, self-help and self-improvement to be utilized for each individual to find their own sense of personal choice and empowerment. People’s individual health, their own thinking processes, their relationship with their own emotions and the degree to which they are continually learning all fall within this realm. Ultimately, this area relies upon each individual to take responsibility for themselves and their own personal growth and development. Traditionally individualist anarchism and the Buddhist anarchism that I used to advocate for tends to concern itself almost exclusively with this area.

2) The Relational Perspective

The relational area is the point where individuals come into contact with each other and interact. It includes things such as communication styles, how people deal with conflict, how people make decisions together and nonverbal interactions. This area is often overlooked by the individualists who are looking mainly at their own lives and choices, or by the collectivists who are looking at groups in general or society as a whole, but this area in many ways is “where the rubber hits the road”. It is in the relational area where people experience most of their joys or frustrations in a collective endeavor and the lack of sufficient attention to this area can lead to the difference between a project succeeding or failing. Relationship anarchy and the compassionate anarchism that I used to advocate for tends to focus almost exclusively on this area.

3) The Structural Perspective

This area is focused on large groups of people, as well as groups of groups of people, and how they interact with each other. It is in this area that social institutions and systems reside. Historically speaking, most of anarchism has focused on this perspective, concerning itself with corporations and capitalism, governments and statecraft, and white supremacy and patriarchy across societies. Within the anarchist milieu, this perspective comes into play when we examine alternative and counter-institutions, anarchist federations and networks, and the anarchist “movement”. Anarcho-communism tends to focus primarily on this perspective, as was the “communitarian anarchism” that I used to advocate.

4) The Physical Perspective

And finally the physical perspective is about just what the name suggests - pure physical reality. This includes things such as people’s physical health, food, agriculture,

architecture, water supply, transportation, clothing, urban planning, ecological matters and nonhuman life. In some sense this perspective is the most straightforward of them all, but any close examination of any particular aspect of physical reality reveals a myriad of complexities therein. The devil is in the details indeed. And since we are still dealing with people here, social structures, interpersonal relationships and people's individual psyches does come into play here as well. Green anarchism tends to focus mainly on this perspective.

Each of the areas that I mentioned here, the individual, the relational, the structural and the physical, each one connects with and affects all of the others. None of them exist independent of the other, rather they work together as a kind of interdependent system. If someone is having troubles with their individual life and psyche that then affects their interpersonal relationships, the social structures and the environment that they live within. Likewise, one's physical environment affects one's mental health, the way that people relate with other and the ways that social structures function. What I am trying to do here is to examine the whole gestalt of the human experience, and these four ways of looking at it can make clear certain aspects that could more easily be overlooked if one were to only be using just one or two perspectives.

The Four Influences on My Utopian Anarchism

Keeping in mind the radical anarchist ideal, the utopian vision for a new society that it points to, and the four different perspectives through which to look at it, I will move now to elaborating upon my own utopian anarchist vision. Everyone has their own vision for the kind of ideal society that they would like to see, but for me personally I realize that I have four distinct influences that originate from outside the anarchist scene that inform my approach to utopian anarchism. These four influences are: the work of Manfred Max-Neef and his concept of fundamental human needs and his related work with human scale development, Buckminster Fuller and his comprehensive anticipatory design science and design science revolution, utopian socialism and the various utopian communities that came about as a result of it, and Marshall Rosenberg and the framework for Nonviolent Communication that he created.

1) Manfred Max-Neef's fundamental human needs

The basic premise behind this is that everything that human beings do is motivated by a desire to meet a basic human need that everybody has. Needs in this conception of them are finite and distinct from "satisfiers" which are the infinite ways that people act to meet needs. Needs can be physical, such as food, water and shelter, or they can be mental, emotional or social in nature as well. Manfred Max-Neef identified nine fundamental needs that people have: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, rest, creation, identity, and autonomy. I like looking at things from this point of view because it opens us up to the possibility of infinite different ways to meet people's needs while still

focusing on the key things that people need to have fulfilling lives.

Manfred Max-Neef then took this concept of fundamental human needs and applied this to communities of people living together with his work in community development that he called “human scale development”. With this he used a process of bottom-up direct participatory democracy for people to identify their needs and how they are getting met or not within the context of their communities. This approach took the focus away from concepts like “standard of living” and “gross national product” and instead focused on what can be done within the community to help there be more happiness and fulfillment among the people there.

2) Comprehensive Anticipatory Design Science (CADS)

This is a body of work that primarily operates on the “physical perspective” that I mentioned earlier. It uses very much a systems theory approach of looking at the various systems that influence any given thing, and in turn looks at how that thing influences the larger systems that it resides within. This approach anticipates the various challenges and opportunities that may arise from the various systems that are being utilized and responds by designing other systems that can address these by using a rigorous process grounded in science. This approach is very much a type of engineering mindset that strives to meet the material needs of everyone while avoiding the systemic oversights that lead to the kinds of pollution and ecological devastation that we see in the world today.

