

Domination, Hierarchy, Authority, Rules, “Justification,” and The Burden of Proof

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Noam Chomsky, a self-described anarchist, presents anarchism as:

Primarily [a] tendency that is suspicious and skeptical of domination, authority, and hierarchy. It seeks structures of hierarchy and domination in human life over the whole range, extending from, say, patriarchal families to, say, imperial systems, and it asks whether those systems are justified. It assumes that the burden of proof for anyone in a position of power and authority lies on them. Their authority is not self-justifying. They have to give a reason for it, a justification. And if they can't justify that authority and power and control, which is the usual case, then the authority ought to be dismantled and replaced by something more free and just.

Although he frames anarchists as *challengers* to hierarchy, authority, and domination, a fundamental problem for many anarchists is that his description appears to still leave room for the same to exist if they can be “justified.” Many anarchists say anarchism should be understood as the rejection of all hierarchy, authority, and domination. Given this, Chomsky is often dismissed as either confused or, at best, a diet, squishy version of an anarchist that adds too many footnotes to anarchism as he goes along.

However, whether Chomsky is a “real” anarchist is interesting only in a relatively limited sense. A more interesting question is whether either the substance or style of his shorthand is at all useful to anarchists to present anarchy, or to those who are anarcho-curious to learn from. There are two main avenues to travel down in answering this question:

1. Exploring what is meant by hierarchy, authority, and domination separately. From there, it can be determined whether Chomsky's shorthand can be of *any* use as a starting point for thinking on anarchism—or if it is just vulgarized nonsense to be completely dismissed.
2. Turning attention to a vital, but less-discussed, benefit of Chomsky's presentation: by framing the question of “justification” a certain way, it shifts *the ultimate burden of proof* on whether a hierarchy, an exercise of authority, or an instance or circumstance of domination can be justified off of anarchists and anarchism, and onto where it belongs—proponents of said arrangements and dynamics who too often sidestep their burden of proof with red herrings and misdirection.

After going down these two paths carefully, it becomes clear that Chomsky is on to something with his shorthand and what he intends to communicate with it. However, he fumbles the ball in two very critical ways.

First, he doesn't distinguish hierarchy, authority, and other similar notions from domination.

Second, he does not clearly establish anarchism as a set of principles and values set against domination with no exception.

Nevertheless, there is a way to get to a well-rounded anarchist shorthand from the starting points Chomsky provides that covers the core of anarchism and is useful to anarchists and the anarcho-curious. However, it's done by removing his approach from his own hands, giving more solid meaning to certain concepts, and re-arranging everything into a cleaner and clearer package.

Domination

At its core, domination is control over others via *imposition* of contexts and dynamics that essentially leaves them facing one of two outcomes: submission, or subjection to punishment or consequences. In other words, domination is when the arrangements, commands, and demands of others are imposed and enforced in the absence of consent, while leaving no viable option for exit or disassociation from certain individuals or groups. Domination can also be understood as a person or group using their role or authority that others previously recognized as legitimate in a way that goes beyond boundaries initially consented to, therefore rendering their presence in that role or their recognized authority illegitimate.

If domination is understood this way, then anarchism can be thought of first and foremost as a set of principles and values against domination. And, if anarchy is about non-domination, then domination can never be justified. Contexts, conditions, or dynamics of domination are to be rejected with no exception. It is in this sense that the concept of domination should be the main key and crux of all anarchist thinking and where subsequent conclusions stem from.

That being the case, it is important to separate the concepts of hierarchy, authority, and rules in *certain senses* from domination so each can be understood in its own right. Only then can one observe how they interconnect and interplay, and make accurate observations about how they exist and operate in the real world.

Domination *can* be present in a hierarchy, an exercise of authority, and/or enforcement of rules—in fact, domination is most often exercised through those contexts and dynamics. However, *any* hierarchy, exercise of authority, and/or enforcement of rules is not necessarily domination in principle. Cleanly separating domination from hierarchy, authority, and/or rules is not to say the latter are necessarily good or bad in their own right. Nor is it to say that all hierarchies, authority, and/or rules can necessarily be justified by those participating in their continuing existence. What it does establish is how hierarchy, authority, and/or rules can exist *both within and without* the context and dynamics of domination.

