

# **Anarchism**

**Basic concepts and ideas**

Peter Storm

October, 2018

# Contents

Introduction . . . . .	3
Anarchism: basic concepts . . . . .	3
HERE . . . . .	4
Authority and hierarchy . . . . .	4
Capitalism and the state . . . . .	6
Patriarchy, white supremacy, domination over nature . . . . .	6
THERE . . . . .	8
Freedom and autonomy . . . . .	8
Reciprocity, mutual aid and free association . . . . .	9
Federation, delegation, decentralization . . . . .	10
Anarchism is a package deal . . . . .	11
Who gets what and why? . . . . .	11
FROM HERE TO THERE . . . . .	13
Ends, means and Marx . . . . .	13
The state: obstacle, not instrument . . . . .	14
Prefiguration and direct action . . . . .	15
IN SUMMARY . . . . .	18

## Introduction

This is an introduction in basic anarchist conceptions, ideas and argumentation. The text started its life in the winter of 2010–2011, in Dutch. It was meant to clarify my own mind as a relative newcomer to the anarchist movement. It got another life as the first part of a series of lectures in 2016.

Here and there, you will find some notes. They point to the origins of quotations, to book titles and so on. They don't contain hidden parts of the story itself, you can safely ignore them as long as sources don't bother you.

I would like to thank my Autonomen Brabant friends and comrades for encouragement, editorial suggestions and tireless hunting after typos. A big thank you as well to the comrades and friends from Paper Jam, who know how to create beautiful things in the shortest possible amounts of time for and money. I do not believe all these comrades like to have their names mentioned, so I won't. But my gratitude is vast. Big hugs to all of you.

*Peter Storm*

## Anarchism: basic concepts

Anarchism comes in as much varieties as there are and have been anarchists. Yet, we do have concepts in common, even if not all of us do use the same words. I will try to introduce what I think are the main concepts, using words as they have generally been used within the historical anarchist movement.

Anarchism is a movement of resistance. Anarchists resist the state. Anarchists resist oppression, class exploitation and the most diverse forms of domination and imposed power relations that restrict and violate our freedom as individuals. Emma Goldman, anarchist in both the US and in Russia, defined anarchism as follows: “The philosophy of a new social order based on liberty unrestricted by man-made law; the theory that all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary.”<sup>1</sup> So, anarchism has a goal: a world of freedom. And anarchism points to a problem: government in all its forms.

The description is not wrong. We – yes, I am one of them – want to replace all these structures of unfreedom with a society of freedom, equality and voluntary cooperation. Anarchism is not just a critique of oppressive society, combined with an idea of a world of freedom. Anarchists have a specific methodology of social change, in which the end to be fought for is already visible in the means we use. Together, the critique, the goal and the road from here to there, form a recognizable whole. As historian George Woodcock formulates it:

“There is a definable anarchist philosophy, just as there is a recognizable anarchist temperament. It involves three elements – a criticism of society as it is, a vision of a desirable alternative society, and a way of proceeding from one to the other.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Emma Goldman: “Anarchism: What it really stands for”, in: Emma Goldman, “Anarchism and other essays”(New York/London 1911; London/Zagreb 2014), p.34

<sup>2</sup> George Woodcock, “Anarchism: a Historical Introduction, in: George Woodcock (ed.), “The Anarchist Reader” (Glasgow, 1977), p. 16

Now, let us turn ‘vision’ into ‘visions’, and ‘plan’ into ‘plans’, and you have a very usable framework for presenting anarchism as a current of social and political thought and action.

## HERE

### Authority and hierarchy

Let’s start with the anarchist critique of society as it exists. What do we oppose, and why? At the heart of anarchism lies a rejection of authority, which is why anarchists are also known as anti-authoritarians. Anarchists are against authority. Or so they (and we) say. As shorthand, that will do. But it is no more than shorthand. It needs addition and explanation to see what exactly the point is. Mikhail Bakunin, one of the founders of the anarchist movement in the nineteenth century, explained what the point was for him, and what was not.

“In the matter of boots, I refer to the authority of the bootmaker; concerning houses, canals or railroads, I consult that of the architect or engineer. For such or such special knowledge I apply to such or such savant. But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect nor the savant to impose his authority upon me.”<sup>3</sup>

You ask advice of experts, whom you can call ‘authorities’ on the subject they know well. But you don’t let the experts force any decision upon you. It is the imposed character of authority that Bakunin rejects, not the expertise as such, even if he, confusingly, uses the word ‘authority’ for expertise as well. Imposed authority, doing what you are told by people or institutions having power over you without them being under your control. That is the point. Hierarchical, top-down authority. That is what anarchists vehemently oppose.

Anarchist are not against any rules as such. Take traffic regulations. They make traffic somewhat more predictable, and much less dangerous. Nothing wrong with that. What is wrong, is the enforcing of the regulations by... authorities. Police handing out fines when you speed to fast or ignore traffic lights, courts pronouncing sentences, civil servants executing the sentences. That is turning sensible regulations into insensitive law, this is imposed authority at work, authority that anarchists object to.

This kind of authority is to be found in all kinds of economic and political institutions. Workers are working for a boss who tells them what to do day in and day out, a boss who – in other words – imposes his or her (usually his) authority, and the authority of the company itself, upon them. Children are supposed to obey their parents, their teachers who, in turn, impose their authority upon those children.

