

Anarchism's Mid-Century Turn

**Review & Response: Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth
Century**

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Review & Response: *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century*, By Andrew Cornell, University of California Press, 2016, 300 pages.

Part One

Transitions

No matter how one feels about it, the current state of anarchism has represented something of a mystery: What was once a mass movement based mainly in working class immigrant communities is now an archipelago of subcultural scenes inhabited largely by disaffected young people from the white middle class.

Andrew Cornell's *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century* supplies the first convincing account of that transition. Beginning in 1916, just before the Red Scare, and closing in 1972, just as our present movement was taking shape, the book serves as "a *prehistory* of contemporary anarchism." Giving particular attention to the middle decades when anarchism seemed to disappear, Cornell uncovers a missing history and finds "a clear line of continuity rather than a defined break." The line he traces is continuous, but it is not straight. There may not be a gap, but there was most certainly a turn.

In the early part of the century, from 1905 to 1917, American anarchism was predominantly, but by no means exclusively, syndicalist. The IWW was of singular import. The Red Scare of 1917–1920 all but destroyed the organization, and the movement. What remained of syndicalism was occupied primarily with legal defense, and other anarchists came to a focus more on education and creating counterinstitutions, rather than mass organizing or immediate insurrection. Hence, anarchists were on the sidelines during the upheavals of the thirties. Then, during the Second World War, the remaining movement split over the question of militarism, with pacifists coming to the fore. At the same time, increasingly much of anarchist activity was in the cultural sphere, and the movement became wedded to the emerging counterculture. "[R]eadings, performances, and exclusive parties moved to the center of anarchist praxis," Cornell writes. "In the 1940s Bay Area scene, participating in such revelatory events became the primary activity expected of an anarchist. Indeed, we might interpret this as the time and place where an anarchist 'scene' emerged – exciting and socially rewarding to participants, but easily perceived as insular and exclusionary to those less connected."

Anarchism came to comprise a set of cultural practices rather than a coherent movement or body of thought. Thus anarchist ideas, but not organizations, were ubiquitous in their influence on the movement of the sixties. By the end of the decade, as Cornell observes, "anarchism had never meant more things to more people. What emerged in the early 1970s was not a unified anarchist movement as such but an array of small groups excited by communism, syndicalism, situationism, libertarian socialism, ultraleftism, revolutionary nonviolence, anarcha-feminism, and social ecology."

On the positive side, the move toward pacifist and countercultural politics is what kept anarchism alive after it was decimated by the Red Scare. Moreover, *Unruly Equality* provides important and inspiring detail of the seldom-heard story of anarchist involvement in the Civil Rights movement – including, interestingly, support for Robert Williams and his campaign of armed self-defense. For example, Dave Dellinger, a life-long pacifist, argued that until the advocates of nonviolence could demonstrate the success of their approach, they had no right to judge Blacks

for using violence to defend themselves. (It is humbling, looking back at the debates of the time, to realize how much better they were – stronger in argument, more honest in intent – than those controversies that plague the left today.) And finally, whatever else one might think of the emerging counterculture, it did produce some lasting institutions, including KPFA-Pacific Radio and City Lights Books.

However, class struggle largely disappeared from the agenda and the movement became increasingly remote from its traditional base, producing a series of missed opportunities. Anarchists deserted the class war at precisely the moment that the largest number of workers were clamoring to enlist in it, leaving it to the CIO and the Communist Party to benefit from the possibilities opened by the National Labor Relations Act. Nor did anarchists agitate for greater gains under the New Deal, or actively oppose discrimination in the federal relief programs' design and implementation. Of course, given their theories and commitments, it's not clear that anarcho-syndicalists could have done any better. In the midst of the massive changes brought on by the Great Depression, anarchists failed to take account of the ways Keynesianism was reconstituting both capitalism and the state. Their doctrine thus became antiquated, their analysis atrophied, and they failed to adapt themselves to the opportunities and challenges of the new situation.

