The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



William Van Wagenen
An Introduction to Mormon Anarchism
2007

Retrieved on May 14, 2025 from
https://themormonworkerdotnet.wordpress.com/past-issues/archive/an-introduction-to-mormon-anarchism/

theanarchistlibrary.org

An Introduction to Mormon Anarchism

William Van Wagenen

2007

Contents

Introduction 5
The Political Dominion of the State 6
The Economic Dominion of Capitalism 9
The Exercise of Dominion in Mormonism 10
Is Authority Based on Violence Necessary? 12
Communism and the State 14
Establishing a Mormon Society 16
The Importance of Economic Unity 18
Having All Things Common: A World Without Property . 22

Only when the evils of capitalism are sufficiently known, and the possibility of an anarchist society realized, will anyone, Mormon or otherwise, be willing to organize to create such a society. Anarchism would arise slowly as more and more people organize to establish equitable economic relations inside the belly of the already existing economic beast. As socialist relations based on voluntary, mutual association arise, the need for government will simply disappear. Rather than being characterized by a violent overthrow of government and seizure of the apparatus of the state by a small, self-proclaimed workers vanguard, the social revolution will take place slowly as the principles of anarchism and/or Mormonism are embraced and put into practice.[26] Once the majority of people in any society come to embrace these ideals, the elimination of poverty and war would be possible.

[26] How anarchist or united order principles can be implemented on a local and even individual level in the modern economy is the subject of a book by Brigham Young University business professors Warner Woodworth and James Lucas entitled Working Toward Zion: Principles of the United Order for the Modern World. Salt Lake City, Aspen Books, 1996.

the evils of a dole abolished, and independence, industry, thrift, and self-respect once more established among our people."

It has accomplished this great task by calling upon every man woman and child in their communities to consider the welfare of others about them as their own, and to be willing to work for others not related by ties other than Christian fellowship. It has called upon every man, woman, and child to be personally responsible for the amelioration of the present crisis.

We repeat, all work was voluntary and personal. No money was paid in wages. And it was accomplished without calling in state aid.[24]

The foundation for a society in which anarchist/United Order principles are fully implemented is thus being laid as quickly as the Mormon Church is established in any part of the world. This foundation must be expanded however so that societies are established in which the means of production are held in common, so that some Mormons and others do not "possess that which is above another." Marion G. Romney, former counselor in the first presidency of the Mormon Church, described the importance of the church's welfare program in the establishment of a socialist society, though he would have eschewed the use of the term:

Almost from the beginning of my services in Church welfare I have had the conviction that what we are doing in this welfare work is preliminary to the reestablishment of the law of consecration and stewardship as required under the united order. If we could always remember the goal toward which we are working, we would never lose our bearings in this great work.[25]

[24] The Catholic Worker, November 1936. As quoted in Vetterli, Mormonism, Americanism and Politics, p. 70.

[25] Marion G. Romney. "The Purpose of Church Welfare Services," Ensign 7 (May 1977): 92. As quoted in Warner Woodworth and James Lucas, Working Toward Zion: Principles of the United Order for the Modern World. Salt Lake City, Aspen Books, 1996, p. 1.

Introduction

In this paper I wish to show that the consistent application of the principles expounded in Mormon scripture, should lead a person to become an anarchist. In other words, every Mormon should look forward to the abolition of government and the building of a socialist society based on free association and mutual cooperation. Attempting to argue such a case may seem perplexing, given the generally pro-capitalist, pro-government, pro-war stance of many American Mormons today.

By arguing that every Mormon should be an anarchist, I am not attempting to imply that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is currently in a state of "apostasy" because its membership does not openly strive for the establishment of an anarchist society. Governments and capitalist economies constitute the reality in which Mormons must live, making some degree of cooperation with government necessary for the Mormon Church to simply exist and evangelize. In the decades following the founding of the Mormon religion in 1830, the federal and state authorities directly threatened the Church's existence various times, in the form of imprisonments, expulsions, land confiscations, and so forth. The most notorious example of this came in 1838 when the then Governor of Missouri, Lilburn Boggs, issued an executive decree stating, "the Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State if necessary for the public peace."[1] Even after the Mormons finally found a safe haven in the deserts of Utah, the US government threatened the existence of the Church several times. In 1856, President Buchanan sent 2,500 soldiers to Utah to put down the "Mormon Rebellion," while the entire leadership of the church was at one time either imprisoned or forced into hiding by federal authorities due to the Mormon practice of polygamy. As

[1] As quoted in Black, Susan Easton and Skinner, Andrew. Joseph: Exploring the Life and Ministry of the Prophet. Deseret Book, Salt Lake City, 2005, p. 284.

a result of such persecution, it was necessary for Mormons to come to some kind of an accommodation with the State. Further, it is the responsibility of Mormons to care and provide for their families, making participation in capitalist economies largely unavoidable.

