The charge has often been made that the anarchist economic model is ill-suited for complex societies. The multi-faceted nature of advanced industrial economies; their scope of operation and breadth of distribution; the extensive refinement in their division of labor - all these and more are held up as examples of the labyrinth of problems that nothing as "simplistic" as anarchism could ever hope to address. Anarchism, according to many modern critics, could only hope to work in limited, small-scale economies. And then, only possibly.

The primitivist sect of the American anarchist movement actually seems to agree with this, and advocates destroying what they call the "industrial mega-machine," thereby returning to small, localized, autonomous villages. This is completely at odds with what the anarchist movement fights for.

Sam Dolgoff stated that, far from being ill suited for anarchism, "complex societies necessitate" it. In The Relevance of Anarchism to Modern Society, he delved right into the subject by reaffirming that "the classical anarchists ... always rejected the kind of `simplicity' which camouflages regimentation in favor of the natural complexity which reflects the many faceted richness and diversity of social and individual life."

Gabriel Jackson, the award-winning historian and author of The Spanish Revolution and the Civil War, posits that the anarchists ruined Spain in 1936, allowing fascism to triumph in that country in the late 1930s. According to him, this was because the anarchist model could not survive in a complex economy:

[T]he revolutionary tide began to ebb in Catalonia [after] accumulating food and supply problems, and the experience of administering villages, frontier posts, and public utilities, had rapidly shown the anarchists the unsuspected complexity of modern society.

Complexity comes to the fore and foils the anarchists, in Jackson's view, allowing Franco to sweep into power.

But Noam Chomsky, in his essay "Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship" (one of his most anarchist writings), writes, "In fact, `the revolutionary tide began to ebb in Catalonia' under the middle-class attack led by the Communist party, not because of a recognition of the `complexity of modern society.'" Furthermore, "Whereas Jackson attributes the ebbing of the revolutionary tide to the discovery of the unsuspected complexity of modern society, Orwell's firsthand observations [in Homage to Catalonia], like those of Borkenau, suggest a far simpler explanation [namely, Communist suppression]." Chomsky continues, "The complexities of modern society that baffled and confounded the unsuspecting anarchist workers of Barcelona" seem not to exist; in fact, "[t]he available records do not indicate that the problems of administering villages or public utilities were either `unsuspected' or too complex for the Catalonian workers - a remarkable and unsuspected development."

Indeed, Augustin Souchy, who, like Orwell, was an eyewitness to the collectivization process, wrote that "The collectivisation of the textile industry shatters once and for all the legend that the workers are incapable of administrating a great and complex corporation." This observation was recorded in The Anarchist Collectives, a collection edited by Sam Dolgoff. Note that Souchy
refers to collectivization in the textile industry, which was an advanced manufacturing industry, and not a rural or small-scale operation. This answers the claim that anarchist administration can be successful only in small-scale industry or non-industrial operations.

In The Relevance of Anarchism to Modern Society, Dolgoff elaborates the point further by citing Kropoktin's observation of English and Scottish workers: [P]roduction and exchange represented an undertaking so complicated that no government (without establishing a cumbersome, inefficient, bureaucratic dictatorship) would be able to organize production if the workers themselves, through their unions, did not do it in each branch of industry; for, in all production there arises daily thousands of difficulties that ... no government can hope to foresee. ... Only the efforts of thousands of intelligences working on problems can cooperate in the development of the new social system and find solutions for the thousands of local needs.

Federalism, the coordination of voluntary bodies of producers over vast regional or even global spaces, was a principal aim of struggle for the Spanish workers as well as other anarchist activists in other countries.

A counter-question, however, is this: Is the current free market system suitable for the complexities of modern society?

In fact, the market system has itself created much of the "complexity" of modern society. For example, at least 30 different types of SUVs currently exist, most with hundreds of parts that are particular to each one, made by differing plants, each requiring their own skilled production and repair. This adds a great deal to the complexity of life. Do the benefits of this kind of "complexity" outweigh the harm that it causes?

Exploitation is indeed a complex affair, as is the subjugation of humans generally. Maintaining class rule and ensuring the viability of an economic system that depends upon ever-greater profits has resulted in an almost schizophrenic complexity, to be sure. Anarchists don't wish to preserve this kind of "complexity" at all, nor do they seek to find a system that is "suitable" to it. This is the kind of complexity that results from the exploitation of man by man.

By contrast, the complexities of human need - health care, housing, food, education, etc. - are not adequately addressed by the market system. In this sense, the state-subsidized market system of our era is extremely ill-suited to the complexity of not just modern society, but of human beings.

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