

# **Misconceptions of Anarchism**

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## **Anarchism Is Not Absolute Anti-social Individualism**

Anarchism does not connote absolute, irresponsible, anti-social individual freedom which violates the rights of others and rejects every form of organization and self-discipline. Absolute individual freedom can be attained only in isolation- if at all: "What really takes away liberty and makes initiative impossible is the isolation which renders one powerless." (*Errico Malatesta, Life and Ideas*, Freedom Press, p. 87)

Anarchism is synonymous with the term "free socialism" or "social anarchism." As the term "social" itself implies, anarchism is the free association of people living together and cooperating in free communities. The abolition of capitalism and the state; workers' self-management of industry; distribution according to needs; free association; are principles which, for all socialist tendencies, constitute the essence of socialism. To distinguish themselves from fundamental differences about how and when these aims will be realized, as well as from the anti-social individualists, Peter Kropotkin and the other anarchist thinkers defined anarchism as the "left wing of the socialist movement." The Russian anarchist Alexei Borovoi declared that the proper basis for anarchism in a free society is the equality of all members in a free organization. Social anarchism could be defined as the equal right to be different.

## **Anarchism Is Not Unlimited Liberty Nor the Negation of Responsibility**

In social relations between people certain voluntary social norms will have to be accepted, namely, the obligation to fulfil a freely accepted agreement. Anarchism is not no government. Anarchism is *self-government* (or its equivalent, *self-administration*). Self-government means *self-discipline*. The alternative to self-discipline is enforced obedience imposed by rulers over their subjects. To avoid this, the members of every association freely make the rules of their association and agree to abide by the rules they themselves make. Those who refuse to live up to their responsibility to honour a voluntary agreement shall be deprived of its benefits.

## **The Right to Secede**

Punishment for violation of agreements is balanced by the inalienable right to secede. The right of groups and individuals to choose their own forms of association is, according to Bakunin, the most important of all political rights. The abrogation of this right leads to the reintroduction of tyranny. You cannot secede from a jail. Secession will not paralyse the association. People with strong, overriding common interests will cooperate. Those who stand more to lose by seceding will compromise their differences. Those who have little or nothing in common with the collectivity will not hurt the association by seceding, but will, on the contrary, eliminate a source of friction, thereby promoting general harmony.

## **Essential Difference Between Anarchism and the State**

The vast difference between the anarchist concept of freely accepted authority in the exchange of services which is the *administration of things*, differs fundamentally from the authority of the

state, which is the rule *over its subjects, the people*. For example, repairing my television: the authority of the expert mechanic ends when the repairs are made. The same applies when I agree to paint the mechanic's room. The reciprocal exchange of goods and services is a limited, not a personal, cooperative relationship which automatically excludes dictatorship. But the state, on the contrary, is an all-pervading apparatus governing every aspect of my life from conception to death, whose every decree I am compelled to obey or suffer harassment, abrogation of rights, imprisonment and even death.

People can freely secede from a group or association, even organize one of their own. But they cannot escape the jurisdiction of the state. If they finally do succeed in escaping from one state to another they are immediately subjected to the jurisdiction of the new state.

## Replacing the State

Anarchist concepts are not artificially concocted by anarchists. They are derived from tendencies already at work. Kropotkin, who formulated the sociology of anarchism, insisted that the anarchist conception of the free society is based on "those data which are already supplied by the observation of life at the present time." The anarchist theoreticians limited themselves to suggest the utilization of all the useful organisms in the old society in order to construct a new one. That the "elements of the new society are already developing in the collapsing bourgeois society" (Marx) is a fundamental principle shared by all tendencies in the socialist movement. The anarchist writer, Colin Ward, sums up this point admirably: "If you want to build the new society, all the materials are already at hand."

Anarchists seek to replace the state, not with chaos, but with the natural, spontaneous forms of organization that emerged wherever mutual aid and common interests through coordination and self-government became necessary. It springs from the ineluctable interdependence of mankind and the will to harmony. This form of organization is federalism. Society without order (as the term "society" implies) is inconceivable. But the organization of order is not the exclusive monopoly of the state. Federalism is a form of order which preceded the usurpation of society by the state and will survive it.

There is barely a single form of organization which, before it was usurped by the state, was not originally federalist in character. To this day only the listing of the vast network of local, provincial, national and international federations and confederations embracing the totality of social life would easily fill volumes. The federated form of organization makes it practical for all groups and federations to reap the benefits of unity and coordination while exercising autonomy within their own spheres, thus expanding the range of their own freedom. Federalism — synonym for free agreement — is the organization of freedom. As Proudhon put it, "He who says freedom without saying federalism, says nothing."