What is necessary to criticize regarding the current state of affairs however, is that many Mormons do not consider support for government and capitalism as necessary evils, demanded by current conditions, but rather see capitalism and government as divinely inspired institutions, which Mormons are obligated to enthusiastically support and unquestioningly obey. Mormons thus find themselves supporting capitalism and government, and therefore exploitation, imperialism, jingoism, and militarism, considering these things inherent to their religion, despite the many resources within Mormon scripture advocating the contrary. It is important that Mormons not see establishment of capitalism and its above-mentioned offspring as the "end of history," but rather look forward to the establishment of a society and economic system in accordance with the principles contained in their own sacred writings.

The Political Dominion of the State

Insight into the reason Mormonism (as well as Christianity generally) is inimical to the State and Capitalism is revealed in Mathew 20:25. Jesus, speaking to his disciples about authority, says:

Ye know that the princes of the gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them; but it shall not be so among you; but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.

Note that there are two types of authority acknowledged here. One is characteristic of the Gentiles, while the other is characteristic of those who follow Jesus. The authority of the Gentiles is such

– it will be limitless."[23] Though the Mormon Church is not currently living in full accordance with the anarchist principles of the United Order, the Mormon Church is nevertheless implementing some of these principles and creating a society organized along the lines of voluntary mutual association for the sake of caring for one another. The Mormon Church currently operates a welfare program funded by voluntary donations by its members known as Fast Offerings. In times of collective or individual financial crises, church members can work for various church enterprises and draw from a common fund according to their needs for the duration of their economic difficulties. If members are already working yet unable to support themselves wholly, or are unable to work altogether, aid is simply given. The anarchist newspaper, The Catholic Worker, described the efforts of the Mormon Church to care for its members at the height of the Great Depression as follows:

Mormons have taken the lead from Catholics in caring for their needy. The Church of Latter-day Saints has met the crisis in a manner which ought to shame our so-called Catholic charitable organizations . . . In every stake unemployed men and women were set to work sewing, farming, canning, repairing shoes and clothing, collecting furniture and gifts from church members and nonmembers.

All work was voluntary. No money was paid. To each man and woman a work certificate was given. When a worker needs anything he presents his certificate to the Bishop of his ward and he is given what he and his family need.

The certificates are not valued in dollars or cents. Their value depends upon the size of the family. Single men doing the same amount of work receive only what they require as bachelors…

The Church of Latter-day Saints has set an example worthy of imitation by their Catholic fellow countrymen. It has set up a system "under which the curse of idleness would be done away with,

[23] As quoted in Richards, LeGrand. A Marvelous Work and a Wonder. Salt Lake City, Deseret Book Company, 1950, p. 435.

There are different ways in which a society can be built in which the means of production are held in common. Section 104 of the Doctrine and Covenants outlines the manner in which such a society could be organized. The Lord declares that bringing the means of production into the hands of the masses is to be done in a specific way: "And it is my purpose to provide for my saints, for all things are mine. But it must needs be done in my own way; and behold this is the way that I, the Lord, have decreed to provide for my saints, that the poor shall be exalted, in that the rich are made low (D&C 104:15,16)." To fulfill this commandment, Mormon communities were to institute a system of economic cooperation known as the United Order in which all members voluntarily "consecrated" their property to a common fund or treasury. Each member then received the amount of property or resources needed to support him or herself, and was given "stewardship" or responsibility over them. All wealth produced in excess of what that individual and his or her family needed was then given back to the common fund: "And all moneys that you receive in your stewardships, by improving upon the properties which I have appointed unto you, in houses, or in lands, or in cattle, or in all things . . . shall be cast into the treasury as fast as you receive moneys, by hundreds, or by fifties, or by twenties, or by tens, or by fives (D&C 104:68)." The treasury was to be administered in democratic fashion, by the "united consent or voice of the order (D&C 104:21)." The wealth of the community was to be such that "no man among you shall call it his own, or any part of it, for it shall belong to you all with one accord (D&C 104:62)."

Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian author and anarchist, recognized the significance of the economic principles found in Mormon scripture. Tolstoy commented that: "The Mormon people teach the American religion; their principles teach not only of heaven and its attendant glories, but how to live so that their social and economic relations with each other are placed on a sound basis. If that people follow the teachings of this Church, nothing can stop their progress

that some men or women "exercise dominion over" others. This, ostensibly, is a reference to the authority of the Roman Empire which ruled in Jesus' day. In other words, the authority of the Gentiles is the authority of the State. John Howard Yoder defines the State as "the phenomenon that society is organized by the appeal to force as ultimate authority."[2] As the sociologist Max Weber explained,

