

## Response to Shannon Brincat

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For a review essay about a book to be at least partially useful, it needs to give a reader a synopsis of what the book actually says, before it proceeds to evaluating it. Instead, Shannon Brincat seems to approach the review as a chance to expound upon his own vision of the world, rather than as an invitation to engage with the book in question. Thus no one who has not read my book would actually know what it really says by simply reading Brincat's review, which misses most of the book. Instead he focuses on two themes, civil society and the market, but again in a way that seems to have missed or totally misrepresents what my book actually says about these themes. I will first say a few words about the question of the market, which is more straightforward. Next I will address the more complex question of civil society, which involves conceptual, historical and psychological dimensions that are fully distorted in Brincat's essay.

The most glaring error in Brincat's essay is the claim that I am a supporter of market ideology and specifically so-called "anarcho-capitalism," which is a term that appears nowhere in my book. The reason that I do not use "anarcho-capitalism" is because the term is inaccurate and confusing, if not an oxymoron given the attitude of most anarchists, historically and today, toward capitalism. So-called "anarcho-capitalism" is described more accurately (and in a more easily understandable way) by the terms that most people use today, namely "libertarianism"—sometimes also "market fundamentalism" is used. But I do not defend those terms either, in fact, quite the opposite. What I do is call attention to a point that Fernand Braudel had made long ago, a point that got forgotten immediately because apparently we did not have the ideological ear by which to hear it: the free market is *not* capitalism. The fact that the two are confused together, and

purposefully so, in current libertarian thought should not mean that we ought to accept that confusion and act according to it. Braudel was in fact surveying a long historical process—three centuries—in which capitalism asserted itself *over* the market. But the two are not the same.

I thought that it would be good if we remembered that distinction, since it does have clear ramifications in terms of how we understand the history of both markets and voluntary associational life. And further, this knowledge may have consequences in terms of how we conceive of the commons or other types of markets today. It is true that my book does not describe the possible structure of such markets, a task which in my opinion deserves a book by itself. In any case, it is not very interesting to criticize a book for not doing what it never claimed to do anyway. More troubling is to jump to conclusions that are clearly the opposite of what I say, namely that I defend “anarcho-capitalism” or market-driven conceptions of human emancipation. My whole book explicitly attempts to describe human emancipation in ways that are *not* beholden to market logic, *nor* to what I consider to be anti-human and limiting logic of materialist analysis.

But first, let me correct one glaring error. I definitely do not, contrary to Brincat’s assertion, consider Ayn Rand and Robert Nozick as anarchists. (Strangely, Alex Pritchard made that exact claim in a different review, showing perhaps how dogmatic thought, useful as a handy guide to easy judgment, predisposes one to misread that which otherwise should be obvious.) I thought that my point was clear that Rand and Nozick represented a *departure* from libertarian anarchism and into something else that came to be known simply as “libertarianism.” As such, they are definitely *not* part of the anarchist tradition—although “libertarian anarchism” proper is part of that tradition, in my view. It seems that Brincat (like Pritchard) became alarmed with my contention (p. 23) that some libertarian ideas may be considered useful to anarchist thought *if* they involved conceptions of human emancipation that do not see it as merely a function of market fundamentalism. Parts of Hayek’s work do indeed fall into that category (as do Stirner and Nietzsche).

The main structure of my argument for anarchy rests on a conception of a civic humanity, which I argue is a long human experience already, and as such verifies the proposition that anarchy appeals in some way because some dimensions of it are *already familiar* to us. Anarchy thus is not simply a theoretical speculation about some hypothetical future, nor does it interest

many people if it could be posited purely in abstract, unfelt forms. Thus anarchy has to be latent in some dimension of voluntary human associational life which is already part of our global heritage. “Civil society” is one of the names we give to the organized forms of this experience. The fact that civil society may involve inequalities and “dark forces” is also part of the story. At any given point, civil society can at best reflect who we happen to be. Thus, civil society is certainly not utopia, nor is it anarchy, nor, to be sure, is it perfect. But it is what we have right now as a large experience of organizing society outside the state. That makes the concept (and the human experience that comes with it) particularly useful for anarchist possibilities and anarchist learning. And that is true even if participants in civil society do not call themselves “anarchists.” *To the extent* that civil society operates as the *alternative* to the state (rather than as a means to lobby the state), civil society could be said to offer a useful apprenticeship on how one may construct or develop further the potentials of voluntary associational life. In principle, when one has placed oneself as the alternative to the state in some area, one is already a step closer to anarchy.

Thus to simply say that civil society is not anarchist does not at all explain why I address it at length in the book as a global (and not simply European or Western) historical experience. I never claimed that civil society was anarchy. But what I did say (which Brincat completely ignores) is that within voluntary associational orders there exist “spaces of anarchy,” here and now and always, which are the formations at which we can identify the emergence of self-consciously anarchist practice. This standpoint should bring up an entire range of related discussions to which I have devoted several chapters of the book: on human psychology and “rationality,” the different meanings of freedom, the nature of trust, and so on.