In other words, hierarchy, authority, and rules are not necessarily counter to anarchism, and therefore their existence *can* be justified in certain circumstances.

However, given that domination is *necessarily unjust* wherever and whenever it's found, any hierarchy, authority, and rules that operate with the context and dynamics of domination are illegitimate by default.

Hierarchy and Authority

When used in *certain senses*, the concepts of hierarchy and authority can be understood as separate from that of domination. When hierarchy and authority operate without domination, those *certain instances* can be understood by anarchists as legitimate and could be justified by those participating in the dynamics. It cannot be overstated that one must be careful with these distinctions: domination is absent *only* if those participating within the dynamics and contexts of hierarchy and authority have truly voluntarily joined or yielded to them while also having continually clear and viable paths to withdrawal and disassociation.

A hierarchy can simply be a matter of arrangement and organization (duties, responsibilities, etc.). Authority can simply be a domain or level of decision-making others voluntarily recognize *within certain limits and boundaries* related to accomplishing certain objectives, or in service of fulfilling the macro desires of the individuals involved.

Take a project, for example, of four groups of people (G1, G2, G3, and G4), building a giant wooden duck on wheels. Fourteen days into the project, and half a duck built, things are going well. However, unbeknownst to them, someone has been spying on the job site the whole time. What the spy has observed for two weeks is one group (G1) sitting on chairs and at tables pointing and talking at two other groups of people (G2 and G3) who are running around building a wooden duck, while the fourth group (G4) is scurrying about, handing other people tools and performing smaller tasks. On day 15, G1 is seen telling everyone it's time to get back to work because if they don't finish the rump today, they won't be on track for the tail tomorrow. Those in G2 turn to tell those in G3 what to do next. Many in G3 turn to those in G4 to request they run and get some specific tools.

All that is quite enough for the person spying on the job site to rush out from behind a bush and verbally explode at everyone. They inform the folks at the job site that the whole endeavor is operating through a top-down command structure with different levels of authority that waterfalls duties through to the lowest people in the hierarchy of the project who are subjected to the least rewarding part of the work. They say G1 seems to be putting the least effort into the duck itself by just sitting there and telling people what to do, while G2 and G3 are clearly working, but are also taking advantage of G4 who are at the lowest rung of this project's ladder. They end by telling everyone that if they understood anarchism and took it to be a matter of principle that all hierarchy and authority ought not to exist, the

project would run a different way.

At this point all those working on the duck explain to the challenger that they are all very passionate about ducks and decided to come together and build the giant wooden duck for fun. They go on to say that at the project pre-meeting it was decided that those in G1 were to be the “project captains” who would draw up the blueprints for the job and direct the crew in the way needed to get the job done. The folks in G2 were recognized “second in command” type positions who would take general direction from those in G1 and then direct and guide the rest of the crew—specifically those in G3. People in G4 noted they had little interest in the finer points of carpentry but they enjoy the comradery of the project and have been quite bored lately anyway—so they told the group to just ask them to do things, and they’ll do it if it helps the project along. This was all then summarized and put in a little chart on the job site to remind everyone of who was responsible for what—visually, it shows G1 at the top of the chart, and so on downward. All groups agree with the idea that anyone who doesn’t like the project anymore can just quit. They all conclude by wondering aloud why the person spying on the job site should have anything to object to here on the grounds of anarchist principle if the context and dynamics of domination are absent.

Indeed, as far as the anarchist is concerned, the existence of elements of hierarchy and authority in *certain senses* are in fact at play here, but that doesn’t mean the dynamics between these groups are necessarily illegitimate—the context or dynamics of domination don’t seem to be in play.

These sorts of careful distinctions between hierarchy, authority, and domination are crucial as far as understanding and critiquing the contexts people and groups operate within and the dynamics between them. They provide a framework for understanding what actually makes hierarchies and systems of authority undesirable and unacceptable to the anarchist: domination. And, perhaps more importantly, these distinctions are very useful when engaging with other people who are trying to learn about anarchism. They put the secondary details of particular arrangements aside, in favor of what should be the primary component of anarchist thinking: understanding anarchism as fundamentally being a set of values and convictions against domination.