The Prefigurative Fallacy

The turn to pacifism also locked the anarchist movement in a particular "prefigurative" orientation.

Prefiguration has always existed in three forms: 1- the notion that our revolutionary organizations would later provide the means of coordinating and managing society; 2- counterinstitutions like anarchist schools, bookstores, co-ops, and utopian communities; and 3- lifestyle practices like free love and vegetarianism. However, these different interpretations of "prefiguration" have received different measures of emphasis at various points in time. The IWW stressed the first; the Catholic Worker and the Modern School movement, the second; and the counterculture, the third.

As Holley Cantine, editor of the journal *Retort*, advised: "Communities and various other kinds of organization must be formed, wherein the ideals of the revolution are approximated as nearly as possible in daily life. The new society must be lived out by its advocates; both as a way of influencing the masses by example, and in order to iron out weaknesses of theory by actual experiment."

As it happened, little genuine *experimentation* resulted – either in the artistic sense of playful improvisation, or in the scientific sense of testing hypotheses against evidence. Instead, the prefigurative imperative produced an elaborate moralism. Anarchists became preoccupied with the minutiae of individual choice rather than organizing collective action.

This attitude rested on a contradiction inherent to the prefigurative idea. Morally, prefiguration demands that we act as though the society we want to create were already in existence today; and as strategy, it promises that we can create that society by doing so. The problem is that, were we capable of behaving as we would in a society without capitalism and the state, then there would be no *need* to abolish either. Instead, it is only possible to act as free and equal beings under conditions of freedom and equality; we cannot create those conditions simply by pretending they exist. The effort, at least as a whole politic, is in fact counter-productive since it turns our attention away from the structural features of our society and toward the moral character of individuals within the movement.

Moreover, the society that our present scenes would seem to prefigure is not on the whole a place where sensible people would want to live. It is as status-obsessed, gossip-ridden, and cliquish as any private school, as prying and sanctimonious as any country church, as prone to splits and purges as the most rigid Leninist sect. Its chief virtues are that it is too small and disorganized to actually succeed in being particularly oppressive. Of course that is only part of the picture, but it is the part that an emphasis on prefiguration tends to foster.

What we are left with, after a few decades of these practices, is the structure and culture of the pacifist movement without its commitment to nonviolence. In fact, even where insurrectionary anarchism has come back into fashion, these same dynamics have continued to hold, only animated with fiery hyperbole and occasional window-breaking.

Cornell offers this assessment:

”To my mind, the legacy of U.S. anarchism in this period is deeply ambivalent. Anarchists excelled at developing broad critiques of the social order. They were often ahead of the curve in identifying social problems (the oppression of gays and lesbians, environmental threats, the alienation of the affluent) and linking these issues to modes of domination. . . . The tradition is also replete with individuals who modeled empathy, solidarity, perseverance, sacrifice, and bravery in their efforts to make the world a more humane place. Yet significant limitations are also apparent. In the twentieth century, anarchists were either uninterested or unable to systematize their perspective, and they have not excelled at engaging ideological opponents in an effort to win the war of ideas.”

In the end, he concludes, with a tone of disappointment: ”I am not convinced that anarchism possesses all the tools necessary to achieve [its] far-reaching goals.”

Lifestyle Anarchism?

Cornell’s analysis serves as a much-needed check against the kinds of fairy tales that anarchists too often tell themselves about themselves. With its historical backing and its determined even-handedness, *Unruly Equality* simultaneously delivers a well-researched account of the ”transformation of the economic Left into the cultural Left” and offers an honest and nonsectarian assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each. It also provides a powerful corrective to the standard critique of the cultural turn.