If no social institutions existed which knew the use of violence, then the concept of 'state' would be eliminated, and a condition would emerge that could be designated as 'anarchy,' in the specific sense of this word. Of course, force is certainly not the normal or the only means of the state – nobody says that – but force is a means specific to the state. Today the relation between the state and violence is an especially intimate one. In the past, the most varied institutions. . . have known the use of physical force as quite normal. Today, however, we have to say that a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory (emphasis in the original).[3]

Those who challenge the sovereignty of the State, or who do not follow its laws, will be forced to submit by violence. This may take the form of imprisonment, execution, or in the case of rebellions, counterinsurgency warfare. Because the State has an overwhelming advantage over its population in the capacity for violence, it is able to exist and retain power. Sovereignty is lost as soon as this advantage in violence can no longer be maintained. Thus, the political and military leadership of any state uses violence and the threat of violence to "exercise dominion over" others.[4] Of course, the vi-

[2] Yoder, John Howard. "A Christian Witness to the State." p. 12.

[3] As quoted in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Translated and edited), From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, p.77.

[4] The State is the only actor, which can employ violence "legitimately", that is legally. To say the use of violence is "legal" implies no moral judgment per se, but rather that the violence is employed by the State or its agents, according to its own established parameters. For example, a murderer could be executed for

olence necessary to maintain sovereignty can be reduced when a state can secure the consent of the masses it governs, making representative political systems, as well as the use of propaganda, useful in perpetuating the acceptance of the state's existence.[5] Violence, however, continues to constitute the foundation of the State's ability to exist, and is what distinguishes the State from other social institutions seeking to achieve similar goals.

his crime by either the State or by a vigilante. His execution by the first is legal, while his execution by the latter is illegal, though in truth no real distinction can be drawn between the two acts in terms of morality. The only difference is that one maintains the order of the status quo, namely the monopoly of violence enjoyed by the State, while the other poses a challenge to this monopoly. The same is true of war. A war fought by a State against another State is legitimate or legal, while an internal rebellion against the government would be "illegitimate" or "illegal". A war fought by the State can be considered either moral or immoral, but it is always legal (putting the very recent idea of international law aside), so long as no other entity maintains sovereignty over its territory. A rebellion against a government can be either moral or immoral, but it is always "illegal" because a rebel group does not have sovereignty. Thus any challenge to the State and its monopoly on violence is responded to with violence. Any individual who does not obey the laws of the State, whether just or unjust, will be imprisoned. Any group trying to undermine the sovereignty of the State, either violently or not, will be imprisoned or killed. Any State infringing upon the sovereignty of another State will find this challenge met by military means. If an individual accepts the validity of the State, and accepts its claim to the monopoly of violence, the "legitimacy" or "legality" of the use of violence by the State is accepted as moral as such, while the use of violence by those who are not agents of the State is considered immoral. The line between "legal" and "moral" begins to blur, until, in some instances, the line disappears altogether, with that which is "legal" being equated with that which is "moral." When such a distinction is lost, the State is able to operate with relative impunity with no resistance or objection from a passive, if not actively supportive populace.

[5] See Chomsky, Noam and Herman, Edward S. Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media. New York, Pantheon Books, 2002.

ning of creation until now is a desire, planted within them by the Almighty, to possess property – lands, houses, farms, etc."[21]

The concept that the wealth of the earth should be distributed among and owned by all its people rather than controlled and used by a small elite is strongly emphasized by the Lord in the Doctrine and Covenants: "For the earth is full, and there is enough to spare. . . therefore, If any man shall take of the abundance which I have made and impart not his portion, according to the law of my Gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment (D&C 104: 18-19)." The idea that the resources of the earth belong to God strongly challenges the legitimacy of private ownership of the means of production. Taking too much of what belongs to God, not allowing it to flow to all of God's children, especially those who are starving, homeless and destitute, truly does constitute stealing.[22]

[21] As quoted in Newquist, Prophets, Priniciples, and National Survival, p. 175.

[22] For those of us living in American suburbia, this is at times a difficult concept to understand. People are considered poor here if they do not wear designer clothes or drive newer cars. It is hard to see why living in excessive luxury might be wrong, when even the "poor" we perceive around us still live comfortably and are not in danger of starvation. Further, we largely surround ourselves or associate with those who enjoy an economic status similar to our own. We may know that others are poor, but if we never see or experience poverty first hand, it is hard to be concerned about it. It is important to remember, however, that life in America, even for some in the lower classes, is not typical of the conditions experienced by the vast majority of people in the world. When we are exposed to the conditions under which hundreds of millions of the truly poor live, it is easier to see that we unnecessarily use resources, which others need to simply survive. To know that the wealth we spend on luxury could be used to provide the basic necessities of life for others is often so disturbing that the only way to deal with it is to simply try to keep it out of our thoughts. At other times we comfort ourselves saying that the poor in the third world are actually happier than those of us living in comfort in industrialized countries. This implies that being poor is somehow desirable, though strangely we never seem to want to change places with them, content as we are in the misery of having more than we need.

under such form that the separate groups, plants, and branches of industry are independent members of the general economic organism and systematically carry on production and the distribution of the products in the interest of the community on the basis of free mutual agreements.[20]

It is for this reason that Proudhon also stated that "property is freedom," meaning that when the workers own the means of production collectively, they are freed from their condition of wage slavery. The workers who under a capitalist system owned only the meager possessions their wages could buy now collectively own the means of production as well. Thus, the "abolition of private property" in fact refers to the inclusion of the masses in owning property, namely the means of production, which position was previously the domain of the capitalists only.