Is Hierarchy and Authority Without Domination *Just Deference to Knowledge?*

Of course, the wooden-duck scenario sketched above is designed to make a precise point in an essay, and it is in some ways too simple. However, it is arranged to not only demonstrate that hierarchy and authority can conceivably be separated from domination in principle, but also to counter what some anarchists will insist on

describing the context and dynamics of the scenario above as: people voluntarily deferring to *knowledge*, not to someone in a certain position or with a certain authority. Some anarchists claim that hierarchy and authority as concepts in and of themselves can never be legitimate, and that the absence of these elements is truly the essence of anarchism and voluntary dynamics.

Yet, when one takes a look at individuals and groups who are interacting in a truly voluntary manner in real life, it simply doesn't seem to be the case that *all* of those dynamics and arrangements are simply cases of respect for expertise or knowledge on the way to achieving a shared goal. To be very clear, yes, in certain scenarios it is indeed the case that deference to knowledge is the only element in play. However, a very narrow idea of how humans can (and do) voluntarily arrange themselves to conduct their endeavors is required if one wishes to fall back to knowledge and respect for expertise as the always-and-everywhere explanation for interpersonal contexts and group dynamics that don't involve domination.

Indeed, there are many scenarios an anarchist could consider legitimate insofar as they are without the context and dynamics of domination, but perhaps see individuals participating in frameworks and arrangements where people have different levels of decision-making power. Or, perhaps different levels and domains of responsibility are recognized and with that certain authority within that domain, and so on. And, it's simply a fact that many join activities knowing full well they will be subject to a certain authority, or decisions, within a hierarchy, and accept that *within the context and limits of the endeavor or arrangement in question*. Furthermore, individuals might even find themselves disagreeing with certain aspects of a hierarchy or certain decisions by an authority in the micro, but still see the context, arrangements, and dynamics as legitimate on the whole—in other words, if they feel their macro desires, values, or goals are still being fulfilled in the long run, they will opt to continue participating and consenting to the arrangements.

This could be as true of our wooden duck project as it is with a stage play of a total of 50 cast and crew members who recognize a director. In some cases, many might see the director as someone to creatively collaborate with and defer to only when their knowledge is greater. But, in many other cases the director can also be recognized as someone with ultimate decision-making authority due to the fact they founded the project based on their individual vision and recruited others to work with to realize that vision (or perhaps they were simply appointed to that position and that level of authority for a certain amount of time).

The same kind of thing can be said with a brigade system of cooks in a kitchen who operate in a hierarchy and under the authority of a head chef in service of their desire to produce a three-course feast on a Friday night for their community. The same goes for two, or multiple, people engaged in sexual arrangements and dynamics based on an adherence to hierarchy or authority (and even some degree of force) *within certain pre-established boundaries* in the service of experimentation

and play for pleasure—the likes of which is often called “domination” but is certainly not what is meant by domination as described above. And, all the same could be said as far as hierarchy and authority for a militia of volunteers who are structured like a platoon with varying levels of decision-making power that tops out with a squad commander—all in service of defending an anarchist town from an exterior statist attack.

Hierarchy and authority can also be at play absent domination within a dispute resolution context. Consider two people that voluntarily enter into arbitration over a disagreement, and promise to abide by the arbiters ruling. The arbiter will control the order of conversation and exchanges between the two parties, enforce a code of conduct between them, and will come to a decision that will be recognized as final—even if both parties don’t leave completely satisfied, and feel they are both compromising to some degree within the limits of the issue at hand. Indeed, one can go on and imagine all kind of group endeavors, arrangements, activities, teams, clubs, and so on that people voluntarily participate in where different degrees and levels of hierarchy or authority are at play as elements pertaining to a specific and limited domain—yet, domination as understood and described above is absent.

By understanding that *certain instances* of hierarchy and authority in *certain senses* can very well exist without the context or dynamics of domination it’s obvious why it would be really silly if an anarchist were to join a 100-year old bowling league and then call for the whole thing to be dismantled on anarchist principles because of the league’s traditions of having a president, recognizing long-standing members with 10-, 15-, and 20-year badges, giving senior members priority for lane usage, and operating with a rule that says junior members must comply with senior member requests when it comes to certain league decisions. It would be equally silly to look at the yearly-elected President—with the authority to arrange the teams every season and choose what night everyone rolls on—as a position of unjust arbitrary decision-making authority, even if they aren’t the most knowledgeable person in the room.