Two decades ago, in 1995, Murray Bookchin published a polemic titled *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*. In it, he sought to reassert anarchism’s character as a mass movement by counterposing it to a ”lifestyle” pseudo-politics. In describing ”lifestyle anarchism” he denounced a whole range of ideological opponents, sometimes conflating incompatible tendencies. He also attempted to define away the entire individualist tradition in anarchism, thus positioning himself as an old guard defending ”The Left that Was” against hucksters peddling zines and raves and vegan potlucks as politics. Though the problems with Bookchin’s arguments were immediately evident and much discussed in the anarchist press at the time, ”lifestyle anarchism” survives as a label affixed (always by others) to a wide range of norms, attitudes, and practices associated with the scene.

What Cornell shows is that, not only were the cultural and prefigurative aspects of anarchism not new, the complaints about them were not new, either. He quotes Harry Kelly, as far back as

1908, worrying that anarchism was becoming "a movement for individual self-expression rather than collective revolution."

What *had* changed was the role of class struggle and the *character* of the anarchist cultural and prefigurative efforts. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the cultural aspects of American anarchism consisted largely of things like community theater and folk singing groups; in the teens, anarchism became associated with the artistic avant-garde; and after World War II, the counterculture. Likewise, prefiguration came to refer less to the kinds of organizations anarchists were building, and more to their individual habits and choices. As a result of this sort of drift, Cornell observes, "In the post war period . . . anarchists' prefigurative lifestyles and communities were less and less embedded in broader working-class traditions and neighborhoods, and they were not paired with confrontational class struggle."

Cornell's account – contra Bookchin's – suggests that if anarchism is in a bad state, that is not because of what was *added* in the post-war period, but what was *left out*. The renewed emphasis on gender equality and the newer concern with racial equality were crucial correctives to syndicalism's tendency toward class reductionism. Likewise, the emerging ecological perspective and the attention to the natural and psychological effects of industrialization fueled a sense of revolutionary urgency and suggested an agenda far beyond social equality and worker self-management. Bookchin, the chief theorist of "social ecology," agreed with that much.

Furthermore, the serious attention given the *means* of change, distinctive of anarchism since Bakunin's quarrel with Marx in the First International, likely only gained significance as the century wore on. Not to put too fine a point on it, but in a period marked by two World Wars and the permanent threat of nuclear annihilation, pacifism must have had an inherent, immediate, intuitive appeal. And prefiguration, even of the most "be the change" bumper-sticker variety, does at least recognize the necessity for individual transformation, though it happens to exaggerate its social effects.

The problem is, as anarchists retreated – not capriciously, or from a sense of superiority, but in direct response to repression – the movement necessarily changed, and its self-conception changed with it. Anarchists stopped thinking of themselves as a social force potentially capable of organizing millions of people, destroying the existing power structure, and reconstituting society. The *language* of revolution remained, but the *idea* was largely lost. The anarchist vision shrank, from the One Big Union and the General Strike, to the affinity group and the poetry reading. At first simply adapting themselves to a political reality – to the experience of defeat, alienation, and marginality – anarchists started defining themselves by those same features. They became enamored with their outsider status, at the expense of their broad, popular aspirations.

Part Two

Proposals

There is however a hopeful implication to the story Cornell tells.

Anarchism and pacifism may have merged in part by accident – because anarchists and pacifists were forced together into prisons and labor camps during the Second World War. But anarchism did not move in a pacifist direction automatically. Instead, the anarchist philosophy was deliberately being reconsidered, revised, and to a large degree reinvented by specific identifiable people – Ammon Hennacy, Dwight McDonald, and more importantly, those associated with the

journals *Why?* and *Retort*. The poet Kenneth Rexroth forthrightly declared: "Our objective . . . was to refound the radical movement. . . to rethink all the basic principles. . . to subject to searching criticism all the ideologies from Marx to Malatesta." That fact logically implies that anarchism could be reinvented again.

No "return" to Classical anarchism, or to some "pure" form of anarcho-syndicalism or insurrectionism, is possible or even really desirable. Capitalism, the state, social stratification, and the left have all changed – and both our theories and our movements need to address themselves to those changes. Besides which, many of the elements characterizing post-war anarchism – feminism, environmentalism, and an emphasis on fighting white supremacy, especially – are positive developments and brought needed attention to issues that anarcho-syndicalism typically treated as secondary. Moving forward, any anarchism worthy of the name will have to incorporate these as essential features of its vision.