Police forbids certain behavior and punishes that behavior with fines, arrest, beatings and tear-gas. By doing so, the police imposes its authority, and that of the state whose functionaries they are. Again, the authority comes from above, from police chiefs, the mayor, the district attorney. Cops arrest you and bring you to a court which then sentences you, in other words: imposes the authority of the law upon you, then you are sent to prison to be locked up. Again, somebody telling you what you may not do (walk around freely) and where you must be (in that cell, four meter long, three meter wide). Hierarchical, imposed authority once again. And then, when you are ‘free’ once more, you still have to pay taxes, work for a boss or else go to unemployment

---

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, “On Science and Authority”, in: Robert Graham (ed.), “Anarchism – A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, Volume One: From Anarchy to Anarchism (300 CE to 1939)”, p. 90

office to conform to rules to get your unemployment benefits. No wonder that state institutions put together are generally known as ‘The Authorities’.

Now, there are several things objectionable with authority in this sense. It hurts people and oppresses them, it limits their freedom in all kinds of ways. And, as we will see, it is freedom, self-determination of the person, individual autonomy what anarchists put forward as their core value, as the goal of a desirable society. Authority manipulates us in to doing what we do not want, keeping us from doing what we desire. Authority puts us in prison. Authority may kill us if we stand in its way, if we do not obey.

Secondly, imposed authority and its institutions are the instrument that the exploiters need to keep working people down. That is the second objection against authority. No boss could keep ‘his’ workers working for low wages and long hours without the threat of dismissal, and without the threat of courts, law and police against strikes and other forms of resistance. No landlord could feel secure against the peasants he exploits without the army, or even death squads, lurking in the background to attack protesters on ‘his’ land. Law, police, courts, army, death squads: authority at work. Exploitation – collecting riches out of the work of others – depends on oppression, on the imposition of authority, in order to function.

But there is more. Authority is not just oppressive, and to be rejected for that reason alone. It is, at the same time, grossly inefficient as well. Many of you will recognize the following situation. You work for a boss. The boss gets ill. Two things immediately happen. First, the mood improves. More jokes, more laughter, somewhat longer coffee breaks, and a lot of words about the boss and the company that were not spoken when the boss was around. That is the first thing. With the boss – the authority-in-person – gone, people start to behave like free animals instead of drilled and caged beings.

The second thing is even more interesting. The job gets done. Not only that, the job gets done quicker, more efficient than when the boss was around. Why? Workers know what to do and how, they do not need a boss for that. And without a boss bossing them around, the work is less tedious. Besides, without the boss around, maybe they can go home earlier without the company noticing – which motivates workers to finish the task quite efficiently and quickly. It all shows that authority is not needed for getting things done. Authority is needed for getting things done in the way that authority wants it, and to rob the workers of the result of their work. But it is harmful for the tasks themselves. If you want results, get rid of the bosses. They stand in the way.

So, there it is: the anarchist rejection of imposed authority. Connected with it is the anarchist objection to the grading of positions into less and more powerful, below and above – the system of grading we call hierarchy. Also, anarchists reject the attitude which authority demands of us – obeisance, conformity. The choice is, in the words of a Phil Ochs song: “You can do what’s right or you can do what you are told”.<sup>4</sup>

Doing what you are told is to be rejected. Better do what you think is right, because you yourself think it is right. We want to do things because we choose to do them, not because something orders us to do them and threatens us if we refuse. Let us quote an ancient predecessor of anarchism, Etienne de la Boetie., in “On Voluntary Servitude” from 1552.

---

<sup>4</sup> Phil Ochs, “Days of Decision”, 1964/65, to be found, for instance at <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/philochs/daysofdaydecision.html> . The song can be found on his second album, “I Ain’t Marching Anymore” from 1965. To listen to the song, check <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAoh3PYOY4U>

“Who could really believe that one man alone may mistreat a hundred thousand and deprive them of their liberty? (...) Obviously there is no need of fighting to overcome this single tyrant, for he is automatically defeated if the country refused consent to its own enslavement; it is not necessary to deprive him of anything, but simply to give him nothing; (...) It is therefore the inhabitants themselves who permit, or, rather, bring about, their own subjection, since, by ceasing to submit they would put an end to their servitude. A people enslaves itself, cuts its own throat, when, having a choice between being vassals and being free men, it deserts its liberties and takes on the yoke, gives consent to its own misery, or, rather, apparently welcomes it.”<sup>5</sup>

## **Capitalism and the state**

The anarchist objection, then, goes much deeper and broader than just a rejection of ‘the authorities’, the government, the cops, the state. We do not want government. We do not want bosses either. A society in which private capitalists employ workers, but in which these capitalists have reduced the state to the barest minimum – like so-called Libertarians, who better could be called Propertarians, propose – is still drenched with imposed authority, and is not acceptable to anarchists for exactly that reason. This even applies if the state would be entirely removed. Hierarchical authority in all these capitalist companies would still be intact, and the things the state used to be doing – ‘security’, ‘public order’ – now would be done by private security firms contracted by businesses.

Privatized oppression is oppression as well, authority in private hands is still to be rejected, just like authority in the hands of the state. Very often, these two go hand in hand, with quarrels between them, but at the same time, leaning upon each other’s power and resources. States finance themselves out of taxes, and therefore need functioning economies – which usually takes the form of profitable, exploitative business. Capitalists need the state, to make sure that the wage slaves-annex-consumers, know their place – down below. Anarchists oppose the whole set-up, and therefore tend to be both ferociously anti-capitalist and inherently anti-state.

