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Anarchism as a Theory of Organization

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You may think in describing anarchism as a theory of organisation I am propounding a deliberate paradox: "anarchy" you may consider to be, by definition, the *opposite* of organisation. In fact, however, "anarchy" means the absence of government, the absence of *authority*. Can there be social organisation without authority, without government? The anarchists claim that there can be, and they also claim that it is desirable that there should be. They claim that, at the basis of our social problems is the principle of government. It is, after all, governments which prepare for war and wage war, even though you are obliged to fight in them and pay for them; the bombs you are worried about are not the bombs which cartoonists attribute to the anarchists, but the bombs which governments have perfected, at your expense. It is, after all, governments which make and enforce the laws which enable the 'haves' to retain control over social assets rather than share them with the 'have-nots'. It is, after all, the principle of authority which ensures that people will work for someone else for the greater part of their lives,

not because they enjoy it or have any control over their work, but because they see it as their only means of livelihood.

I said that it is governments which make wars and prepare for wars, but obviously it is not governments alone — the power of a government, even the most absolute dictatorship, depends on the tacit assent of the governed. Why do people consent to be governed? It isn't only fear: what have millions of people to fear from a small group of politicians? It is because they subscribe to the same values as their governors. Rulers and ruled alike believe in the principle of authority, of hierarchy, of power. These are the characteristics of the *political principle*. The anarchists, who have always distinguished between the state and society, adhere to the *social principle*, which can be seen where-ever men link themselves in an association based on a common need or a common interest. "The State" said the German anarchist Gustav Landauer, "is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently."

Anyone can see that there are at least two kinds of organisation. There is the kind which is forced on you, the kind which is run from above, and there is the kind which is run from below, which can't *force* you to do anything, and which you are free to join or free to leave alone. We could say that the anarchists are people who want to transform all kinds of human organisation into the kind of purely voluntary association where people can pull out and start one of their own if they don't like it. I once, in reviewing that frivolous but useful little book *Parkinson's Law*, attempted to enunciate four principles behind an anarchist theory of organisation: that they should be (1) voluntary, (2) functional, (3) temporary, and (4) small.

They should be voluntary for obvious reasons. There is no point in our advocating individual freedom and responsibility

new forms of organisation should be. We have now to make the opportunities for putting them into practice.

if we are going to advocate organisations for which membership is mandatory.

They should be functional and temporary precisely because permanence is one of those factors which harden the arteries of an organisation, giving it a vested interest in its own survival, in serving the interests of office-holders rather than its function.

They should be small precisely because in small face-to-face groups, the bureaucratising and hierarchical tendencies inherent in organisations have least opportunity to develop. But it is from this final point that our difficulties arise. If we take it for granted that a small group can function anarchically, we are still faced with the problem of all those social functions for which organisation is necessary, but which require it on a much bigger scale. "Well," we might reply, as some anarchists have, "if big organisations are necessary, count us out. We will get by as well as we can without them." We can say this all right, but if we are propagating anarchism as a social philosophy we must take into account, and not evade, social facts. Better to say "Let us find ways in which the large-scale functions can be broken down into functions capable of being organised by small functional groups and then link these groups in a federal manner." The classical anarchist thinkers, envisaging the future organisation of society, thought in terms of two kinds of social institution: as the territorial unit, the commune, a French word which you might consider as the equivalent of the word 'parish' or the Russian word 'soviet' in its original meaning, but which also has overtones of the ancient village institutions for cultivating the land in common; and the syndicate, another French word from trade union terminology, the syndicate or workers' council as the unit of industrial organisation. Both were envisaged as small local units which would federate with each other for the larger affairs of life, while retaining their own autonomy, the one federating territorially and the other industrially.

The nearest thing in ordinary political experience, to the federative principle propounded by Proudhon and Kropotkin would be the Swiss, rather than the American, federal system. And without wishing to sing a song of praise for the Swiss political system, we can see that the 22 independent cantons of Switzerland are a successful federation. It is a federation of like units, of small cells, and the cantonal boundaries cut across linguistic and ethnic boundaries so that, unlike the many unsuccessful federations, the confederation is not dominated by one or a few powerful units. For the problem of federation, as Leopold Kohr puts it in *The Breakdown of Nations*, is one of division, not of union. Herbert Luethy writes of his country's political system:

> Every Sunday, the inhabitants of scores of communes go to the polling booths to elect their civil servants, ratify such and such an item of expenditure, or decide whether a road or a school should be built; after settling the business of the commune, they deal with cantonal elections and voting on cantonal issues; lastly… come the decisions on federal issues. In some cantons, the sovereign people still meet in Rousseau-like fashion to discuss questions of common interest. It may be thought that this ancient form of assembly is no more than a pious tradition with a certain value as a tourist attraction. If so, it is worth looking at the results of local democracy.
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> The simplest example is the Swiss railway system, which is the densest network in the world. At great cost and with great trouble, it has been made to serve the needs of the smallest localities and most remote valleys, not as a paying proposition but because such was the will of the people. It is the outcome of fierce political struggles. In the 19th cen-

between the various undertakings, with no central authority. You can post a letter to anywhere in the world, but there is no world postal authority, — representatives of different postal authorities simply have a congress every five years or so.

There are trends, observable in these occasional experiments in industrial organisation, in new approaches to problems of delinquency and addiction, in education and community organisation, and in the "de-institutionalisation" of hospitals, asylums, childrens' homes and so on, which have much in common with each other, and which run counter to the generally accepted ideas about organisation, authority and government. Cybernetic theory with its emphasis on self-organising systems, and speculation about the ultimate social effects of automation, leads in a similar revolutionary direction. George and Louise Crowley, for example, in their comments on the report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Triple Revolution, (*Monthly Review*, Nov. 1964) remark that, "We find it no less reasonable to postulate a functioning society without authority than to postulate an orderly universe without a god. Therefore the word *anarchy* is not for us freighted with connotations of disorder, chaos, or confusion. For humane men, living in non-competitive conditions of freedom from toil and of universal affluence, anarchy is simply the appropriate state of society." In Britain, Professor Richard Titmuss remarks that social ideas may well be as important in the next half-century as technical innovation. I believe that the social ideas of anarchism: autonomous groups, spontaneous order, workers' control, the federative principle, add up to a coherent theory of social organisation which is a valid and realistic alternative to the authoritarian, hierarchical and institutional social philosophy which we see in application all around us. Man will be compelled, Kropotkin declared, "to find new forms of organisation for the social functions which the State fulfils through the bureaucracy" and he insisted that "as long as this is not done nothing will be done." I think we have discovered what these

> The composite work organisation may be described as one in which the group takes over complete responsibility for the total cycle of operations involved in mining the coal-face. No member of the group has a fixed workrole. Instead, the men deploy themselves, depending on the requirements of the on-going group task. Within the limits of technological and safety requirements they are free to evolve their own way of organising and carrying out their task. They are not subject to any external authority in this respect, nor is there within the group itself any member who takes over a formal directive leadership function. Whereas in conventional long-wall working the coal-getting task is split into four to eight separate work roles, carried out by different teams, each paid at a different rate, in the composite group members are no longer paid directly for any of the tasks carried out. The all-in wage agreement is, instead, based on the negotiated price per ton of coal produced by the team. The income obtained is divided equally among team members.

The works I have been quoting were written for specialists in productivity and industrial organisation, but their lessons are clear for people who are interested in the idea of workers' control. Faced with the objection that even though it can be shown that autonomous groups can organise themselves on a large scale and for complex tasks, it has not been shown that they can successfully co-ordinate, we resort once again to the federative principle. There is nothing outlandish about the idea that large numbers of autonomous industrial units can federate and co-ordinate their activities. If you travel across Europe you go over the lines of a dozen railway systems — capitalist and communist — co-ordinated by freely arrived at agreement

> tury, the "democratic railway movement" brought the small Swiss communities into conflict with the big towns, which had plans for centralisation…
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> And if we compare the Swiss system with the French which, with admirable geometrical regularity, is entirely centred on Paris so that the prosperity or the decline, the life or death of whole regions has depended on the quality of the link with the capital, we see the difference between a centralised state and a federal alliance. The railway map is the easiest to read at a glance, but let us now superimpose on it another showing economic activity and the movement of population. The distribution of industrial activity all over Switzerland, even in the outlying areas, accounts for the strength and stability of the social structure of the country and prevented those horrible 19th century concentrations of industry, with their slums and rootless proletariat.

I quote all this, as I said, not to praise Swiss democracy, but to indicate that the federal principle which is at the heart of anarchist social theory, is worth much more attention than it is given in the textbooks on political science. Even in the context of ordinary political institutions its adoption has a far-reaching effect. Another anarchist theory of organisation is what we might call the theory of spontaneous order: that given a common need, a collection of people will, by trial and error, by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of chaos — this order being more durable and more closely related to their needs than any kind of externally imposed order.