Similarly, it would also be silly if an anarchist asked for a soccer league to be dismantled because the league has a president who referees report to (and the assistant referees report to the referees), and all of those officials exercise their authority to make organizational decisions or judgment calls on the field that teams and players might not always agree with. Anyone who has played a sport knows the *last* thing that happens is full agreement with, and actual respect for, every call a referee makes—but adherence happens if people want the game to actually continue.

Ultimately, if everyone *on the whole and in the macro* has truly voluntarily chosen to initially and continually associate with these groups, and in doing so has accepted the arrangements and rules they operate with, these groups and their dynamics should be recognized as legitimate. Even if members were to disagree with certain decisions and happenings at any given time, and feel their macro desires

and objectives are still being fulfilled, then any hierarchy or authority in play is operating without domination.

Again, these may seem like flippant examples, but it is absolutely worth leveraging them in an effort to set aside the idea that all non-domination ridden activities, contexts, or dynamics between people are simply deference to knowledge and are always without elements of hierarchy, authority. Anyone who has voluntarily chosen to belong to a specific arrangement, club, project, or play a sport, should know what it's like to belong to a context with certain elements of hierarchy and authority at play, disagree with some elements of that hierarchy or certain decisions from some positions of authority here and there—or perhaps even continuously—but not then see the whole thing as illegitimately imposing forms of domination over their lives.

Ultimately, humans are individuals with different qualities, interests, desires, and goals. Even assuming a utopia with conditions of perfect freedom, always voluntary activity, and no background conditions that make it necessary to work to generate materials to sustain life, it's hard to imagine all humans *not* wanting to engage in different activities and projects that interest them. And, there will probably never be a universal way different individuals and groups go about these endeavors and projects—whether that's assigning responsibilities and ensuring they're performed, executing specific operations or activities, recognizing seniority or bestowing honors for achievements, employing dispute resolution mechanisms or handling requests for organizational or community change, and so on.

Individuals participating in certain endeavors and projects might recognize that without elements of hierarchy and authority in some instances, failure might be inevitable because: processes might be inefficient; the project would shift in character and scope to the point of ceasing to be what it originally was; varying levels of interest in certain kinds of roles and responsibilities among all the participants would not be addressed correctly by spreading them out with complete equality; and so on and so forth.

At the end of the day, why different individuals and groups go about their business differently will vary for at least as many reasons as there are individuals and groups. And that's a good thing because not every individual—and therefore not every group—is the same or desires the same things. In doing so, they will freely join and leave different groups and participate in group structures that have different ways of operating. If all of that is the case, indeed, *certain instances* of hierarchy and authority *in certain senses* will appear in different places in different times—or perhaps even be consistent parts of the lives of many—without necessarily operating within a context and with the dynamics of domination.

Rules

Like hierarchies and authority, whether certain rules are legitimate or illegitimate depends on the context they're employed in.

Indeed, some rules are an explicit kind one might operate under when they enter another individual or group's space voluntarily. For example, perhaps due to a past trauma, one of your friends doesn't want to hear about quarry pits. So, when you go to their house to visit, you're asked to abide by the rule your friend and their roommates have agreed upon—don't talk about quarry pits. Guests who break the rule are asked to leave (and are viewed as pretty rude for not listening to it).

Other rules are implicit ones, created by dynamics, ongoing agreements, or norms. For instance, if you make an agreement with someone over a handshake that whenever you bring certain goods you have to their house, they will ensure you get certain goods you want in return delivered to your house within three or less days later, it wouldn't be odd to say this is one of the rules in your relationship or dynamic if this were to go on for many years.

Some will say enforcement of rules (i.e., ensuring consequences are visited on others) couldn't ever be something one can consent to or be considered legitimate—why would someone “consent” to a consequence or punishment? Well, again, *in certain senses*, it can absolutely be the case someone does. For example, if someone joins a sports club with responsibilities and rules the members must agree to, and all members know what kind of consequences will come into play for violating them, that would make enforcement legitimate. So, if there's a rule that all members must sweep the tennis court they use when they're done with their match or be tasked with sweeping all the courts, it wouldn't be illegitimate if they were asked to sweep all the courts after violating that rule—and if they refused continually at the expense of other members, be asked to leave the club.