Anarchism is deeply hostile to the state – any state – because the imposed authority any state implies and exercises. Hierarchical, imposed authority of a public institution that has the competence and legitimacy to rule a certain territory is a core characteristic of the state as such. But hierarchical authority is just as a characteristic of the capitalist company or corporation. Anyone who rejects the state but accepts capitalism, is not an anarchist but a liberal on steroids. Anarchists are much more than just anti-state – and by no means all enemies of the state are anarchists. But those who reject capitalism without wanting to get rid of the state, are not anarchists either.

## **Patriarchy, white supremacy, domination over nature**

State power and the power of private property are three dominant systems of hierarchical authority who deserve to end up in the fire of anarchist criticism and anarchist practice. There are more of these systems, and they are by no means secondary.

---

<sup>5</sup> Etienne de la Boetie, “On Voluntary Servitude”, in: Robert Graham, “Anarchism – A documentary of Libertarian Ideas, Vol. One: From Anarchy to Anarchism (300 CE to 1939)”, p. 4

There is, to start with, the system of patriarchy, of male dominance. In this structure, human reproduction and the bringing up of children, sexuality, kinship ties and so on are tied together in hierarchical fashion and an authoritarian structure. In this patriarchy, the dominance of heterosexual men is anchored, and thereby also the subjection of women and of all those people not fitting under the label 'male' and 'heterosexual'.

We see this in the traditional form of the family, with the man on top, the woman as subordinate partner, and down below the children of which the boys grow up to become potential family heads, the girls to become subordinate partners of heterosexual men themselves. Because women, as mothers, got pushed into the main role in the raising of children, the men are the ones 'making a living' for the whole family, which is dependent of the income that male breadwinner brings in. Subjection of women is inherent in this pattern, as is the exclusion of non-heterosexual relationships, preferences and identities. They contrast with the tie between man and women which keeps the – unequal – partnership together. Heterosexuality as norm and male dominance are connected. Patriarchy puts men above women, heterosexuals above people with any other sexual orientations.

This whole pattern is full of privileges, and therefore of hierarchical authority, often subtle and slippery. Male privilege, heterosexual privilege, are products of patriarchy, just like cis privilege – 'cis' as opposed to 'trans': Cisgender people have either female or male characteristics in conformity with how they identify themselves; transgenders identify which does not conform with the physical characteristics that are supposed to make you either a woman or a man. They are generally marginalized by a patriarchal system that puts man on top and furthermore does not accept anything outside imposed, well-defined and well-controlled gender roles. Patriarchy oppresses women, both hetero, bisexual and lesbian; it oppresses homosexual and bisexual men; it opposes transgenders. It oppresses heterosexual cis men as well, by pushing them into a role that fits like a straitjacket and from which they cannot get out – as if identities cannot be fluid and cannot change in time. Where people are put above other people, there you have hierarchy and authority. From an anti-authoritarian point of view, fighting patriarchy is a necessity, not an extra.

The same applies to that other system of hierarchical authority: white dominance, white supremacy. It grew together with colonial relationships where white possessing classes and state rulers colonized people of color, often whole populations. White rule subjected these subjected populations, partially exterminated, enslaved or otherwise exploited them, through forced labor in the colonized areas or through migrant labor in the so-called colonial motherlands. This is all justified by views of white superiority and black inferiority, sometimes more subtly with reference to 'culture'. Racism is the ideology that belongs with this white supremacy, justifying it. So, white supremacy and racism are a heritage of colonial experience. But they are very much a living heritage: it is not a remnant, it is a living system destroying lives for the sake of maintaining white political and economic power.

Here, also, we see a hierarchy, ordering people on a ladder from high to low, subjecting people to institutional authority, in this case colonial authority and its inheritors. White privilege is a product of this system. Anti-racism and an anti-colonial practice belong to anarchism, just like an anti-patriarchal theory and practice belong there. That anarchists are not at all always thoroughly permeated with anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal attitudes, is unfortunately true. This means that we have to take the fight against all those hierarchies and forms of authority into the anarchist movements itself when and where necessary. Which means: all the time.

Yet another form of domination needs to be mentioned the domination of non-human nature by humans and human 'civilization'. Even in much left-wing, even anarchist, discourse, this domination tends to be taken far too much for granted. Yet, it is not at all self-evident that humans stand 'above' nature, 'above' non-human animals for instance. God may, according to Biblical authority, have appointed us as Masters of Creation. But a philosophy which rejects God as the Ultimate Authority Father Figure, would do well to reject this appointment, this mastership over the rest of nature.

Humans are part of nature, they themselves belong to a particular species of animals. They – we – have no right to subject animals to our desires, as if animals are just things for humans to be used. Overthrowing human supremacy over nature – for instance, by refusing to use products for whose production have been caged and killed – is, at the very least, consistent with anarchism. Human liberation without animal liberation is incomplete. To be consistent, anarchism opposes hierarchy as such – including the hierarchies that puts humans above other species.

Besides, respecting nature in all its varieties as equal, as a spectrum of independent, autonomous living forces, might help us find the respectful attitude we need to prevent the utter destruction of the planet and its life forms, including ourselves. Overthrowing human domination over nature is not just a matter of anarchist principle and consistency. It might well be a matter of sheer survival.

## **THERE**

### **Freedom and autonomy**

High time to move to the second aspect of anarchism. We have seen what anarchists object to. But what are anarchists for? What do they want instead of the present unfree order? What values do they hold as central values?

Freedom is the essence. Freedom as personal autonomy. We want to decide freely about our lives, our bodies, our energy and our time. And, as anarchists, we usually think that we actually can do so: we are capable of freedom, of self-determination. We want to be free. We see this urge to freedom as essential for our humanity, which means that we see it not just as a privilege for ourselves or the group we belong to. Freedom in an anarchist sense belongs to everybody, to be mutually recognized. By all for the sake of each of us.