3) Utopian Socialism

“Utopian socialism” is an umbrella term that refers to the kinds of socialism that existed before Marxism and anarchism came about that were characterized not by an emphasis on class struggle and revolution but instead on proposing new forms of society based on radically different designs. Some of the proponents and enthusiasts for these radical designs for different kinds of societies came together to create new utopian communities that were based on these designs. The emphasis here was on focusing on what one wants instead of what one doesn’t want, articulating a design for that vision, finding like-minded people and then moving to the same place to live and work together to turn that vision into a reality. There is a quote from Buckminster Fuller that I think nicely encapsulates the underlying sentiment behind utopian socialism: “You never change things by fighting against the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the old model obsolete.”

4) Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

NVC is something that I have written about recently as well as in the past, but to succinctly summarize what it I would say this: Nonviolent Communication is an approach to communication based on principles of nonviolence, evolved from person-centered therapy,

that instrumentally uses Manfred Max-Neef's concept of fundamental human needs that I mentioned above. NVC has been used to assist people in achieving greater personal psychological self-understanding and self-discovery, it has been used to assist with people's interpersonal relationships and it has been used as a guide for creating new kinds of social structures and institutions. The goal of NVC is to increase people's capacity to acknowledge and value everyone's needs and to meet those needs out of an authentic desire to contribute to everyone's wellbeing.

Ten Principles for My Utopian Anarchism

Diving into the heart of what my approach to utopian anarchism is about, I would frame it with ten distinct principles:

1) Have an idealized positive image for the kind of society that is the end goal.

This positive image does not need to be set in stone, nor is it something that I am wanting people to be uptight about or something that is used to judge people over. Rather, it is something that I would like to be used as a kind of guiding light for all the actions taken towards the end goal. This idealized positive image is intended to be aspirational and inspirational, and not to be used as a kind of "spook" such as what is talked about in the philosophy of Max Stirner.

2) Have a comprehensive general understanding of the systems and structures that are operating behind the scenes that make such a society possible.

Usually when people envision an anarchist society the picture is painted in very broad strokes, with little to no elaboration on what is actually happening to have this society function. I would like to take a very different approach than that, and instead I find it useful to continuously be asking "What's going on here exactly?" "How does it work?" "How is it sustained?" "How does it survive the inevitable challenges and hardships that life brings?" Pursuing this line of rigorous inquiry can ultimately deepen one's understanding of the end goal that one is pursuing and can serve to support one in "reverse engineering", so to speak, that vision to better discern action steps to get there.

3) The whole point of such a society is to have happy healthy harmonious humans.

Sometimes one might wonder why the hell are we doing all this work and investing all this time in what I am calling "utopian anarchism". My response to that is what I call "Quadruple H" - happy healthy harmonious humans. That's the whole point of it all. That's the reason why.

4) Aims to eliminate all forms of domination and instead meet needs through voluntary cooperation and sharing.

This in my view is the whole goal of anarchism in general and I believe that it is important to keep this reason succinctly stated and in the back of one's mind at all times. Think of it as the "anarchist mission statement", if you will.

5) Focuses simultaneously on personal inner work, relationship work, larger group structures and the physical environment. This is a reference to the four perspectives that I talked about earlier. It is good to periodically re-examine how one's collective endeavors are faring through using each one of these four perspectives in order to ensure that nothing important is being overlooked or neglected.

6) Incorporates all of the various different anarchist critiques but focuses primarily on the positive end goal. The majority of anarchist writing out there focuses primarily on critiques of the various aspects of the world we live in that dominate and oppress people. I appreciate these critiques, I find them to be useful in terms of pointing out various things that we need to avoid and keep an eye out for, but in the end these critiques do not tell us where we want to go or how to get there.

7) Open, honest, thoughtful and considerate conversation that includes awareness and expression of one's own needs as well as those of others is the foundation for it all. This is the kind of thing that Nonviolent Communication talks about and advocates for and I believe that ultimately if the people involved in this utopian anarchist endeavor can succeed at practicing this then the project would stand a good chance at weathering the inevitable challenges that it will come across.

8) Recognizes, uses, creates and discards of social constructs and is not bound by them. Human societies everywhere create and abide by social constructs as a way to help the society function smoothly. I don't see social constructs as necessarily being "good" or "bad" per se, but what I do see as being deleterious is believing that any particular social constructs are "inevitable" or "necessary". Instead I would like to cultivate a habit of recognizing social constructs for what they are, to not be attached to them and to instead be willing to replace them if a consensus is reached that doing so would be advantageous. I have previously written about the social construct of "ownership" here.

9) Acknowledges that uniformity of vision is not necessary for sufficient cooperation to be possible. I have lots of ideas on, lots of beliefs about and lots of desires for the world at large. And while I have a lot that I can say about my approach to utopian anarchism and the ideal society I envision, I do not want to convey a notion that everyone would need to abide by everything I say about the subject in order for it to be realized. People can cooperate in a variety of different ways, in a variety of different capacities, each for their own reasons. The last thing that I would want to see happen is have some kind of cult created in the name of some anarchist vision. Uniformity is unnecessary.