The situation is similar in agriculture. In a capitalist system in which the right of "private property" is protected, the land worked by hundreds or thousands of peasants would be owned by one person, forcing those who work the land to relinquish the wealth they produce, giving it to the land owner. In an anarchist system in which there is no "private property", the land would be owned by those who work the land for themselves, allowing them to keep the wealth they, as laborers, produce, rather than filling the pockets of the idle landlord. This could take the form of individual peasants working small plots of land they themselves own, or larger plots owned communally by a group of farmers. The importance of allowing everyone in a society to own property, rather than confining ownership to a small elite, is reinforced by the comments of John Taylor, one of the early presidents of the Mormon Church: "One great principle which has existed among men from the begin-

[20] As quoted in Guerin, Anarchism, From Theory to Practice, pg. ix.

The Economic Dominion of Capitalism

While the state allows some men and women to exercise political dominion over others, the capitalist mode of production allows men and women to exercise economic dominion over others. This stems from private, rather than social ownership of the means of production, such as land, factories, natural resources, and so forth. When the means of production are owned privately by capitalists, workers have no means to support themselves and must sell their labor to the capitalist in order to survive. Because the capitalist is in a position of dominance over the worker (he can fire the worker and leave him without the resources to live), the capitalist is able to take the profits produced by the labor of the worker. Rather than paying the worker the dividends of the wealth produced by the worker's labor, the capitalist instead pays the worker a wage. This wage is not determined according to what the worker and his/her family need to survive, but rather according to the demands of the market. Wages fluctuate depending upon how many people are in need of work. The more people in need, the lower the wage a capitalist can pay, as he can replace any unsatisfied worker by another yet more desperate. In this way a person's labor becomes a commodity to be purchased and sold, like oil or tin. The buying and selling of a person's labor resembles the way in which Africans were previously purchased and sold as slaves in the United States.

For this reason, a laborer working for wages is often called a wage slave, and the wage system, wage slavery. Though wage slaves often enjoy political rights, their daily existence can mirror that of slaves in centuries past, in terms of poverty, deprivation, and suffering. Working sixteen-hour days in the factory or coal mine for less than what one needs to live closely resembles working sixteen-hour days in the cotton fields. A wage slave may have no more freedom to improve his situation than a man or woman legally in bondage, as voluntarily leaving the employ of one's capitalist employer would lead to deprivation and starvation for both

the worker and his or her family. The worker may switch her job, and her master with it, but the conditions in the new place of employment will be roughly the same as before, dictated as they are by the market. The wage system ensures that wealth will be unevenly divided, as it channels the majority of the wealth produced by workers, who are many, into the hands of the capitalists, who are few.

In short, because the capitalist owns the means of production, he has the ability to exercise dominion over his workers. The capitalist is able to exploit labor and keep the profits labor has produced. The State, which exercises dominion in the political realm by violence, guarantees the ability of the capitalist to control the means of production in an authoritarian manner by passing laws and dispatching the army and police when necessary for their enforcement. The anarchist Alexander Berkman describes the workings of the system this way: "Capitalism robs and exploits the whole of the people; the laws legalize and uphold this capitalist robbery. The government uses one part of the people to aid and protect the capitalists in robbing the whole of the people. The entire thing is kept up by educating the people to believe that capitalism is right, that the law is just, and that the government must be obeyed."[6]

The Exercise of Dominion in Mormonism

The exercise of dominion over others in the political and economic realm is the kind of authority Mathew 20:25 condemns. In contrast to authority based on violence, followers of Jesus are to exercise authority on the basis of service, love and charity. Thus, "whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant." Further, Joseph Smith gives this instruction: "When we undertake . . . to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of

[6] Berkman, Alexander. What is Anarchism. AK Press, Edinburgh, 2004. Pg. 16.

privately owned, it allows the owner to "steal" the wealth of the workers and rob them of the fruits of their labor.[19] This concept does not extend to property individuals own to feed and shelter themselves and their families.