Violations of freedom result in harm. Forcing people to work for a boss not just limits our freedom; it also ensures people are poor while the capitalist grows rich by stealing what we, forced by bosses' authority, produce for the capitalist. Hierarchical authority enables exploitation, it is a weapon by our rulers to enrich themselves at our expense. This form of authority makes possible more evils: generals can command soldiers to kill; again, it is hierarchical authority drives the giving of orders and expecting them to be executed. Winning our freedom, by overthrowing imposed authority, means ending even the possibility of exploitation and large-scale war. Once more, an anti-state attitude and anti-capitalism go together. Autonomy, personal self-determination, clashes with both capital and state. The free, autonomous individual which is her/his own purpose and goal and who will not be subjected to any person or institution, is what it is all about.

One author who stressed the importance of the individual and her or his autonomy, is the nineteenth century anti-authoritarian philosopher Max Stirner in his famous book "The Ego and



his Own”<sup>6</sup>. Shortest possible summary: Nothing for Me goes above Me. The book is not an easy read. Some paragraphs read a bit as justification for a war of each against all, for egoism in its ultra-liberal sense. Reading beyond that, one discovers that what he explicitly demands for his own one Ego, he implicitly accepts for all. And he sees value in what he calls a “Union of Egoists” in which autonomous, free individuals can band together to achieve common goals.

Stirner is so valuable because with his plea for the concrete, autonomous, freedom-loving individual, he creates a criterion with which every abstraction which demands the individual ‘s subjection, is found wanting. That goes for concepts like state, church, capital, but also abstractions like ‘humanity’, ‘justice’. As soon as people sacrifice themselves for ‘humanity’, then ‘humanity’ functions like an authoritarian spook, and concrete human beings still suffer subjection. They are still treated as means to an end beyond and above them. Stirner provides us all with a good warning system against authoritarian concepts and situations, wherever they raise their heads.

### **Reciprocity, mutual aid and free association**

Now, free, autonomous individuals cannot and will not live as separate entities, as if they are alone in the universe. We need each other, and we want each other as well, in all kinds of ways and situations. Here, the concept of reciprocity is central in anarchist social thinking. Reciprocity: I do something for you. I don’t demand something in return. But I know that you will do something for me if the need arises. That is reciprocity. I run out of coffee. I ask the neighbor for some coffee. She gives it, without asking for something in return. Next week she goes on holiday and ask me to water her plants. It is not a market transaction. It is a gift of her to me, followed by a gift of me to her, and we both know that it works like this between us.

Now, anarchy – a society functioning along anarchist lines – is this two-way neighborly assistance, this reciprocity, generalized through the whole of society. It worked quite nicely for Hobbits in Middle Earth, that is, until Sauron began to meddle with his Nazgul, his Orcs and above all his Ring of Power... In his book “Mutual Aid”<sup>7</sup>, anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin has done much to show how mutual aid, the practical form that reciprocity takes, had been, in all kinds of societies and historical episodes, an essential counterpoint against the imposed, hierarchical way of doing things, of living and organizing social life. It still is.

How do we organize this mutual aid, this reciprocity? Here, anarchists in the nineteenth century and later, generally used the words ‘free association’. The idea is not difficult. You have people combining their forces to do things together (they form an ‘association’) on a voluntary basis (‘free’). People who get together to repair bikes, to plant a vegetable garden, to play chess, to run a café, to form a string quartet of a punk band – they are all forming free associations. Characteristically, people do the necessary things themselves. They do it because they choose to do so, not because they are commanded or forced. They can leave if they want to. And they decide together about what has to be done, and how, in so far as things go beyond individual decisions. The word generally used for this form of decision-making is self-management, another concept quite common within anarchism. Nobody manages us, we manage our stuff ourselves, together.

---

<sup>6</sup> Max Stirner, “The Ego and his Own”, original (in German): “Der Einzige und seine Eigentum” (Berlin, 1845).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Kropotkin, “Mutual Aid, A Factor in Evolution”, first publication: London, 1902;

## Federation, delegation, decentralization

Now, free associations are the cells, as it were, of a free society, its basic organizational forms. But how do we connect them? It is not very practical to assemble the population of a whole region, or all workers in a certain branch of production, in one place to decide together. Some other form of coordination may be needed. For instance, you can have a corn field operated by a free association, a mill operated by another one, and a bread bakery run by a third one. You need to combine the work of the three associations in order to actually make bread from corn, and distribute it to the people needing to eat. Another example: several local self-managing communities – free associations – live alongside the same river. It makes sense to coordinate efforts, for irrigation, or for protection against flooding.

Where coordination is needed, it is envisioned as coming ‘from below’ a phrase that anarchists use frequently. We oppose this to the standard operation of present society, which imposes things from above’. Bakunin expresses the idea beautifully: “I want the organization of society and of collective or social property from bottom to top, by the way of free association, and not from top to bottom by any sort of authority”.<sup>8</sup>

Here, anarchists often use the concept of federation. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, nineteenth century anarchist pioneer from France, was one of the first to stress the point. Federation is simply free association, not of individuals but of basic free associations. Combining them together. To coordinate tasks that involve all participating associations, the separate associations can put forward somebody talking to others put forward from other associations. In other words: the associations send delegates to some coordinating council or assembly. But these are not ‘representatives’ in the usual, parliamentary sense. They may discuss, they may come up with a proposal. But they cannot impose that proposal upon the associations forming the federation. Rather, the proposal goes back to the associations, who then can say yes or no or propose specific changes.