Ultimately, the crux of whether rules are legitimate or not, and can therefore be justified, parallels the same logic presented in the previous sections. What's crucially important is how the rules came about, who is adhering to them, and that the nature of the context and dynamics at play are absent of domination—which again, also entails that there are always options for clear and viable exits from the rules.

Force

Below is an example of a proactive use of force Chomsky uses to illustrate that not all instances of force are necessarily illegitimate:

Suppose I'm taking a walk with my granddaughter and she runs out

into the street—and I grab her and pull her back. Well, that’s authority, and it’s my task to demonstrate that it’s legitimate. And, I think in this case if anybody challenged me I could make an argument saying that’s legitimate authority.

Unfortunately, the context that precedes this example is Chomsky sloppily tumbling “authority and domination” together before he settles on the term “authority.” Beyond using the terms (incorrectly) in an interchangeable way, the trouble is that his example introduces what is really an *instance of force* under the label of “authority and domination.”

Nevertheless, the sloppy point stands as helpful to some degree once clearer distinctions are made. Of course, anarchists should see no problem with the act of grabbing and stopping a young child who might be knowingly chasing a ball into a street unknowingly filled with dangerous traffic. Similarly, anarchists should see no problem with certain reactive uses of force—for instance, if one is walking alone in a dark alley and they get assaulted, they are certainly right to defend themselves proportionately.

What’s important to understand is that these examples put an action up for judgment in a *moment* in time. This is distinct from *ongoing* contexts and dynamics of hierarchy, authority, and domination. A use of force can, in itself, be looked upon as just, unjust, justifiable, or unjustifiable. The more pressing questions deal with the broader context it takes place within, and the reasons why it happens at all.

Detecting Domination

After separating and understanding domination, hierarchy, authority, and/or rules, it is crucial to consider how the related, but separate, notions below aid in further understanding the nature of domination so that a judgment can be made on whether contexts and dynamics of domination are truly in play:

1. Whether an individual has chosen to truly *voluntarily* adhere to certain individual or group dynamics that may feature hierarchy, authority, and certain rules within certain limits.
2. Whether an individual can completely exit certain dynamics, circumstances, and arrangements, if and when they choose to do so.
3. How certain instances of hierarchy, authority, and rules can be considered legitimate within certain boundaries, but then become illegitimate if they violate those boundaries.

In other words, the key markers that distinguish contexts and dynamics of non-domination or domination is: first, a question of whether an individual consented

to those contexts and dynamics to begin with; second, a question of continuing consent; and third, whether agreed upon (if any) contexts, dynamics, and arrangements stay within the boundaries agreed to.

So, if an individual is forced to participate in certain arrangements, they are being dominated. If an individual first chooses to participate in certain arrangements, but later decides they want to detach and disassociate from them but is unable to make a relatively easy exit from those arrangements due to others (e.g. threat of violence, physical prevention from leaving a space, fraudulent or malicious action that eliminates or lessens one's chance to cleanly exit, etc.), they are being dominated. And, finally, if an individual agrees to certain dynamics and arrangements which include authority vested in other individuals or groups, and those groups overreach, violate, or go beyond the scope of what is agreed to, an individual is being dominated.

These understandings of the “how and when” of domination allow an anarchist to conclude, for example, that it may be unacceptable for someone to refuse to conduct themselves in a certain way they previously agreed to while they're working within a certain structure or on a certain project. But, of course, if they no longer wish to remain part of the project it would not be unacceptable for them to completely leave it and exit out from under certain obligations and demands.

Similarly, an angry tennis player passionately protesting a call made by an umpire, demanding a higher-up official overturn the call and remove the umpire from their position of authority, and then being denied that request while being essentially told that if they don't like it, they can leave, is not experiencing domination. In fact, if the player stays and continues to play after the disagreement, it's assumed they are not rejecting or withdrawing their consent from the whole idea of tennis, the rules it operates under, the legitimacy of having an umpire as the on-field authority over almost all calls and issues, or the hierarchy the umpire exists within.