A society without private property, or in which all things are had in common, would be one in which the means of production were owned collectively, to be used for the common benefit of all. In such a society, the shoe factory previously owned by a capitalist would instead be owned and operated by the workers employed there. The factory would be controlled by the workers democratically through workers councils, giving them all a say in how the factory should be run and allowing them to keep the wealth produced by their own labor. Under such a system, economic power is distributed to the masses and controlled democratically, just as political power is theoretically distributed to the masses in a liberal democracy. Workers produce and distribute wealth on the basis of mutual cooperation, having no master. Notice that such a socialist system bears no resemblance to the centrally planned communist economy of the Soviet Union. Markets continue to function, but with the benefits of production, trade and exchange being enjoyed by the masses rather than a small elite who abrogate the right to take as much wealth as possible, regardless of the consequences to others.

The anarchist historian Rudolph Rocker summarized the system this way:

[Anarchists] are convinced that a Socialistic economic order cannot be created by the decrees and statutes of government, but only by the solidaric collaboration of workers with hand and brain in each special branch of production; that is through the taking over of the management of all plants by the producers themselves

[19] See Proudhon, Pierre Joseph, What is Property? : An Enquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government. With a biographical essay by J. A. Langlois. Translated from the French by Benj. R. Tucker. New York, H. Fertig, 1966.

rich and poor, all belonging to the same Church, and all expecting to go to the same heaven: one rolling in luxury and wealth, and another ground down in poverty and affliction. Was this the way that the Church was built up in the days of the Apostles? Did they not sell their houses and lands and lay the avails thereof at the Apostles feet? Did they not have their property in common? Did not the poor rejoice in that he was exalted, and the rich in that he was made low? Were they not all considered one in temporal riches? Yes: they consecrated all they had to the Lord."[18]

Having All Things Common: A World Without Property

What would it look like for Mormons to have all things in common? What would a Mormon society without private property look like? Before answering these questions it is first important to understand what is meant by private property. The anarchist Proudhon famously stated: "Property is theft." This is an easy statement to misunderstand, as one might initially assume it to mean that no one may own one's own house, or car, or tools, or any other personal item. It seems to imply that everything we use on a daily basis must not belong to us individually, but must be shared. One might also think this comment refers to the state of affairs formerly extant in the Soviet Union, in which the State owns everything and confiscates all the wealth produced by its wage slaves. However, Proudhon wrote this in the context of a capitalist society, where the means of production are privately owned. Consequently, if a shoe factory is the private property of one individual, he/she is then able to take the profits and wealth, which come from the shoes the workers produce in the factory. Proudhon therefore states that "property is theft" in the sense that if the means of production are

[18] Pratt, Orson. The Seer. Vol. II, No. 7; The Equality and Oneness of the Saints.

the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold the heavens withdraw themselves and the Spirit of the Lord is grieved. . . No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned (D&C 121: 37, 41)."[7]

Smith wrote these passages condemning compulsion by force at a time when he and several colleagues were suffering directly at the hands of the State, namely during a period of extended imprisonment in a jail at Liberty, Missouri and after many vain attempts to appeal to the government authorities for respite from his unjust incarceration. Perhaps Smith's significant suffering at the hands of the State came to mind when speaking of how he himself tried to lead. When asked how he was able to govern such a large community of believers, Smith responded, ""I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves,"[8] rather than boasting of the passage of just laws or of the establishment of an efficient police force.

The conception of authority based on love rather than violence turns the entire basis for society upside down. It calls into question the legitimacy of the State itself, including the validity of attempts

[7] I understand that these comments may be taken to apply to the authority of the church only. For example, that the spiritual authority exercised by those in leadership positions within the church may only exercise authority on the basis of persuasion, love, and so forth, but that political authorities may in fact use violence to enforce law and order. No doubt Romans 13:1-7 would immediately be quoted in support of this argument. I will later deal with the issues surrounding the passages in Romans, but for now it is sufficient to mention that Joseph Smith saw no difference between the spiritual and temporal. He saw himself not merely as the head of a religious organization, but of the emerging kingdom of God on earth, with all its religious, economic, and social aspects. One of Smith's revelations indicates that there is no distinction in the mind of God between what is temporal and what is spiritual. "Wherefore, verily I say unto you that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; neither any man, nor the children of men (D&C 29:34)."

[8] Smith, Joseph. Quoted in John Taylor, "The Organization of the Church," Millennial Star, Nov. 15, 1851, 339.

to overthrow the State and replace it with another, which will continue to exercise dominion through violence. Of what use is it if, after a revolution, the new State continues to exercise dominion based on violence and perpetuates the capitalist system as before? What good is accomplished if only the faces and names of the rulers change, while oppressive structures remain intact?

Is Authority Based on Violence Necessary?