Kropotkin derived this theory from the observations of the history of human society and of social biology which led to his book *Mutual Aid*, and it has been observed in most revolutionary situations, in the *ad hoc* organisations which spring

up after natural catastrophes, or in any activity where there is no existing organisational form or hierarchical authority. This concept was given the name *Social Control* in the book of that title by Edward Allsworth Ross, who cited instances of "frontier" societies where, through unorganised or informal measures, order is effectively maintained without benefit of constituted authority: "Sympathy, sociability, the sense of justice and resentment are competent, under favourable circumstances, to work out by themselves a true, natural order, that is to say, an order without design or art."

An interesting example of the working-out of this theory was the Pioneer Health Centre at Peckham, London, started in the decade before the war by a group of physicians and biologists who wanted to study the nature of health and healthy behaviour instead of studying ill-health like the rest of their profession. They decided that the way to do this was to start a social club whose members joined as families and could use a variety of facilities including a swimming bath, theatre, nursery and cafeteria, in return for a family membership subscription and for agreeing to periodic medical examinations. Advice, but not treatment, was given. In order to be able to draw valid conclusions the Peckham biologists thought it necessary that they should be able to observe human beings who were free — free to act as they wished and to give expression to their desires. So there were no rules and no leaders. "I was the only person with authority," said Dr. Scott Williamson, the founder, "and I used it to stop anyone exerting any authority." For the first eight months there was chaos. "With the first member-families", says one observer, "there arrived a horde of undisciplined children who used the whole building as they might have used one vast London street. Screaming and running like hooligans through all the rooms, breaking equipment and furniture," they made life intolerable for everyone. Scott Williamson, however, "insisted that peace should be restored only by the response of the children to the variety of stimuli that was placed in their

From the standpoint of the production workers, "the gang system leads to keeping track of goods instead of keeping track of people." Melman contrasts the "predatory competition" which characterises the managerial decision-making system with the workers' decision-making system in which "The most characteristic feature of the decision-formulating process is that of mutuality in decision-making with final authority residing in the hands of the grouped workers themselves." The gang system as he described it is very like the collective contract system advocated by G. D. H. Cole, who claimed that "The effect would be to link the members of the working group together in a common enterprise under their joint auspices and control, and to emancipate them from an externally imposed discipline in respect of their method of getting the work done."

My second example again derives from a comparative study of different methods of work organisation, made by the Tavistock Institute in the late 1950s, reported in E. L. Trist's *Organisational Choice*, and P. Herbst's *Autonomous Group Functioning*. Its importance can be seen from the opening words of the first of these: "This study concerns a group of miners who came together to evolve a new way of working together, planning the type of change they wanted to put through, and testing it in practice. The new type of work organisation which has come to be known in the industry as composite working, has in recent years emerged spontaneously in a number of different pits in the north-west Durham coal field. Its roots go back to an earlier tradition which had been almost completely displaced in the course of the last century by the introduction of work techniques based on task segmentation, differential status and payment, and extrinsic hierarchical control." The other report notes how the study showed "the ability of quite large primary work groups of 40–50 members to act as self-regulating, self-developing social organisms able to maintain themselves in a steady state of high productivity." The authors describe the system in a way which shows its relation to anarchists thought:

which is incapable of realisation (and consequently not worth fighting for) because of the scale and complexity of modern industry. How can we convince them otherwise? Apart from pointing out how changing sources of motive power make the geographical concentration of industry obsolete, and how changing methods of production make the concentration of vast numbers of people unnecessary, perhaps the best method of persuading people that workers' control is a feasible proposition in large-scale industry is through pointing to successful examples of what the guild socialists called "encroaching control." They are partial and limited in effect, as they are bound to be, since they operate within the conventional industrial structure, but they do indicate that workers have an organisational capacity on the shop floor, which most people deny that they possess.

Let me illustrate this from two recent instances in modern large-scale industry . The first, the gang system worked in Coventry, was described by an American professor of industrial and management engineering, Seymour Melman, in his book *Decision-Making and Productivity*. He sought, by a detailed comparison of the manufacture of a similar product, the Ferguson tractor, in Detroit and in Coventry, England, "to demonstrate that there are realistic alternatives to managerial rule over production." His account of the operation of the gang system was confirmed by a Coventry engineering worker, Reg Wright, in two articles in *Anarchy*.