Of course, in practice, the lines between acceptable delegation and unacceptable representation often get blurred. And sometimes anarchists talk about ‘representatives’ where they actually refer to what I here would call delegates, not to parliamentary representatives. Still, the difference matters. Delegates are not authorities, they do not have power to impose anything upon us. Representatives embody such power over the ones they represent; they are a form of government, not an extension of self-management. This, by the way, is why anarchists do not see representative democracy as an embodiment of anarchist values. Elected authorities are still authorities.

Some anarchists use ‘direct democracy’ as a concept in this respect. These words ‘direct democracy’ at least indicate that something else is meant than parliamentary, representative, that is mostly indirect democracy, in which you may elect your political boss, while remaining subjected to such a boss. I very much doubt whether the use of the concept ‘direct democracy’ to describe anarchist goals of self-management and free association is wise. Yes, the word can sometimes help to explain the concept of ‘self-management’ to non-anarchists. But ‘direct democracy’ still implies some sort of state. In that concept, there still is a form of binding authority of ‘the

---

<sup>8</sup> Bakunin’s Second Address to the 1868 Congress of the League of Peace and Freedom”, quoted from <https://robertgraham.wordpress.com/2018/09/24/bakunins-speech-at-the-league-of-peace-and-freedom/>

people'. The anarchist collective CrimethInc. has written very sensibly on the problems with the concept of democracy.<sup>9</sup>

Besides, the word 'direct democracy' is also used as a description of certain procedures used within present states. Referenda are forms of 'direct democracy'. But they are still forms of rule over people, which is a non-anarchist thing. I think it is much better to avoid describing the goals of anarchist social change as 'direct democracy'. Far right groups often like to talk about 'direct democracy' these days. Direct self-management in, from and through free associations is something entirely different.

For anarchists, decision-making power always rests with the participants in the basic associations, not with higher coordinating organs and delegates, not with any 'center' of decision-making. This decentralized way of organizing societal needs and tasks characterizes anarchist visions of a desired society. Paul Goodman, twentieth century American anarchist, used the term 'decentralism' almost as a synonym for anarchism. That was not for nothing.

### **Anarchism is a package deal**

Here, it is important to be consistent. Decentralization to the basic units in which the relationships are authoritarian, top down, hierarchical, is not anarchist. Recognizing, for instance, the 'de-central' powers of states in the US up to the 1960s to operate and defend racist, apartheid laws against the black population, unhindered by the central 'Federal' authorities in Washington, has nothing to do with anarchism. To be consistent with anarchism, decentralization should be pursued back to the most basic level – the free personality itself which is what anarchism is about.

For instance, Thomas Jefferson, one of the US 'Founding Fathers', and introduced here and there as almost-anarchist, falls way short in this respect. Yes, he was advocate of people's rights and powers, minimal government and even a revolution now and then when government arrogance grew too big. At the same time, he was a slave-owner and, as President, he helped instigate and push forward the systematic expulsion of the original inhabitants of the US wherever they stood in the way of US 'civilization'. More evil forms of imposed authority than slavery and mass ethnic cleansing, interrupted by mass slaughter, are hardly imaginable.

Anarchism, in all its varied forms, is a package deal. Anarchist decentralization has to be combined with the principle of truly free association of people as equals and with direct decision-making by those involved in such free association. This decision-making is better not conceptualized as 'direct democracy' with referendum and so on, but as self-management, deciding together about what concerns the ones involved, whether that may be the place of work, the neighborhood or any other dimension of social life.

### **Who gets what and why?**

Different forms of anarchism have different ideas on who gets what and on what basis. There are anarchists who want to use market mechanisms. This has problems. The risks are big, even if it is agreed that there shall not be a market for labor power, and therefore no more wage

---

<sup>9</sup> CrimethInc. ex-Workers' Collective, "From Democracy to Freedom – The difference between government and self-determination" (Salem, Oregon, 2017)

labor. Even then, markets tend to reflect and encourage inequalities, they tend to make profit – not usefulness, not social and individual need or desires – the main criteria, thereby undermining the anarchist ethos of reciprocity and mutual aid. To prevent inequality getting out of hand, shall we introduce an institution that takes away from the richer ones to give it to the poorer ones? In what does this differ from reintroducing a kind of social democratic state? But if we don't go into that direction, the richer ones will soon be defending their riches against the poorer ones who will become disgruntled because of the unfairness reappearing. Sooner rather than later, the rich will form an institution for their defense. In other words, they will introduce a new state.

Now, anarchists have different ideas on all this. By no means all oppose the market, as I do. However, I think, a case can and should be made that market relations are not consistent with anarchist values and either do not belong in an anarchist society, or at the very least most certainly should not provide its basic coordination mechanism.

That leaves two other options. One is: people get back from society the value what they contribute, based on labor time necessary. This was called collectivism, a concept Bakunin adhered to. Let's say making a bread costs an hour, making a chair costs two hours. So, you can exchange a chair (two hours of work) with two breads (also, two hours of work). To facilitate transactions, work is being paid with labor notes (representing hours of work done) which can be exchanged with other labor notes. But will this not work suspiciously like money? The concept implicitly uses a kind of market. And how do people who cannot work get what they need? This system demands institutions of book-keeping and control, to regulate it fairly, seeing to it that the very young, the ill, the ones too old to work, get what they need. The risk that such an institution will develop state-like pretensions and powers, is considerable. And – a point forcefully made by Kropotkin – can you truly establish who contributed exactly what towards fulfilling society's needs? Moreover, even if you could, wouldn't distribution on that basis not mean a vast apparatus of control? What about the contribution made by earlier generations?