At this point, some might respond that authority based on force and violence is necessary because "people are bad." A society without government, they say, could only be successful if all the people living in it were perfect. But the fact that we are not angels provides the best insight as to why any society would be more just, and more peaceful, without the existence of authority based on violence. As Joseph Smith noted while languishing in Liberty Jail, power and authority are quick to corrupt: "We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion (D&C 121:39)." The anarchist Bakunin similarly stated, "Take the most radical of revolutionaries and place him on the thrown of all the Russias, or give him dictatorial powers . . . and before the year is out he will be worse than the Czar himself."[9] Such insights make us wonder why it would be wise to place some men or women in positions of authority over others, and give them the power to exercise this authority by violent means, rather than establishing a society in which all are equal.

The story of the prophet Alma in the Book of Mormon also makes the point that raising some individuals into positions where they can dominate others is something of which we should

[9] Quoted in Guerin, Daniel. Anarchism, From Theory to Practice. Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1970, pg. 25-26.

how he had lead a strike of oil workers to prevent the national oil company from being privatized and purchased by US oil interests. As a result of these activities, the Colombian army hunted Mondragon for a month, and after finally capturing him, imprisoned and tortured him. Because he had a good relative in the army, he was eventually released, but has been placed on several death lists and has been living largely in hiding since, still suffering from the physical effects of his torture by electric shocks at the hands of a US trained interrogator. Paramilitary groups in Colombia unofficially affiliated with the government are also notorious for murdering union leaders on behalf of corporate bosses, in an effort to force workers to disavow collectively negotiated union contracts and sign new ones for lower wages.

Even if such divisions of wealth do not lead to violence, it is difficult to imagine that such a community, with Mormons on both sides of the picket line, could have the spirit of unity and affection for one another required to make them one. Orson Pratt, one of the original twelve Apostles of the Mormon Church described inequality of riches as, "a principle originated in hell," in part because "it tends to division, and to keep asunder the social feelings that should exist among the people of God."[16]

Most people tend to agree with the early colonist John Winthrop that "in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity, others mean and in subjection."[17] In contrast, Pratt argues that another form of social organization is possible:

"For many centuries past mankind have sought to accumulate riches, and to aggrandize themselves one above another; and this covetous spirit has prevailed even among those who have professed to be the followers of Jesus and his Apostles: hence, we find

[16] Pratt, Orson. The Seer. Vol. II, No. 7; The Equality and Oneness of the Saints.

[17] Elliott, Neil. Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2004, pg. 11.

for he that is idle shall not eat the bread nor wear the garments of the laborer (D&C 42:42)," indicating that not working and instead living in luxury off wealth created by the labor of others is wrong.[15]

Capitalism also proves divisive in that inequalities in wealth cause enmity between rich and poor. The Book of Mormon prophet, Nephi, warned: "But woe unto the rich. . . for because they are rich they despise the poor, and they persecute the meek, and their hearts are upon their treasures; wherefore their treasure is their god (2 Nephi 9:30)."

Such enmity often arises because capitalism pits the interests of the workers against their employers. The lower the capitalist can keep wages, the more profit he himself is able to make. Workers organize into unions and use strikes to try to pressure the capitalist employer to raise wages, while employers use other desperate workers, the police, or private mercenaries to break strikes and prevent and intimidate workers from organizing, practices which often lead to violence.

The life of Hector Mondragon, a Colombian economist and well-known human rights activist, provides a concrete example of such violence. In a visit I made to Colombia in 2004, he described to me

[15] This scripture is often interpreted to mean, that if poor people do not work, they do not deserve food, shelter, or any of the other basic amenities of life, which we hard working wealthy people deserve. Images are conjured up of the lazy poor who live in luxury by collecting exorbitant welfare checks. Though it is unfortunate that some people take advantage of welfare programs, the vast majority of the poor must work extremely hard. If they don't, they will simply starve. That this passage in the Doctrine and Covenants refers to the idle poor must be seen as incorrect, given King Benjamin's unequivocal pronouncement that assistance should be given according to need, and that though a person may responsible for his own miserable plight, this is no excuse to deny him or her the resources needed to live. There is simply no excuse to let others starve. Instead, this passage refers to the state of affairs that has long dominated human existence, namely the idle rich living off the backs of the laboring poor. Only with the emergence of the welfare state in the 20th century could the first interpretation make any sense at all, and even then there is such a small number of people on the planet abusing such welfare programs that such an interpretation proves virtually irrelevant.

be weary. Because he leads a large group of believers into the wilderness to escape persecution by King Noah, Alma becomes highly esteemed by his followers. As a result they ask him to become their King. Alma refuses, choosing to become their high priest instead. He explains: "Behold it is not expedient that we should have a king, for thus saith the lord, ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another, therefore I say to you it is not expedient that ye should have a king. Nevertheless, if it were possible that ye could always have just men to be your kings, it would be well for you to have a king. . . ye have been oppressed by King Noah, and have been in bondage to him and his priests. . . and now as ye have been delivered by the power of God out of these bonds . . . even so I desire that ye shall stand fast in this liberty, wherewith ye have been made free, and that ye trust no man to be a king over you (Mosiah 23:7-16)." Alma's choice to exercise only spiritual, rather than political authority, gives us insight into what kinds of authority are legitimate and which are not.

