

An Anarchist FAQ: Freedom Interview

Anarcho

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Freedom: What is the FAQ?

It is a long, but comprehensive, webpage of “Frequently Asked Questions” about anarchism on the internet (www.anarchistfaq.org) and soon to be a book by AK Press. It covers most of the obvious questions you would expect, plus some more obscure ones. It attempts to present anarchism as a serious political theory and movement to those interested in finding out about it as well as being a resource for anarchists.

How many people have contributed to the FAQ and is there a driving collective behind it?

Lots of people have contributed to it, most of them probably unknowingly as cut and paste has been applied to good arguments and points made by anarchists all the time. There is a collective, although numbers fluctuate as people take breaks and volunteer. I have been there from the start and am the main contributor and editor as well as doing the revisions for publication.

How was much of the research and writing done?

Initially, we had a list of what we thought an anarchist FAQ should contain. People volunteered to do different sections and did the necessary research and writing. Once the initial framework was there, additions have been made as they were deemed required. Usually when a new anarchist book comes out and it contains a good quote, argument or fact but also when we notice new arguments against anarchism or it looks like comrades need help with certain subjects. For specific areas (for example, economics and history) we use the net and libraries to find qualified sources to bolster our arguments. But as far as anarchism goes, we consider anarchists to be the relevant experts and base ourselves on the movement and what its members say and do.

What sort of people or what backgrounds have been involved?

Just your typical anarchists, working class people who believe strongly in anarchism and seek to convince others of our ideas. We are not academics – we have real jobs! The collective has seen many nationalities and we have got contributions from anarchists across the globe.

How long is it due to be (one rumour has been upwards of two volumes of 1,000 pages each!) and how comprehensive do you think it is?

Well, I'll give some figures. Section A ("What is Anarchism?") is slightly over 104,000 words. In total, excluding appendices, it is over 890,000 words. And most of that has not been revised! The length indicates its comprehensiveness, I would say. It is long because we want to make it a valuable resource for the anarchist movement and to convince sympathetic people that our ideas are worth considering. Also, we have to spend a lot of time refuting frequently asserted nonsense about anarchism. It always takes up more space to refute a falsehood than to make it. If Leninists could bother to read a book about anarchism before spouting off about it, the FAQ would be a lot shorter...

What was the impetus to begin the project and are there any spin-off ideas etc that are being considered?

It all dates back to the early 1990s when many anarchists first became aware of the internet. We logged on to anarchist newsgroups and webpages and came across self-proclaimed capitalist "anarchists" (unsurprisingly, Americans). After numerous arguments with these people on how "anarcho"-capitalism is an obvious oxymoron, a group of us decided that it would make more sense to produce a FAQ which indicated why anarchism is, by definition, anti-capitalist (socialist) and just refer to that.

At the suggestion of Mike Huben (maintainer of the "Critiques of [right-wing] Libertarianism" webpage), we turned it into an Anarchist FAQ. Since then, the FAQ has expanded and developed. While it still shows its genesis somewhat, it has become much, much more (if it were to be started anew "anarcho"-capitalism would be totally consigned to an appendix).

As for spin-offs, well the AK book will only include the appendix on "The Symbols of Anarchy". The appendices on Marxism and the Russian Revolution could make good pamphlets and books (the account of the Kronstadt rebellion is definitive, I would say).

How successful has the website been and was its growth a prod to produce the book?

The webpage is pretty successful. Most anarchist webpages link to it. It is mirrored in numerous places (including leading anarchist sites like www.infoshop.org, www.anarchism.ws and www.libcom.org). It has been translated. There has been a steady flow of praise. As for producing the book, its success alerted AK Press that it would be a good idea to print it. But when I was working on it initially, I thought that it would make a good book as it was summarising 19th and 20th century anarchism and so laying a foundation for building the movement for the next century. However, I'm glad that it has been a decade before publishing it as it has improved considerably from the early versions. While most of it has stood the test of time (and just been expanded), a few sections needed considerable reworking.

The FAQ has been controversially cited in places such as Wikipedia (along with elements of the FAQ itself) as a potential ‘official’ source of information on the subject of anarchism. Would you say this is a vindication of the book’s purpose, an accurate portrayal?

Totally. I’m lost count of the nonsense I’ve read about anarchism in academic and Marxist accounts. Basic errors, arguments that have been answered by anarchist thinkers, including “anarcho”-capitalism as a form of anarchism, and so on. The list is endless. As for Wikipedia, it is not that controversial. Anarchists come along and reference it, “anarcho”-capitalists say that it is “self-published” and is not a valid source. Which is, of course, simply an excuse to bar it and a new one will surely be discovered once it is published.

Why do you think the FAQ is being viewed in this way?

The reason why anarchists want to cite it is because it does reflect what most anarchists think anarchism is. And that is the same reason why the “anarcho”-capitalists there seek to exclude it as a valid reference! Given that the FAQ is the most obvious barrier to their attempts to redefine anarchism and rewrite our history, I can understand why they do so – they need to exclude anarchists from defining anarchism otherwise their pretensions would be exposed!

What have been your favourite parts of putting the book together? What have been the best bits of feedback on the website?

My favourite part is seeing how much of it has stood the test of time (the worse is seeing how badly put some of it is!). So I’ve enjoyed taking the time to make it better, to clarify issues and to apply what I’ve learned over the last decade. As for feedback, the best ones are from people writing to say that we presented what they think anarchism is. That makes it worthwhile. And people pointing out typos!

How long has it been in the making?

It was officially released on the 19th of July, 1996, so over ten years. It has taken so long simply because it is produced by people working on it in their spare time. Taking myself, I have to juggle family life, work and activism as well as revising the FAQ ready for publication. Plus, new books come out all the time and anarchists say and get up to new things, and so update it to reflect new developments.

Another issue is that I got sidetracked somewhat on the section on Marxism. I have wanted to do a comprehensive anarchist critique of Marxism since I became an anarchist way back in the 1980s. Much of that work, on the Russian Revolution, is in an appendix now and, while important, it did delay getting the main sections finished!

Do you have backers and if so, who?

No backers. It is a labour of love. As I am a wage slave, I think it helps make the FAQ more grounded in reality than some academic produced works on anarchism. But, if any wealthy backers do wish to come forward I would not object...

Why do you think this is a good time to be bringing the FAQ out on paper?

Thanks to the “anti-capitalist” protests a few years back, interest in anarchism has increased. Luckily the FAQ was already there. This meant that during the Genoa protests, when the BBC decided to inform its readers what anarchists wanted they linked to the FAQ. That was great, knowing that people would be getting an accurate account of anarchism. But the need to get it in a more accessible format was obvious (reading things online is not ideal and, of course, excludes those without an internet connection). Hopefully, people will think our effort is worth it.

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