For this and other reasons, Kropotkin and others, from the 1870s onwards, began to propose free communism: people voluntarily contributed to society, as much as they saw fit, in the way they themselves found satisfactorily. At the same time, people could take what they needed from what society's members had made available. You give what you feel you can reasonably contribute. And you take what you need. Gradually, this free – or libertarian – communism had gained wide acceptance within many forms of anarchism, though market ideas have not entirely disappeared within anarchism. This acceptance is reasonable. Communism – in the sense of freely sharing out society's resources and results – belongs to anarchism in a way that working-for-a-living, only getting what you can pay for, does not. The market still implies the power of things over people. When you put the autonomous person center stage, you cannot simply accept such thing-power. Even anarchists who never would use the word 'communism' – because of its horrible historical connotations – tend to use communist concepts and practices. Look at anarchist food initiatives: usually, they don't ask pay for what they cook. They ask for a voluntary donation, and they will still give you food if you cannot donate.

In general, mutual aid and reciprocity are not just mechanisms that enable free associations to work; they also provide the mechanism that ties the free associations forming society together as well. Communities, free associations of living where people live, do their things together or individually as they see fit, with the members together taking the decisions that concern them. Collectives, free associations for specific functions, may be embedded within such communities, where some of socially useful tasks are being freely done – the making of food and instruments,

building living spaces, making clothes and other stuff. Reciprocity and mutual aid operates within them and between them. Coordination operates through federation, delegation and/or direct networking (much easier today than in Kropotkin's days!). And all this is operated by the people directly involved, through self-management in one form or another. That is what a free society of autonomous, self-directing and freely cooperating individuals might look like. Different anarchists would use different words for things like this, and specific practices and forms probably would differ enormously. Still, when anarchists talk of the desired future, this is more or less what their visions come down to.

## **FROM HERE TO THERE**

We know what anarchists object to. We have seen what we would put in place of the old society. Now to the third problem. How to get from here to there? Here, a little detour may be useful.

### **Ends, means and Marx**

Anarchists oppose the state and capitalism, and want to build a society of free and equal people, taking decision making in their own hands, a society run on the basis of self-management, structured and controlled from the bottom up. But being anti-state and anti-capitalist, combined with a striving towards bottom-up direct decision-making by those involved, is a thing we find outside anarchist circles as well. Marxists want to see capitalism overthrown, smash the capitalist state and envision a workers' revolution to open the road towards a communist society where there are neither classes nor a state. Karl Marx expresses numerous elements what fit into both the anarchist critique of the existing order and the anarchist goal of a very different form of society. And, for Marx, personal freedom was an immensely important goal, even though it often got overlaid by all the historical-materialist analyses, economic treatises and heated strategy debates with, amongst others, his anarchist rivals. I think it makes sense to place whole aspects of Marx' world of thought within a broadly-interpreted anarchist tradition, and value it as an interesting contribution to that tradition.

Where Marx, and especially the most important forms of Marxism, differ from anarchism is neither in its criticism of society nor in the goals of both Marxism and anarchism. The difference is mainly in the road from here to there. Anarchists choose very specific methods, approaches which characterize anarchism maybe even more than the criticism of the present and the contours of the desired future society. From the origins of anarchism as a current of thought, anarchists emphasized a very important point: forms of action and organization should be in accordance with anarchist goals and purposes. Striving for a horizontally organized, self-managed society without imposed authority, demands organizations working in that direction, structured non-hierarchically, horizontally, with direct say of the participants in that organizational form. If, on the contrary, you try to reach an anarchistically-organized society by means of centralized organizations, organized in top-down fashion, with a managerial hierarchy with a leadership able to impose its authority upon the members – you will discover the consequences after, for instance, a revolution. You will find out that this organization, with all the hierarchical-authoritarian characteristics, will dominate in the new society, and will distort such a society. A revolution won through a vanguard party, centrally and hierarchically led, will lead to a society that is centrally and hierarchically led. Workers may get jobs and a better income that way, but they will not get

self-management. A revolutionary civil war won by a Marxist, Leninist guerrilla army will lead to a society being led by the top of that army. Peasants may get land after the victory, but they will not get freedom. Stateless communism, as even envisioned by Marx, will not be the outcome of victory by centralized, hierarchical and authoritarian means.

To reach a society of freedom, equality and solidarity, we need to practice these values in the struggle for that society. Those values come down to: do it ourselves, do it together, decide directly, and together see to it that these decisions are executed. We need forms of organization in which this initiative of ourselves, this direct say, is operational; it should be the norm. Anarchism is something we do ourselves. Nobody is going to do it for us.

### **The state: obstacle, not instrument**

A similar objection applies to the use of representative democracy through elections. This way, our power is being transferred upwards, there is representation, not delegation. This way, elected politicians execute power. This is still authority from above, structured hierarchically. Building our own power and strengthening control from below by giving that power and control away once every four years is a contradiction. It does not make sense.

There may be tactical reasons why an anarchist takes part in an election. But the belief that fundamental changes in anarchist direction can be achieved through voting and the ballot box of representative democracy, is totally non-anarchist. Not just because of the anarchist rejection of representation in principle. There is also the character of state institutions themselves: organized from the top down, with their bureaucratic, police and military hierarchies which not only escape our control but also the control of elected representatives. State organs usually are closely connected to the dominant, usually the property-owning class, which today is the capitalist class. If the state is anybody's instrument, it is an instrument of that class, not an instrument of ours.

