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Anarchocommunism

Jesse Cohn

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Anarchocommunism, sometimes also called “anarchist communism” or “libertarian communism,” is the tendency within anarchism advocating the abolition both of the state and the system of wages and prices. Under “the communism of the free,” as Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) called it, the communist distributive ethic – “from each according to ability, to each according to need” – would constitute the extension of individual freedom into the economic realm, permitting each to take and to give at will, in keeping with the dictates of his or her conscience (1892/1995: 36).

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865) and Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) were both opponents of “communism” in this sense, wary of the potential for “free riders” to take advantage of the system, effectively living off the labor of others, hence becoming exploiters in their turn. Against this, theorists such as Kropotkin and Alexander Berkman (1870–1936) suggested that informal social pressures, new cultural norms, and a sense of solidarity would be sufficient to ensure a balance between production and consumption, with the social sanction of expulsion from the community reserved for the inevitable handful of intransigents. Buoyed by such

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arguments, anarchocommunism became, by the end of the nineteenth century, the most widely embraced ideological framework in the international anarchist movement, from Argentina to China, largely supplanting the “collectivist” position – favoring the continuation of a wage/price system with “collective ownership of the instruments of work” – that had predominated during the era of Bakunin’s leadership.

Ultimately, anarchocommunism would exercise influence over radical thinkers ranging from Nicaraguan revolutionary Augusto César Sandino (1895–1934) to American social ecologist Murray Bookchin (1921–2006). The Dutch Provos’ “White Bicycle Plan” (1965), the San Francisco Diggers’ “Free City” project (1967–8), Food Not Bombs (1980–), and the Free Software Movement (1985–) can be considered examples of an anarchocommunist system of free distribution in action.

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