Of Standard's tractor factory in the period up to 1956 when it was sold, Melman writes: "In this firm we will show that at the same time: thousands of workers operated virtully without supervision as conventionally understood, and at high productivity; the highest wage in British industry was paid; high quality products were produced at acceptable prices in extensively mechanised plants; the management conducted its affairs at unusually low costs; also, organised workers had a substantial role in production decision-making."

way," and, "in less than a year the chaos was reduced to an order in which groups of children could daily be seen swimming, skating, riding bicycles, using the gymnasium or playing some game, occasionally reading a book in the library … the running and screaming were things of the past."

More dramatic examples of the same kind of phenomenon are reported by those people who have been brave enough, or confident enough to institute self-governing non-punitive communities of delinquents or maladjusted children: August Aichhorn and Homer Lane are examples. Aichhorn ran that famous institution in Vienna, described in his book Wayward Youth. Homer Lane was the man who, after experiments in America started in Britain a community of juvenile delinquents, boys and girls, called The Little Commonwealth. Lane used to declare that "Freedom cannot be given. It is taken by the child in discovery and invention." True to this principle, remarks Howard Jones, "he refused to impose upon the children a system of government copied from the institutions of the adult world. The self-governing structure of the Little Commonwealth was evolved by the children themselves, slowly and painfully to satisfy their own needs."

Anarchists believe in *leaderless groups*, and if this phrase is familiar to you it is because of the paradox that what was known as the leaderless group technique was adopted in the British and American armies during the war — as a means of selecting leaders. The military psychiatrists learned that leader or follower traits are not exhibited in isolation. They are, as one of them wrote, "relative to a specific social situation — leadership varied from situation to situation and from group to group." Or as the anarchist Michael Bakunin put it a hundred years ago, "I receive and I give — such is human life. Each directs and is directed in his turn. Therefore there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination."

This point about leadership was well put in John Comerford's book, *Health the Unknown*, about the Peckham experiment:

> Accustomed as is this age to artificial leadership… it is difficult for it to realise the truth that leaders require no training or appointing, but emerge spontaneously when conditions require them. Studying their members in the free-for-all of the Peckham Centre, the observing scientists saw over and over again how one member instinctively became, and was instinctively but not officially recognised as, leader to meet the needs of one particular moment. Such leaders appeared and disappeared as the flux of the Centre required. Because they were not consciously appointed, neither (when they had fulfilled their purpose) were they consciously overthrown. Nor was any particular gratitude shown by members to a leader either at the time of his services or after for services rendered. They followed his guidance just as long as his guidance was helpful and what they wanted. They melted away from him without regrets when some widening of experience beckoned them on to some fresh adventure, which would in turn throw up its spontaneous leader, or when their self-confidence was such that any form of constrained leadership would have been a restraint to them. A society, therefore, if left to itself in suitable circumstances to express itself spontaneously works out its own salvation and achieves a harmony of action which superimposed leadership cannot emulate.

Don't be deceived by the sweet reasonableness of all this. This anarchist concept of leadership is quite revolutionary in

its implications as you can see if you look around, for you see everywhere in operation the opposite concept: that of hierarchical, authoritarian, privileged and permanent leadership. There are very few comparative studies available of the effects of these two opposite approaches to the organisation of work. Two of them I will mention later; another, about the organisation of architects' offices was produced in 1962 for the Institute of British Architects under the title *The Architect and His Oflice*. The team which prepared this report found two different approaches to the design process, which gave rise to different ways of working and methods of organisation. One they categorised as *centralised*, which was characterised by autocratic forms of control, and the other they called dispersed, which promoted what they called "an informal atmosphere of free-flowing ideas." This is a very live issue among architects. Mr. W. D. Pile, who in an official capacity helped to sponsor the outstanding success of postwar British architecture, the school-building programme, specifies among the things he looks for in a member of the building team that: "He must have a belief in what I call the non-hierarchical organisation of the work. The work has got to be organised not on the star system, but on the repertory system. The team leader may often be junior to a team member. That will only be accepted if it is commonly accepted that primacy lies with the best idea and not with the senior man."

And one of our greatest architects, Walter Gropius, proclaims what he calls the technique of "collaboration among men, which would release the creative instincts of the individual instead of smothering them. The essence of such technique should be to emphasise individual freedom of initiative, instead of authoritarian direction by a boss… synchronizing individual effort by a continuous give and take of its members …"

"This leads us to another corner-stone of anarchist theory, the idea of workers' control of industry. A great many people think that workers' control is an attractive idea, but one