

Myths about anarchism

Anarcho

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This is a write-up of my talk at the 2015 London Anarchist Bookfair. It is based on my notes and so will not be exactly the same as at the event but it will be close enough. The meeting summary initially submitted for the programme was:

*Anarchists and anarchism have had a lot of nonsense written about them over the years. Whether it is proclaiming that we want chaos or see revolution as an easy process, the “conventional wisdom” is often at odds with reality. This applies to individual anarchists, with Proudhon painted as an advocate of “labour notes” or Kropotkin a gentle Prince of non-violence who had an idealistic vision of social revolution. This is not true. Anarchism and anarchists have a coherent and practical vision of both social change and a better (not perfect) society. Join Iain McKay (author of **An Anarchist FAQ**) as he explodes some of the common myths about anarchism and anarchists.*

The meeting itself was well attended with some good questions and discussion after my talk. Attendees seemed to be happy with it but it is up to the reader to determine whether the talk meet the expectations of the summary!

There is so much nonsense written about anarchism that it is hard to know where to start. While this applies across the political spectrum, perhaps needless to say, Marxists are particular prone to writing completely inaccurate articles but at least these are easy to refute as they just repeat themselves by regurgitating the nonsense written by the likes of Marx, Engels and Lenin!

I think that the biggest is that anarchism is just “anti-state”. As I will show, this is not remotely the case but it is, I think, the biggest myth which produces the biggest confusion. First, however, I will discuss some of the other more obvious and silly myths.

General Myths

The most obvious general myth is that ***anarchism equals chaos***. Seriously, who in their right mind wants chaos? Not anarchists. Yet this myth is interesting as it says more about current society than it does anarchism.

After all, what is chaos? It is a situation where anyone can coerce anyone else as much as can get away with. That is, ruling them. Chaos equals everyone acting like a state or boss. Or, in other words, the state is *legal* chaos, just “legal” coercion and rule *as defined by itself*.

Hence the old anarchist saying that “government is chaos, anarchy is order”!

The next big one is that ***anarchism is against organisation***. This is suggested by some people who you would expect to know better. Indeed, I remember reading an academic author proclaiming Max Stirner was not an anarchist because he was in favour of organisation (his “Union of Egoists”)! So anarchists were, apparently, even more individualistic than the arch-egoist himself.

Sometimes you have to conclude that such claims are driven by political needs. For example, one Marxist graphic “guide” to Marx rightly noted that Bakunin warned against the dangers of the abuse of power in the so-called workers’ state but then immediately proclaimed Bakunin was against all forms of organisation! You cannot help concluding that this nonsense was written to stop people looking at the libertarian socialist alternative for what sensible person would look into Bakunin’s ideas after reading that?

In reality, anarchists have thought about organisation from the start. We are *against* specific forms of organisation, namely those which are hierarchical, authoritarian, centralised, top-down – as in the capitalist workplace or state. We are *for* specific forms of organisation, namely self-managed, decentralised, federal, bottom-up ones which end the division between rulers and ruled.

Thus we find that Proudhon argued for a socio-economic federation based on workers control to end wage-labour (that is, the selling labour and liberty to a boss) as well as the election, mandating and recall of delegates to end the state (that is, delegating power to a few governors). He advocated a libertarian social organisation rooted in federalism and contract (free agreement) – collective self-rule within free associations.

Anarchists, then, recognise that co-operation does not equal coercion and so Engels (in his awful “On Authority”) was wrong in equating agreement with authority. This is liberal nonsense and anarchists had long argued that freedom is a product of association, not isolation, and so it is *how* we associate, *how* we organise, which is important.

Which brings me to my next myth, namely that ***anarchism is a fusion of liberalism and socialism***. This is wrong for anarchism is a *socialist* (egalitarian) critique of state and capitalism. Its main influences were Rousseau’s critique of liberalism and workers movement – liberalism only featured in terms of anarchist critiques of “Malthusian” economics and the class-ridden society it produced.