Placing some people in authority over others, making it possible for them to exploit and dominate others by violence, does not bring order, but rather disrupts the cooperation to which people are naturally inclined. We should change these institutions because they in fact make it difficult for people to be good. Such systems allow for the "wholesale" robbery and killing (ordering armies to war) undertaken by capitalists and politicians respectively, while at the same time encouraging "retail" robbery and murder amongst individuals from the poor and exploited sectors.[10] High levels of crime often plague the poorest neighborhoods, cities, and coun-

[10] In labeling the robbery and murder by the State "wholesale" and the robbery and murder by individuals "retail" I am here borrowing Noam Chomsky's phrase by which he distinguishes between State terrorism and the terrorist acts committed by sub-state actors, such as al-Qaeda. Both are surely reprehensible, but incidents state terrorism vastly exceed those of non-State actors, and therefore have much more devastating consequences for many more victims. See

tries, as many people find themselves in desperate situations and with little hope for the future. The Marxist author Bertolt Brecht expressed this point well in his play, Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan. In it, a prostitute laments:

I am far from sure that I am a good person. I would like to be, only, how should I then pay my rent? I will admit it then: I sell myself to live. . . I am ready to do anything, but who isn't? Naturally I would be happy to be able to keep the commandments of child's love and truthfulness; to not covet my neighbor's house would be a joy to me, and to be true to a man would be pleasant. I would like to have to extort my living from no one, and not rob the helpless. But how should I do all this? Even when I violate only some of the commandments, I can still barely survive.[11]

When petty crime proliferates due to the masses living in difficult economic circumstances, we are left to choose between one of two options; to spend vast amounts of money to build more prisons and employ more police to fill them, or change the mode of production to eliminate poverty, which is at the root of the problem. As Brecht stated more succinctly, "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral," meaning that if people's basic needs are met, they can then begin to think about being moral.[12]

Communism and the State

Now the communist might here respond that it is necessary for the workers to overthrow the present political order and establish a State controlled by the dictatorship of the proletariat. If this

Chomsky and Edward Herman, The Political Economy of Human Rights, Boston, South End Press, 1979.

[11] Brecht, Berthold. Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan; Die Stuecke von Bertolt Brecht in Einem Band. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1997, p. 598 (my translation).

[12] Brecht, Berthold. Die Drei Groschenoper; Die Stuecke von Bertolt Brecht in Einem Band. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1997, p. 191.

is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin (D&C 49:20)." The kind of unity God desires is illustrated in the Book of Mormon. Though the spiritual apex of the Book of Mormon occurs with the visit of the resurrected Christ to the Americas (3 Nephi 11), the economic and social apex comes shortly thereafter, with the establishment of a society among the Nephite people in which "they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free and partakers of the heavenly gift (4 Nephi 1:3)."

A further reason Mormons should therefore not seek to establish or perpetuate capitalistic modes of production is that capitalism always leads to inequality of wealth The author of 4 Nephi later laments that after two centuries of living in relative harmony, the Nephites, "did have their goods and their substance no more common among them. And they began to be divided into classes (4 Nephi 1: 25, 26)." The ability of the capitalist to exploit the labor of others for his own profit is calculated to channel the wealth produced by the masses into the hands of those who own the means of production, which is always a small minority. Vigorously participating in a capitalist economy does not alleviate the problem of exploitation and divisions of wealth, as these are the exact conditions such a mode of production is meant to entrench. Everyone knows the maxim, "let your money work for you," but what we rarely realize is that invested capital does not produce wealth by itself, but rather gives the investor the ability to exploit the labor of others for profit. This is of course the way to become rich in a capitalist society. It is the American dream to build up enough capital so that you can quit working and live comfortably on the wealth that others produce and that your investment of capital allows you to collect. Consequently, you may lift yourself out of poverty and exploitation through capitalism, but only on the basis of the fact that others remain in the position from which you yourself want to escape. The Lord consequently exhorts, "thou shalt not be idle;

become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure (Moroni 7: 47,48).

If we have charity for others, we will seek to use the excess resources we have to assist those who do not have enough to live, as well as refrain from stealing the wealth produced by the labor of others.

The central importance of helping the poor is illustrated in Benjamin's words when he equates helping others materially to serving God. "And behold I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom, that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God (Mosiah 2:17)." This message mirrors that of Mathew 25, where Jesus indicates that whatever we do to the poor and downtrodden (the least of our brethren) we also do to him. At the last judgment, one's life will largely be judged according to whether we have fed, clothed and otherwise cared for the poor.