What we need is not a return, but a critical reevaluation – one that is, at once, both a deconstruction and a renewal. I have only a vague idea of what that reassessment would look like, but I do have some thoughts about the tasks it should prioritize and along what lines it should develop.

I think the place any new anarchist theory should start is with re-centering the old ideals of freedom and equality. It is striking how little that language is used on the radical left anymore. Its neglect, I suspect, is partly down to a desire to distance ourselves from liberalism, and partly from the (related) postmodern suspicion of universalist claims. However, while both terms – *freedom* and *equality* – are abused by hacks and exploited in propaganda, that is precisely because they remain inspiring ideals that speak to something deep and defining in the human spirit. Furthermore they are, or at least they ought to be, *affirmative* ideals – not merely rejections of something else. To give them positive content, we need to be able to specify what we mean by the words, and further still, how our politics will bring these ideals into reality.

That specificity would demand a fundamental shift in anarchism as it is presently conceived, as essentially a philosophy of refusal. And even then, *what* we are refusing is surprisingly uncertain and contentious. Are we against power, coercion, hierarchy, the state, government, privilege, domination, civilization, society, "the extant" – or something else entirely? None of those formulations quite do the job: They would all seem to include some things we probably do *not* oppose, and most leave out some things that we certainly *do* oppose. The negative formulation of anarchism, as being simply *against* one or all of the above boogeymen, is responsible for a lot of our present theoretical underdevelopment, and the well-intentioned but misguided efforts to always stretch our tent further and cover more and more of the left's ideological circus.

A positive formulation, I believe, need not be overly prescriptive – in fact, I think it should be diverse, pluralistic, and innovative – but it should offer some vision of what a diverse, pluralistic, and innovative society might be like; or, returning to the original meaning of an "anarchism without adjectives," it might present a range of possible ideals established according to some identifiable and common principles.

Moreover, for a group so fixated on critiquing power and the state, it is surprising how rarely contemporary anarchists have bothered to forward a theory about either one. It is as though we determined that they are bad, then decided to give the matter no further thought, as one might take a sip of milk, discover it sour, and simply spit it out. The inability or unwillingness to develop a theory of the state (or more modestly, an analysis of states), one that can take account of both the differences between governments and also the changes within them, has repeatedly

steered the anarchist movement into blind allies. In the thirties, the anarchists failed to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the New Deal; in the forties, the movement split over the question of whether democracy should be defended against fascism; and under neoliberalism, many anarchists have seen the necessity of preserving welfare programs but lack any theoretical justification for doing so.

Again, this review is not the place for a thoroughgoing theory of the state. But I suspect that such a project would need to begin with the recognition that states comprise *networks* of institutions, and that these institutions have different, sometimes competing – and even conflicting – needs, functions, strategies, and agendas. I further suspect, following from that observation, that even working according to anarchist principles, different parts of the state must be approached differently. I doubt that anyone, in real life, has precisely the same attitude toward the police department, the water bureau, state universities, and the public library; there are some parts of the government we wish to abolish, and some we might want to capture and democratize. Other conclusions, concerning the differences between liberal and totalitarian governments, or the need to defend specific programs under certain circumstances, likely follow. On the whole, our opposition to the state would probably need to become less total and more strategic – not so much a smashing as a dismantling, with specified pieces to be recycled or repurposed.

At the same time, and congruently, anarchism needs to develop a broader theory of power. It should interrogate and integrate its recent borrowings from feminism (especially women of color feminism), queer theory, indigeneity, and so on. One form this reconception might take is a kind of fusing of intersectionality and class politics, careful to avoid the various pitfalls of essentialism, nationalism, class reductionism, and the facile treatment of “classism” as another brand of prejudice. That would require attention not only to the intersections where power is applied most acutely, but also to the cleavages where systems of power can be pried apart, and the interstices where liberatory practices and egalitarian relations may develop.

