

Rulers vs. Leaders



Send him mail. [f](#) [t](#)

“One Voluntarist’s Perspective” is an original column appearing most Mondays at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OVP-only RSS feed available [here](#).

An oft-tackled question by anarchists is on the difference between rulers and leaders. In general usage, the difference seems clear, but there are some exceptions. Just what is the difference between rulers and leaders, and why should we care? Let’s see.

Rulers

Rulers are those who rule. To rule is “to control, guide, direct” and to “impose rules” and “to dominate” and “to exercise ultimate power and authority over an area and its people.” In general usage, rulers are kings, queens, presidents, prime ministers, dictators, legislators, governors, and mayors. Ruler is not generally used to refer to smaller controllers and dominators, such as thieves, rapists, batterers, kidnappers, and murderers, but the difference is one of degree, not of kind, as is obvious by the above definitions.

An important distinction within the concept of rulership concerns what is being ruled. Rulers claim rule over both people and their resources, but I don’t think that’s necessary. It is often said that property owners are rulers over their property, and while I think this is true, this does not mean that their rule extends to other people who are using their property. If I invite someone into my house, I am ruler over my house, but not ruler over him. This is often a point of attack against proprietarian anarchists. Anarchism is the doctrine that rulers are undesirable for a number of reasons, but this only applies to rulers of people, not rulers of property, legitimately acquired according to prevailing social norms. For an anarchist to oppose rulers of legitimately acquired property is in direct contradiction to his own life, and the property required to maintain it, both of which he claims to rule.

Leaders

Contrasted to rulers, leaders are those who lead. To lead is “to guide” and “to travel” and “to go forth” and “to direct on a course.” In general usage, leaders include rulers, as well as parents, teachers, entrepreneurs, priests, scientists, tour guides, and so forth. As can be seen, rulers are leaders, but not all leaders are rulers. Other kinds of leaders may also act

as rulers, such as parents and teachers, but that is not a necessary component of the role.

The distinction, then, on what turns a leader into ruler is when their control and guidance is imposed on others. Leaders have willing followers, while rulers have dominated subjects. Anarchists and voluntaryists do not generally oppose leaders unless those leaders begin exercising coercion in some form, at which point they become rulers. Another related concept is authority. Rulers impose their authority. Leaders, on the other hand, earn their authority as a matter of expertise. If the difference between rulers and leaders could be explained in one word, that word would be *imposition*.

Final Thoughts

Why should we care? Even if you're not an anarchist or a voluntaryist, you're still subjected to the rule of others. Look around and think about whose guidance and control is being imposed on you. What would happen if you stopped allowing them to do so? Rulers are often called leaders in the news. This is an unfortunate sleight of hand used to conflate the two and make it seem that our rulers are chosen, when in fact they are not. Now that you know the difference between rulers and leaders, perhaps you won't be so easily fooled.

Read more from "One Voluntaryist's Perspective":