The Importance of Economic Unity

Going beyond merely stating the importance of helping the poor, Mormon scripture contains rather explicit guidelines regarding the desired economic and social organization of the Mormon community. The Doctrine and Covenants declares that foundation of any Mormon community should be unity. The Lord commanded the Mormons to, "be one, and if ye are not one, ye are not mine (D&C 38:27)." This unity is not confined to being one of heart or one in spirit only, but extends to being one economically as well. The Lord instructs further, "in your temporal things you shall be equal, and this not grudgingly, otherwise the abundance of the manifestations of the Spirit shall be withheld . . . if ye are not equal in earthly things ye cannot be equal in obtaining heavenly things (D&C 70:14, 78:6)." Inequality of wealth, in fact, is offensive to the Lord: "But it

could be done, capitalism would be abolished and socialism instituted. Communists propose to seize the means of production now privately owned, and bring them under control of the State. In this way all the wealth produced by industry would benefit the workers and be distributed equally among them. A new of age of justice and equality would supposedly dawn.

Friedrich Engels, co-author with Karl Marx of the Communist Manifesto explained the distinction between the communist and anarchist conceptions of revolution:

The anarchists put the whole thing upside down. They declare that the proletarian revolution must begin by doing away with the political organization of the state. . . But to destroy it at such a moment would be to destroy the only organism by means of which the victorious proletariat can assert its newly conquered power, hold down it's capitalist adversaries, and carry out that economic revolution of society without which the whole victory must end in a new defeat and in a mass slaughter of the workers similar to those after the Paris commune.[13]

Though communist rhetoric is perhaps appealing in theory, what communists often set out to do in practice is a different matter. The "revolutionary" State is not controlled by the masses of workers, as the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" would suggest, but rather by the "vanguard of the workers," namely the Communist Party central committee. Power is centralized so that this small autocracy controls the means of production. The workers then become wage slaves to one enormous State-owned corporation, as the party managers and bureaucrats enjoy the vast wealth and privileges once enjoyed by capitalists. The workers are exploited as before, while their previously meager freedoms are restricted even further. They are forced to work in factories and communal farms, while the wealth they produce is expropriated

[13] Cited in Chomsky, Noam. For Reasons of State. The New Press, New York, 2003, p. 373.

and sent to the central government. The police and intelligence agencies function as before, though now describing their work with euphemisms such as monitoring "counterrevolutionary" activity and eliminating "enemies of the people." Bakunin anticipated the evils of what he called "red bureaucracy," decades before they were realized in practice when the Bolsheviks took hold of the 1917 revolution in Russia. He explained that:

I detest communism because it is the negation of liberty and I cannot conceive anything human without liberty. I am not a communist because communism concentrates all the powers of society and absorbs them into the State, because it leads inevitably to the centralization of property in the hands of the State, while I want to see the State abolished. I want the complete elimination of the authoritarian principle of State tutelage which has always subjected, oppressed, exploited, and depraved men while claiming to moralize and civilize them. I want society, and collective or social property to be organized from the bottom up through free association and not from the top down by authority of any kind.[14]

In short, it seems that the existence of the State, whether capitalist or communist, is something that Mormon scripture encourages us to move beyond.

Establishing a Mormon Society

Though Mormons have no business engaging in rule by violence, or participating in political institutions of the State, Mormons are asked to actively work to create a better society. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord asks Mormons to "be anxiously engaged in good cause" to "bring to pass much righteousness (D&C 58:27)." Of all the good causes in which Mormons can engage, assisting the poor is perhaps the most important and is a major theme in Mormon scripture. In one of the most significant sermons in the

[14] As quoted in Guerin, Anarchism, From Theory to Practice, pg. 22.

Book of Mormon, King Benjamin preaches about the atonement of Jesus Christ and what is necessary to receive forgiveness for sin. He describes us all as "beggars" who depend on God for all that we have, including the breath that sustains our life (Mosiah 4:19, 2:21). He describes the hypocrisy of begging Christ for forgiveness for sin, while at the same time refusing to give to the beggar who asks us for food, money or other assistance. To walk blameless before God, Benjamin explains, "I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants." If we seek to please God, we "will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to [us] in vain, and turn him out to perish (Mosiah 4:14 -29)." Benjamin is harshly critical of those who refuse to assist others, and who justify this by saying, "the man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just (Mosiah 4:17)." It is interesting to note here that assistance for the poor is to be given according to need, not according to merit. The question of whether someone deserves help is rendered irrelevant. Keeping or using resources that others need to simply survive is contrary to the most fundamental teachings of Mormonism, namely having love and charity for God's children, who in fact are our brothers and sisters. In one of the final chapters of the Book of Mormon, the prophet Moroni writes:

Wherefore my beloved brethren, if ye have not charity, ye are nothing, for charity never faileth. Wherefore, cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all, for all things must fail – but charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him. Wherefore my beloved brethren, pray unto the father with all energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may