Such a critique of power and this theoretical synthesis would necessitate an attempt at relating our ideas to one another as part of some larger coherent body of thought. Various observations, insights, concepts, and analyses would still surely be taken on from other traditions – but they would need to be approached at the level of argumentation and fitted together with other ideas central to the anarchist project, not (as at present) adopted as axioms and thrown together willy-nilly in what is sometimes too optimistically termed a tool kit. Anarchism would continue – as it always has – to incorporate innovations and insights from other political traditions, from the sciences and social sciences, from the arts and humanities, and to change and adapt our understanding of the world in light of new arguments and new information. But we should do so with an attention to the reasons for these additions, their implications, and the ways in which they cause us to affirm or revise our existing theories. (Picking up where Cornell leaves off, Spencer Sunshine’s dissertation, “Post-1960 US Anarchism and Social Theory,” makes this argument explicitly.)

Finally, or in practice, most pressingly – we need to distinguish between ethics and politics, recognizing that we do inevitably need both. Politics without ethics becomes indistinguishable from power-worship, while ethics without politics tends toward either a kind of saintly quietism or a meddling purism. *Because* we need ethics as well as politics, politics as well as ethics, it is necessary that we not conflate them. The relationship between these two spheres of value is complicated, and cannot be reduced to questions of individual versus collective action, or means and ends – but the larger mistake tends to generate confusion in these other areas as well. It becomes

too easy to believe that a good society is just the product of good people, and therefore that the movement's political failings are down to the sins of someone or a few of its participants. Likewise if (as the slogan goes) "the means are the ends," then radical means, like the moral virtues, are their own reward: they need not produce any tangible effect in the world. The tendency then is to view the movement itself as both the agent and the object of change. Our collective attention thus turns increasingly inward – more intensely scrutinizing the lives and attitudes of other anarchists according to constantly shifting and ever more exacting standards.

Of course there is no question that ethics matter, that individual actions sometimes affect large numbers of people, or that only justifiable means can reliably serve the ends of justice. But surely we can chart a course somewhere between Leo Tolstoy and Niccolo Machiavelli. In fact, the anarchist love of freedom – as a value related to but complementing equality – ought to warn us against our own more puritan inclinations. Our prefigurative practices should be guided by a strategic need to avoid establishing new tyrannies, not by a moral demand that we fully realize some new utopia. In fact, among the tyrannies we should avoid creating are those based in perfectionism and moral precepts.

Coda

I do not know what the outcome of this kind of critical reassessment would be, or whether anyone in our present anarchist circles possesses the philosophical acumen and political will to make the attempt. I do believe that if its current condition persists – if anarchism remains only a loose assortment of social scenes with distinctive and often obscure norms and practices, collectively darting from one ideological fashion to the next, always seeking the newest or most radical-sounding slogans (rather like a crow chasing a bit of tinsel on a windy day) – the movement will deteriorate until it is only an historical curiosity, comparable to the Diggers or the Anabaptists. Without substantive changes within anarchism, it will never produce another revolution, much less a new society. It may, for all that, prove to be a transformative force in the lives of individuals who come into contact with it. Just as often, however, it will lead to exhaustion, disillusionment, and cynicism.

Cornell's book does not provide a remedy to our present malaise. It does, however, help us to understand how it developed. *Unruly Equality* makes a real contribution to the history of American anarchism and may – if it is widely read and carefully considered – make a contribution to anarchism's future as well. Cornell's book (unlike this review) is mild in its criticism and strong on the facts. It offers no concrete proposals, but simply tells a forgotten story – and thereby, in its own quiet way, invites us to consider why we believe the things that we do, whether the movement we have is the one that we want, and how we expect to make a better world.

These are basic questions, but so hard to answer.

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