None of those chapters show up in this reduction of an argument, although those discussions should have offered some answers to Brincat’s complaint that I do not pay much attention to questions of domination, inequality, authority, and so on, in my supposed celebration of civil society. However, for me these are serious issues, so serious, in fact, that they cannot be discussed in a simple way. “Authority,” for example, may be a problem, but for whom? Is it an abstract problem that could be described in terms of objective measures, or is it a problem for those who *perceive* it as a problem? The answer is crucial if we are to understand anarchy as a science of life, as I maintain, meaning that our concepts

have to resonate with how ordinary notions of authority and freedom from it circulate in our larger reality.

In that sense, “authority” may not be a problem when one who is object to it actually *demands* it, or even consents to it. It is more clearly a problem, however, when it appears to be “out of place,” so to speak. We may here be reminded of Mary Douglas’s definition of “dirt” as not an absolute condition, but as matter in the wrong place. Thus in histories of civic humanity, we see clearly that voluntary associational life does give rise to what I have called “customary authority,” but in a way that is always distinguished from tyrannical or other types of authority that did not arise out of communal demands or that possessed an attribute of non-negotiability (such as the state). The principle here may be generalized as follows: when a student or a child seeks, voluntarily, the authority or guidance of the teacher or parent, should we speak of “domination” here in the same way that we speak of it when we discuss large states and large social or political institutions? This would be infantile leftism, since it is quite obvious that large numbers of people, who may indeed be very interested in the idea of “freedom” in general, also look for guidance and authority *as needed* in practical life. There is therefore always customary authority in civil society, indeed, even in a perfect anarchy. But customary authority is meant for a particular and concrete task, is not meant to be general or permanent, and which we consent to or seek out as free beings.

In this light, I do not think it is very useful to simply say that anarchists should expose “all forms of coercion, domination, and exploitation,” with the assumption being that anarchists know *a priori* what these forms look like. Before exposing anything that is social in nature, you do need to talk to other people. In this case, first and foremost you would need to ask the people affected whether they themselves feel “coerced, dominated, exploited” (and if so, how). There is nothing more patronizing than an old leftist position that claims that ordinary people’s interpretation of their reality could be dismissed as mere “false consciousness” if it does not adhere to a theoretical script that we already have. How people feel about their reality is always more practically important than how we theoretically presume that they *should* feel about it. That is because if their interpretation differs from what we assumed to be, then that difference should itself serve as an opportunity for us to know something more about reality as well as about how we ought to conceive of it. After all, someone’s consciousness of their reality is also *part* of that reality. It is not

simply a reflection of it. (And it is in that sense that I endorse the proposition that “the idea [*not* ‘ideal’, as Brincat misquotes it] is the real”).

It is true that civil society habituates power imbalances, and one can safely say that spaces of anarchy are not free from such imbalances either. But if we acknowledge customary authority as consistent with anarchy, and if we have learned anything from Foucault, the question would not be how to abolish “power” in general. The question is rather one of how to assure that power remains rationally and effectively *contestable*. From this standpoint, we can see that even if both state and civil society involve power imbalances, it is easier to contest the power of someone in civil society than that of the state. After all, the state is meant to be permanent, does not cease to impose its laws when you object to them, does not allow an exit from its overall authority over society, and possesses significant coercive muscle to insure all of the above. This could scarcely be compared to civil society, which, while it may house inequalities of various sorts, is not a state and does not have the properties of the state: its institutions do not claim to represent all of society; they may be exited from; they may split; and new organizations may emerge within it.

Obviously, civil society is not perfect, since at most it stands in for what we happen to be at any given moment. And one could always denounce what we may be as social beings, as society, as partners to institutions, since our partial knowledge of others and our myopias insure the occurrence of error, even in a perfect anarchy. The point is not to banish error; it is to construct, one step at a time, common social and political theater in which error occurs on a human rather than gargantuan scale; is more easily rectifiable and negotiable; and serves as opportunity from which to learn—and not necessarily in standard ways. Indeterminacy of outcome is indeed a logical consequence of such a theater, since indeterminacy can only be banished by authoritarian rule. But the consequences of this indeterminacy should not trouble us much, since as I say in the book (p. 138), the danger of error is a danger of scale: an individual error always destroys less of the world than a governmental error. So the question is not how to banish error, but how to insure that, (1) that its consequences remain relatively small, and (2) that we are able to rectify it as directly as possible.

The theater in which such learning may happen most effectively is what we call civil society, in which a socially common interest in autonomy cohabits a communicative space with a less

common but verdant enough (or so should it appear to be) anarchist science and philosophy of life. Out of these experiences, the civic features of humanity come to the fore. But such a society cannot be perfect, to the extent that we ourselves, the makers of such a society, are not perfect.

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