However, of course, that same player somehow not being allowed to leave the game, or disassociate and disengage with the tennis league entirely if they feel there is a truly unbearable abuse of authority occurring, would change the whole context to that of domination. Furthermore, it would be equally illegitimate if the league's on-court hierarchy, authority, rules, and dynamics began to extend and impose themselves onto other areas of that player's life beyond the limits initially agreed upon—like the umpire coming to their house and bossing them around under threat of being fined or putting a lien on their house.

It's also crucial to understand the different dimensions and manifestations of domination, and how they can be considered beyond the context or dynamics directly imposed by one individual or group—which is not the only way domination should be understood. Domination can also be a feature, driving element, or result of the way multiple individuals and groups interact that forms institutions and norms others are subjected to. For example, one can distinguish between the micro

interaction of trading ongoing labor for ongoing payment and the larger context behind that. Could an anarchist construct a thought experiment which includes a macro context of an ideal utopia of non-domination and a micro interaction where one individual chose to continually trade a day's labor for a form of compensation? Certainly—one can design scenarios all day. However, it's an entirely different story to understand and consider, for example, the different levels of domination individuals are subject to in reality when they are part of the billions driven to rent or subordinate themselves to employers in the modern industrial world.

Indeed, if individuals could choose much more appealing alternatives to these arrangements they probably would, but they most often can't—not due to the emerging results of different individuals and groups pursuing their own projects and desired arrangements, but rather due to the overarching reality of entrenched structures of economic and social power, privilege, and influence that state and private groups wield. How this power, privilege, and influence interacts and maintains much of the current social and economic order with various hierarchies, authorities, and rules is key. And, it is in this way that one can view the *institution and norms* of present-day wage labor as an unjust phenomenon of domination at many levels, all while not necessarily condemning the mere fact of trading one's labor for compensation (or a “wage”) as unjust in and of itself on principle. The same critical eye and understandings can be applied to modern corporate law, institutions of property and property law, etc.

It is only when armed with these kinds of careful understandings—and in some cases simply the right *questions*—that the anarchist is able to understand social and economic injustices as being caused by, or enabling, various elements and contexts of domination. In this way, these understandings can also help anarchists navigate around the pitfalls of vulgar voluntarist thinking on the one hand, while also avoiding the implication that anarchism is an unserious outlook on human relations with no room for nuanced understandings.

A Note on Vulgar Voluntarism and Mirage Exits

While consent (initial, continuing, and within certain established boundaries) is a key pivot point between circumstances of domination and non-domination, a vulgarized conception of consent can incorrectly lead one to believe that *any* interaction or dynamic between people or groups of people is just given *any* form of agreement in the micro. The idea that outsiders should respect any form of explicit or implicit agreement between two individuals and understand it as voluntary with no consideration for the context and dynamics surrounding the agreement leaves one with a very thin, and ultimately incorrect, conception of consent.

Many anarchists—especially those who would be more comfortable with labels

on the other side of a hyphen such as socialist, syndicalist, communist, etc.—rarely miss an opportunity to claim that those who, for example, have a positive view on individualist, market- and trade-based social and economic arrangements, often have a kind of vulgarized idea of consent and exchange at play. It is important to note this is indeed a massive problem some self-proclaimed anarchists have.

One-dimensional, as-long-as-they-said-yes, no-consideration-for-broader-social-or-material-context kind of thinking can, and often does, lead to very bizarre conclusions about consent and voluntary action. For example, the idea that people of early maturity or impaired capabilities and sense cannot in fact legitimately consent to certain activities (even if they said “yes” to a certain proposition) is a notion often objected to by certain self-proclaimed anarchists. And, of course, that isn’t the only kind of topic where the tendencies of vulgar voluntarism show themselves. Much has been written by anarchists about how the idea that one submits to a wage arrangement and the authority of a boss in a state-capitalist economy “voluntarily” after being sandwiched between state control and plunder on one side, and economic privilege on the other, doesn’t even rise to the level of a joke—and that is correct, that idea is a joke.

Anarchists that understand anarchism as anti-domination should be able to identify situations and circumstances that are “voluntary” in only the most superficial ways: the context could be one of massive social or economic power dynamic imbalances; one of the parties could have severely compromised judgment; someone could be consenting to something they otherwise would not, but for the fact they are somehow being directly or indirectly compelled by artificial circumstances of restriction and privilege that benefit the other party; and so on. In this way, even if someone ostensibly consents or agrees to something, whether they are doing something in a truly voluntary manner—i.e., absent the contexts, dynamics, and traces of domination—is the crucial question for anarchists.