10) Voluntary associations that people choose to be in. Any involvement with the kinds of utopian anarchist societies/communities/projects that I am envisioning would need to be done voluntarily. I hold this vision dear to my heart, but I would not want anyone to

ever be coerced into participating in it. Individual willingness is a key principle necessary for the whole thing to work. I have previously written about this [here](#).

Ten Practices for My Utopian Anarchism

Moving from the abstract to the practical, there already exists a number of different practices that people can engage in now as well as in a future utopian anarchist society. All of these practices are grounded in some way in the principles that I elaborated upon above. A lot of what I mention below are more like groups or clusters of different practices, but nevertheless what I want to emphasize is that there are some real life things that people can do to begin practicing utopian anarchism.

1) Egalitarian income-sharing intentional communities. This is where people live together intentionally, share income and resources, and make decisions together in some kind of democratic way. In the United States the [Federation of Egalitarian Communities](#) is a good resource for such communities.

2) Vipassana Meditation practice. With regards to the first perspective that I mentioned in this piece, the individual/personal perspective, Vipassana Meditation practice is a great way for one to better understand oneself and to develop more personal insight, self-discipline and self-control. This [website](#) is a good starting place to go learn more about this practice.

3) Empathic listening exchanges. Empathy is an essential part of maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, and the approach to empathy that I draw from the most comes from Nonviolent Communication. NVC teaches some specific ways to practice empathic listening, and there is one instruction guide for that online [here](#).

4) Restorative / Transformative Justice for addressing harm. People often hurt other people, whether it is done intentionally or unintentionally it is a regular part of life. The approaches to addressing harm that I consider to be the most beneficial for individuals, relationships and communities is Restorative Justice and Transformative Justice. These approaches focus on healing those whom have been hurt, repairing relationships and changing the systemic conditions that have helped to create the situation where harm occurred to begin with.

5) Convergent Facilitation for group decision-making. Based on Nonviolent Communication and created by the NVC trainer Miki Kashtan, Convergent Facilitation is a method for facilitating meetings of groups of people to find consensus while also addressing all of the different needs and concerns that the participants have.

6) Decentralized organizational structures. The field of organizational development has produced a lot of work over the years designing ways that people can structure decentralized directly democratic organizations that are efficient and effective at what they

are trying to do. Some examples of this are Sociocracy, Holacracy and Frederic Laloux's *Reinventing Organizations*. There are many practical and valuable insights contained within this work, but since it originates from the corporate world it has largely gone unnoticed by most anarchists.

7) Fundamental human needs assessments. This practice has first been developed by Manfred Max-Neef and the work he did with Human Scale Development in small-scale communities. I'm thinking that a similar practice could be developed for individuals where a person takes the time to sit down with a list of needs and carefully examines whether or to what extent each need is being met in their life and in what ways. This can be a guided process of self-reflection where one gains clarity about the relationship that they have with the various different needs that they have. I'm thinking that a kind of annual ritual could be created for this practice, possibly carried out each year on one's birthday.

8) The Co-Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth. Based on Comprehensive Anticipatory Design Science and organized by the Buckminster Fuller Institute, this is an inventory of various practices that people can do to implement this way of thinking into real life situations. The website for this can be found [here](#).

9) Group Size Based on Dunbar's Number. The anthropologist Robin Dunbar has suggested a number of people which is the maximum size that a group can be where everyone who is a part of the group still has meaningful relationships with one another. Anything above that number results in relationships within the group becoming impersonal and abstract. I would like for there to be an agreed upon mechanism within utopian anarchist communities for the group to split into two new communities once that number has been reached. Think of it being like a process of cell division, but for groups of people.

10) Student-centered learning. A number of different educational theorists have discussed student-centered learning, and the one that I resonate with the most is that which was articulated in a book by Carl Rogers. I have also written about this subject previously myself in a blog post [here](#). Briefly stated, the idea behind it is that in situations where learning is being facilitated, the emphasis is to be placed on the learner and wherever their interests and enthusiasm may be and to de-emphasize the importance of curricula, educational standards and schools in general.

So that about wraps it up for now. I realize that in some sense what I am talking about here is nothing new. Solarpunk is a relatively recent phenomenon that covers a lot of the same ground as utopian anarchism, albeit it is not a specifically anarchist project and is instead more of a generally radical ecologically-oriented one. Going back further in time, utopian socialism also has a number of similarities to utopian anarchism, but like solarpunk it is also

not a specifically anarchist project. I would say that both solarpunk and utopian socialism are “siblings” of utopian anarchism, but not twins.

Regarding the “utopian anarchist” label specifically, there are only two people other than myself who have publicly associated themselves with that term. There is the author Ruth Kinna who has written about the subject, co-edited a book about it, as well as given talks about it. And the other person is Elon Musk, who has publicly stated that he is a utopian anarchist, but has never elaborated on what that term means to him in any great detail.

For me, although I do appreciate the work that Ruth Kinna and Elon Musk have done, I prefer sticking to my own ideas for what an ideal anarchist society would look like and how it would work. And ultimately I think that this is how it will play out for everyone, each person will have their own ideas for what the ideal world would look like, and it is up to us all to find ways to work together to begin moving towards these ideals. My hope is that what I have written here has stirred up some thought to that end.