The idea to use the state for anarchist purposes is, according to anarchists, an absurd contradiction. The state is the concentrated version of hierarchical authority and, at the same time, the organ that guarantees and defends the working of other hierarchical institutions. Achieving something through the state means accepting that state and moreover, recognizing and strengthening its legitimacy

That is why Marx' idea of a necessary 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is so very wrong. Yes, it is possible that, even after an anarchist revolution, remnants of the state still exist, or even that new state structures may appear. The goal, then, must be to get rid of them as quickly and as thoroughly as possible. Not giving them legitimacy by calling them 'revolutionary' and identifying ourselves with them. The whole idea of a necessary transitional state, workers' state, dictatorship of the proletariat – no matter how democratic Marx and sometimes even Lenin envisioned such state – precisely gives those institutions a legitimacy that is deadly dangerous to every anarchist-revolutionary dynamics. It opens the road to counterrevolution in revolutionary disguise.

The idea that such state will, in Marx words, 'wither away' in the end when it loses its presumed function as class differences fade and every counterrevolutionary danger has gone, is not reassuring. States are concrete instruments of power in which concrete people sit, hierarchically organized, with privileged officials and functionaries and their armed versions, soldiers and officials. These institutions, and especially the ones in charge of them, will defend their positions and privileges, with arms if they think it necessary, even if their original role has disappeared. Look at the NATO alliance. This has lost its reason of being when the Cold War has ended around 1990.

According to Marx' logic, it now could have 'withered away'. But NATO stubbornly refused to wither away. Rather, it went on existing and found a new role in which NATO no longer waited for Russian soldiers to appear, but rather went to war in Yugoslavia and then Afghanistan.

States and their institutions have interests of their own. They do not just die just because their original role has gone. If we truly want to get rid of the state, we will have to actively remove the state, and not count on its spontaneous disappearance. This active hostility, not just to the capitalist state but also to the whole concept of even the most revolutionary state, sets anarchists apart from the adherents of Marxism, at least in its usual forms.

## **Prefiguration and direct action**

Anarchists, then, choose other forms of organization and action, forms that are not meant to make the state into the agent of our interests. Let's introduce two concepts that are important in the anarchist approach. These are 'prefiguration' and 'direct action'. Prefiguration means that the free society to come should already be visible, 'prefigured', formed beforehand, in the present organizational forms anarchists use. We want to have a society run directly by the people themselves, without interference of any imposed authority? Then, we want to see that already in our self-managed organizations, in which decision-making is in the hand of members, and in which delegates only execute what members decided without having independent power above these members. We want no more hierarchical authorities in the desired future? Then, let us give hierarchically structured authorities as little room as possible – which preferably means: no room at all. We want people capable to take initiative, make themselves heard, able to run things together themselves? Then we better build organizations and practices where those capacities get maximum space – organizations where it is not the usual practice to wait for instructions from head office, to be executed loyally. We want a society of do it ourselves, do it together? Let's organize now by doing things ourselves together.

This is how it was expressed within the anti-authoritarian wing of the First International, the workers' organization in which Bakunin and his anarchist supporters formed a radical wing. The text is from the Sonville Circular, a document from 1871 out of this wing:

"The society of the future should be nothing other than the universalization of the organization with which the International will have endowed itself. We must, therefore, have a care to ensure that that organization comes as close as we may to our ideal. How can we expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge from an authoritarian organization? Impossible. The International, as the embryo of the human society of the future, is required in the here and now to faithfully mirror our principles of freedom and federation and shun any principle leaning towards authority and dictatorship."<sup>10</sup>

That is the idea. Creating, or at the very least hinting at, aspects of the future in how we operate and organize in the present.

The other concept is direct action: action taken directly by those involved themselves, who put pressure by acting. This means that the action is not outsourced to negotiators, officials, mediators: the action is done directly, not indirectly. A strike called by a trade union official, to provide the negotiations proceeding in back office with some extra pressure, is not direct action. A strike where those same workers lay down tools to get their demands granted, thereby putting

---

<sup>10</sup> Sonville Circular, in: Robert Graham (ed.), "Anarchism: A History of Libertarian ideas, Vol. One: From Anarchy to Anarchism (300 CE to 1939)", p. 97–98

direct pressure on management by stopping production, is direct action, but not completely so. In the matter of putting pressure, it is. But concerning the granting of demands, it isn't yet fully direct. This granting still depends on the other side, on the boss.

This brings us to a second aspect of directness, a form that goes beyond demanding and forcing the granting of demands by putting pressure: it is the bringing about of the desired change, by the action and its participants themselves. A demonstration demanding the transformation of empty houses into affordable living room, is not direct action. Entering the empty houses and transforming them into living space is direct action.

Squatting is a rather pure form of direct action. The demand for housing is not even put forward, but executed by the participants, the squatters, themselves. No wonder that there is a considerable overlap between squatting movements and anarchist movements.

A factory occupation against closure, with the demand that the closure is cancelled, is direct action in the sense that the workers themselves put the pressure on, without interference of officials. It is not yet direct action in the second meaning wherein activists not so much put forward demands but grant their own demands by bringing about the desired change themselves. When workers occupy the factory and start running it without their former bosses, then we see the second aspect of direct action. At the same time, we see an anarchist dream brought into reality in the here and now: workers' self-management, no more bosses. This is, in fact, the prefiguration at work that I talked about earlier. Direct action is a favorite method of anarchists, partly because its connection with the prefiguration of the future can become so visible in this way.