In similar ways, whether one can exit from association with certain individuals or groups, and/or their authority, can either be understood through the lens of whether the options for exit are viable and realistic alternatives, or just very thinly flippant ones. For example, if you’re at your friend’s house and they tell you if you don’t like their rules you can leave, that’s one thing. However, if you’re part of a colony on the moon and you’re told that if you don’t like the new dictator and how they’re starting to run things you can always try the airlock, that’s another.

In other words, what can be considered a true exit option from certain dynamics and arrangements—as opposed to an unrealistic mirage exit that ultimately serves as an illusion of choice and traps individuals—is a key consideration for anarchists.

This essay’s use of consent, voluntary action, and clear and viable exits when it comes to association and disassociation with individuals, groups, hierarchies, authority, and rules, employs the multi-dimensional perspective that anarchists should operate with. Anyone approaching the discussion above on justifiable hier-

archies, authority, and from the single dimension on whether “someone agreed to it” is missing the point of the arguments above, misleading themselves, and would end up with quite a superficial version of anarchism—in fact, they don’t end up with anarchism at all.

The Burden of Proof

If indeed the core tenet of anarchism is that domination is inherently unjust, then it can never be understood as legitimate or justifiable.

As for hierarchy, authority, or a set of rules, the default anarchist assumption certainly shouldn’t be that certain instances of the same are legitimate or acceptable simply because they exist—it must be *demonstrated* that they are. And, indeed, those who *challenge* hierarchy, authority, and certain sets of rules or bring critiques against them don’t need to justify why they or others *shouldn’t* be subject to certain structures. The burden of proof to “justify” certain hierarchies, authorities, or rules is on those that are proponents of their continuance. And, the only way one can “justify” the establishment or maintenance of hierarchy, authority, and rules to challenges or inquiries from within or without is if it can be demonstrated that the contexts or dynamics of domination are not present.

So, if one decided to live in a community of 1000 people based on a strict communitarian, command-economy model, only to realize a few years later they no longer want to be subject to the arrangements and rules they previously agreed upon, they are certainly right to make the case to change these arrangements from within that group and elicit a response. Now, imagine if in response to this ask the economic council replies that they will not allow anyone to get out of their communal farm work, won’t be modifying the rules about possessions such that community members can have their own property and trade with others, and justifies this decision by saying that everyone else is more than happy with the way things are (demonstrated by their initial and continuing consent).

If it is true that everyone except the one new dissenter is happy with everything, it can be said this community has justified its hierarchy, authority, and rules to that one unhappy person. If this one unhappy camper then demanded to know what alternatives they had and were told if they didn’t like it they could leave, and that they will be happily supplied with a backpack filled with more than enough food and supplies to get to one of the 40 other alternative communities/towns only about one mile away each if they did decide to leave, this whole scenario can be considered non-dominative in nature—people within it are consenting and happy, and people wanting to leave are provided a clear and viable exit.

Alternatively, imagine the scenario above, but with two key differences:

- After speaking with some people quietly away from the economic council,

one discovers there are in fact many people who aren't happy with the way things are, but they're worried about speaking up from within the system because they might have dinner privileges taken away.

- Furthermore, people are often told that if they don't like it they can leave, but in this version of the scenario the community is on an isolated sea platform with no known transportation. In other words, what the economic council is really implying when they say if you don't like it you can leave is that one can either submit to the hierarchy, authority, and rules of the community, or throw themselves into the water and have fun with certain death. And, in the meantime if they misbehave they will not get dinner, and face other consequences.

In the modified version of the scenario, the economic council has obviously failed to justify the contexts and dynamics of the community to any anarchist. They would be unable to demonstrate truly voluntary adherence to the hierarchy, authority, and rules at play, or the alternative of clear and viable exits to those withdrawing their consent or agreement. In principle, the anarchist would view challenge or resistance to these structures and dynamics and the call for their dismantling as just in principle—the rest is a discussion of tactics.