## After the Revolution

Society is a vast interlocking network of cooperative labour, and all the deeply rooted institutions now usefully functioning will in some form continue to function for the simple reason that the very existence of mankind depends upon this inner cohesion. This has never been questioned by anyone. What is needed is emancipation from authoritarian institutions over society

and authoritarianism *within* the organizations themselves. Above all, they must be infused with revolutionary spirit and confidence in the creative capacity of the people. Kropotkin, in working out the sociology of anarchism, has opened an area of fruitful research which had been largely neglected by social scientists busily mapping out new areas for state control.

The anarchists were primarily concerned with the immediate problems of social transformation that will have to be faced in any country after a revolution. It was for this reason that the anarchists tried to work out measures to meet the pressing problems most likely to emerge during what the anarchist writer-revolutionary Errico Malatesta called “the period of reorganization and transition.” A summary of Malatesta’s discussion of some of the more important questions follows.

Crucial problems cannot be avoided by postponing them to the distant future — perhaps a century or more — when anarchism will have been fully realized and the masses will have finally become convinced and dedicated anarcho-communists. We anarchists must have our own solution if we are not to play the role of “useless and impotent grumblers,” while the more realistic and unscrupulous authoritarians seize power. Anarchy or no anarchy, the people must eat and be provided with the necessities of life. The cities must be provisioned and vital services cannot be disrupted. Even if poorly served the people in their own interests would not allow anyone to disrupt these services unless and until they are reorganized in a better way, and this cannot be achieved in a day.

The organization of the anarchist-communist society on a wide scale can only be achieved gradually as material conditions permit, and the masses convince themselves of the benefits to be gained and as they gradually become psychologically accustomed to radical alterations in their way of life. Since free and voluntary communism (Malatesta’s synonym for anarchism) cannot be imposed, Malatesta stressed the necessity for the coexistence of various economic forms — collectivist, mutualist, individualist — on condition that there will be no exploitation of others. Malatesta was confident that the convincing example of successful libertarian collectives will

attract others into the orbit of the collectivity ... for my part, I do not believe that there is “one” solution to the social problem, but a thousand different and changing solutions, in the same way as social existence is different in time and space. [*Errico Malatesta, Life and Ideas*, edited by Vernon Richards, Freedom Press, London, pp. 36, 100, 99, 103–4, 101, 151, 159]

## **“Pure” Anarchism Is a Utopia**

“Pure” anarchism is defined by the anarchist writer George Woodcock as “the loose and flexible affinity group which needs no formal organization and carries on anarchist propaganda through an invisible network of personal contacts and intellectual influences.” Woodcock argues that “pure” anarchism is incompatible with mass movements like anarcho-syndicalism because they need

stable organizations precisely because it moves in a world that is only partially governed by anarchist ideals ... and make compromises with day-to-day situations ... [anarcho-syndicalism] has to maintain the allegiance of masses of [workers] who are only remotely conscious of the final aim of anarchism. [*Anarchism*, pp. 273–4]

If these statements are true, anarchism is a Utopia, because there will never be a time when everybody will be a “pure” anarchist and because humanity will forever have to make “compromises with the day-to-day situation.” This is not to say that anarchism excludes “affinity groups.” Indeed, it is precisely because the infinite variety of voluntary organizations which are formed, dissolved and reconstructed according to the fluctuating whims and fancies of individual adherents reflect *individual preferences* that they constitute the indispensable condition for the free society.

But the anarchists insist that production, distribution, communication exchange and the other indispensable which must be coordinated on a world-wide scale in our modern interdependent world must be supplied without fail by “stable” organizations and cannot be left to the fluctuating whims of individuals. They are *social obligations* which every able-bodied individual must fulfil if he or she expects to enjoy the benefits of collective labour. It should be axiomatic that such indispensable “stable” associations, anarchistically organized, are not a deviation. They constitute the essence of anarchism as a viable social order.

## Charting the Road to Freedom

Anarchists are not so naive as to expect the installation of the perfect society composed of perfect individuals who would miraculously shed their ingrown prejudices and outworn habits on the “day after the revolution.” We are not concerned with guessing how society will look in the remote future when heaven on earth will at last be attained. But we are above everything else, concerned with the *direction of human development*. There is no “pure” anarchism. There is only the application of anarchist principles to the realities of social living. The one and only aim of anarchism is to *propel society in an anarchist direction*.

Thus viewed, anarchism is a believable, practical guide to social organization. It is otherwise doomed to Utopian dreams, nor a living force.

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*This talk discussed the main principles of constructive anarchism.*

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