Direct and indirect aspects often are mixed within one single action. That applies strongly to strike action. For, however much ordinary trade union strikes are indirect in their approach, with union functionaries in control, still it is the fact that workers in fact do something themselves to raise the pressure gives us a glimpse of direct action within thick layers of representation and mediation, in other words: of indirectness.

The less strikers follow instructions of functionaries, the more they follow their own insights, the more direct a strike becomes, the more the strike is truly their own. But, in so far as strikers put pressure on the other side – demanding something, instead of realizing it themselves – the indirect aspect is not yet gone. Striking until the boss agrees to shorter hours is still indirect in this sense, even if the execution can be reasonably direct. Refusing to work one minute longer than the demanded shorter hours is direct action pure and simple: the demand is not granted by the boss, but implemented by the workers right away.

Similarly, demonstrations as such are not direct actions. They demand, but they apply mainly symbolic pressure, to be seen but hardly to be felt. But when demonstrators occupy a municipal building, or the local university administration, when they start sitting down on street intersections – and thereby exert immediate pressure – an element of directness becomes noticeable.

There are other forms of direct action. Preparing meals and sharing them out freely is one of them. It is direct action in all kind of ways. People collect and prepare the food themselves. People hand it out to other people themselves. There is no intermediary. At least as important: the desire – helping people get a decent, well prepared meal made out of ingredients produced in respectful as sustainable ways is not put forward as a demand ('give us free meals!') but realized directly by making and handing out those meals. And the implicit protest against the waste of foodstuffs is answered directly as well, by, well, not wasting foodstuffs but using them. Food Not Bombs, a form of action that was quite widespread around the year 2000 but has withered away a bit,



deserves to be brought to life once more, today rather than tomorrow. It is anarchist-communist direct action at its most concrete.

As you can see by this example, direct action need not be the same as the most militant action. Smashing windows or putting graffiti on walls of a multinational, to attack its ugly role and practices, is a form of propaganda. But it is not 'direct action' in the sense I indicate above, although an element of doing-it-yourself is obvious. But putting posters on walls is done 'directly' as well, and yet we do not usually call that 'direct action'.

Direct action is very important in anarchist approaches of change. That is because, through direct action, the goal is already anticipated, made visible, made real. You might say: direct action is self-management, free association, on its way to being realized. Just like a factory occupation is a self-managed factory being born, just like squatting anticipates a self-managed housing association. Together, we change parts of the world ourselves, because in the future we want the world to be changed and self-managed by all of us. Free association and self-management as a goal, direct action anticipating the goal in prefiguration while moving towards it.

Stressing the importance of direct action is not meant to be an argument to neglect other forms of action. Demonstrations, handing out flyers, sticking posters on walls, making and publishing leaflets, pamphlets, zines, books, films, holding meetings to spread information – anarchists do all these things, and they are not 'direct action'. But even within these kinds of activities, anarchists stress the importance of doing it ourselves. They look – when they participate in activities organized by non-anarchists – for opportunities to introduce elements of direct action and bottom-up initiative within more indirect, top-down forms of action.

Transforming a respectable trade union demonstration into something sharper, encouraging sit-ins, breaking through police lines, yelling at social democratic speakers on the stage – it all can be seen as a search for direct confrontation within a form of action dripping with indirectness. And while directness expresses our strength, all this indirectness represents weakness on our side: it keeps us in chains. Of course, introducing direct action aspect within respectable, awfully lawful marches and rallies is only one option for anarchists. Another one is: leaving the respectable action altogether, and get our own action going, with all the energy and directness we can muster.

In a way, anarchism in its several aspects – its criticism of the present order, its goal of self-liberation, and the road from present to future – can be shown with squatting as an example. There is the resistance against political and economic authority: people break into houses, thereby breaking the law, challenging property rights and risking confrontation with the cops. There is direct action, reaching our goals immediately. Squatters create a form of community, a free association in which they live, organize their facilities and defend their free space. Resources shared out, in free communist fashion, no matter how much some of us may hate that c-word. The future free world is anticipated in prefiguration in the present community being formed in the squatted building. Squatting, in this sense, can well be seen as anarchist revolution in embryo. Which, by the way, is not meant to say that squatting should be the main front of struggle. But as an example of anarchist ideas in operation, I hope it works.

## IN SUMMARY

So, there we have it: some basic idea of what we anarchists like to go on about. The anarchist striving consists of a rejection of hierarchical, imposed authority and its institutions, a rejection of state, capital, white supremacy, patriarchy, and one other fundamental hierarchy: human domination of the rest of nature, something that demands further elaboration.

It is a striving towards a society of free and equal people, getting together in free associations, combined through federation and similar procedures, on the basis of direct self-management in free association. Delegation of tasks when necessary, but no representation of power.

Prefiguration: the goals of a society of freedom and solidarity of equals should better be present in the non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian means and forms of organization, because means and ends are connected. Direct action as a method to get us in the direction we desire. All this to be reached from the bottom up and under the immediate say of those involved.

These are some basic concepts in which maybe not all, but many anarchists will recognize as their own ideas. These are concepts we all can use on our way towards a society of equality, solidarity, sustainability and freedom.

*Peter Storm*

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Peter Storm  
Anarchism  
Basic concepts and ideas  
October, 2018

Retrieved on 2021-05-07 from [peterstormt.nl](http://peterstormt.nl)

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**