This is similar—but, importantly, *not* the exact same—to what Chomsky is trying to establish when he states that those exercising their authority or position in a hierarchy have a “heavy burden to bear” and that “it’s the task of those who have the authority to demonstrate that” they are doing so legitimately. Unfortunately, because of his often sloppy use of terms when addressing this topic—and the resulting frenzy so many get into around his supposed idea of legitimate vs. illegitimate hierarchies and authority—this burden-of-proof razor brought to the anarchist toolkit is overlooked. This is a shame, because it is a tool that carves away the distractions and non-sequiturs people often throw against anarchists when they imply that it is anarchism that needs to make a case against the assumption that hierarchy, authority, and rules are justifiable in and of themselves. In reality, it’s up to proponents of those contexts and dynamics—whether they’re simply making the case in conversation, or are wielding a position of authority themselves—to justify them. And if they can’t demonstrate the absence of domination and the presence of consent, they ought to be viewed as unjustified and illegitimate.

A Word on Anarchist Uniformity

Perhaps there are those who object to the premise of hierarchies, authority, and rules being justifiable, even in the *certain senses* and *certain instances* described here. They may still insist that anarchism is indeed the rejection or abolition of hierarchy,

authority, and rules in and of themselves—even if domination as understood here is not in play. The question for anyone leaning this direction is a simple one: if domination is truly absent from a context or dynamic, and someone’s truly voluntary consent is present, what additional considerations *must* enter the picture of anarchism?

Many different flavors of anarchism—or, what you get when you add a hyphen to anarchism—should be seen as nothing but welcome additions to anarchist discourse. However, that’s only insofar as these versions of anarchism are seen by their respective proponents as *primarily* a worldview of non-domination at core that *secondarily* ventures further into signaling or describing more specific kinds of social or economic structures/arrangements that are preferred as the best way to realize non-domination. Often, proponents of a preferred flavor of anarchism overstate their case (and frankly, their anarchism) when they go further than a prescription for non-domination in human relations and into the claim that their version of anarchism is *the* one to be implemented while others—even if anti-domination is still at their core—cannot, and should not, be tolerated.

As explored above, all individuals within a context of non-domination will likely have their own ideas of what constitutes the good life for themselves and their communities, and will more than likely seek to join projects and communities that are at least compatible with these ideas and are at most a reflection of them. This will likely result in many leading lifestyles, belonging to contexts, or playing a part within certain dynamics where there are elements of hierarchy, authority, rules and norms, decisions being made, and lifestyles being pursued that others might disagree with or would not prefer for themselves—and that’s perfectly fine.

It cannot be overstated that non-domination should be the primary concern of the anarchist. The anarchist who claims to agree with non-domination as the driving and central tenet of their anarchism but also pushes the case further to yearn for *uniformity of context, dynamics, preferences, and arrangements* across all individuals and groups is not necessarily diving headfirst into the depths of faux-anarchism and the dangerous kinds of vanguardism that lead to the types of oppression that can be found even in a stateless society—but they also aren’t treading in the shallow end of that pool either.

A Cleaned-Up Model

The above doesn’t claim to define terms and concepts once and for all, or introduce *the* word-for-word way to understand them. However, to grapple with the variety of separate and important ideas at play throughout this discussion, terms like hierarchy, authority, rules, domination, force, voluntary, and so on used in this essay have a very intentional meaning outlined for them.

If one accepts the way these terms are used here, one can use a similar approach to Chomsky when describing anarchism, but improve it to be a more precisely defined anarchist shorthand that keeps the concept of domination as its critical focus:

1. Anarchism is a point of view, and set of values, set against domination. As such, it is a system of thought on non-domination. Anarchists reject all contexts and dynamics of domination—no exceptions.
2. Anarchists identify arrangements and dynamics that are based on, or have elements of, hierarchy, authority, and rules, and bring challenges and critiques to them—driven by a detection of domination.
3. In all cases, it is the proponents of contexts and dynamics that maintain certain hierarchies, authority, or rules that must justify them as operating absent the context or dynamics of domination. If they can't be justified or shown to be legitimate in this way, they ought to be dismantled—or destroyed.

This description of anarchism centered around anti-domination provides a shorthand for anarchists to present anarchy, and serves as a concept ladder for those who are anarcho-curious to learn from.

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