It is worthwhile reminding ourselves that classical liberalism not very liberal (in the modern sense). It justifies voluntary subjection, voluntary authority, exploitation, and so on. However, is the problem with slavery or dictatorship *really* that they are not voluntary? Yes, according to “libertarian” (i.e., propertarian) Robert Nozick who is echoing classical liberal John Locke. No, according to anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin who opposed the wage-labour liberalism defended.

Just as anarchism is socialist and not liberalism, the next myth is that ***anarchism is individualism***. While this is popular with Marxists, it baseless and simply that shows their ignorance. At the forefront of producing ignorant Marxist distortions about anarchism was Hal Draper who proclaimed anarchism the most anti-democratic ideology there is. Really? So monarchy or dictatorship is more democratic than anarchism? Is the party dictatorship implemented and advocated by Lenin and Trotsky more democratic? It just makes you wonder what Draper understood by democratic!

Yes, anarchists are in favour of individuality, individual liberty, free association. However, we draw egalitarian or *democratic* conclusions from these and not (classical) liberal ones. We recognise that a social organisation does *not* equal the state and so are looking for associations which are free internally as well as free to join. Individualism, in contrast, justifies authoritarian organisations while for anarchists individual freedom implies self-managed organisations and not hierarchical ones like the state or capitalist workplace.

There is an element of truth in the argument anarchists are “anti-democratic” simply because history shows that the majority can be wrong and oppressive. This means that minority rights, freedom to protest, freedom to experiment, and so on are important not only in themselves as a defence of freedom but also to ensure social evolution. This means that anarchists argue for majority decision making within freely joined associations but against majority rule.

Needless to say, while the majority can be oppressive we recognise that minority rule *is* oppressive – whether politically (dictatorship or monarchy) or economically (feudalism or capitalism).

Anarchists recognise that while the majority need not right, no minority (even one elected by a majority) can be trusted not to abuse its position.

From what has been said so far, it is clear that the sadly too common notion that ***anarchism is just anti-state*** is a myth. This one is popular with both Marxists and Propertarians (for obvious reasons) but it overlooks a significant aspect of anarchism, not least that the first anarchist book was *What is Property?* rather than *What is the State?* and that it concluded property was both “theft” and “despotism”!

Thus the property owner was the sovereign over their property and those who use it. This meant that wage-workers sold labour and liberty to boss which, in turn, ensures exploitation happens. From this Proudhon – like subsequent anarchists – concluded that property had to be abolished by becoming socially owned and managed by the individuals and groups who used it – workplaces would be run by their workers, houses by their tenants, communities by its member and so on.

This system of use-rights was termed “possession” and it would end wage-labour by association. In short, anarchism has stood for workers’ control of production since 1840.

This analysis of the hierarchical nature of property, of capitalism, feed into the anarchist critique of the state. The state defends exploitation and oppression of the many by the few which property creates, it is an instrument of class rule to enforce boss’s authority and cannot be anything else due to its structure (which reflects its role). It cannot be “captured” by the many for it is an unreformable instrument of the few.

So libertarian principles of being anti-state and anti-property are intertwined and interlinked. Ah, what about the so-called “libertarian” right? Does that not show that anarchism is just anti-state? No, for the “libertarian” right stole the name libertarian from the left in 1950s America – apparently, theft is property! They also defend state-like social relationships (most obviously, wage-labour and landlordism) and usually support fascism to ensure them (von Mises eulogised fascism in the 1920s while von Hayek supported Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile). This is only surprising if you think they are genuinely interested in liberty rather than property – and the power that goes with it.

Anarchists are often portrayed as being utopians but the notion that ***anarchism just about a perfect future world*** is a myth. Far from it, we all about applying our ideas in the here and now for we recognise that people change through struggle. Hierarchy corrupts our character, both the rulers and ruled, while resisting hierarchy improves our character. Indeed, it is the struggle for freedom which makes us able to live as free individuals. Thus we create the new world while we fight the current one.

Nor does it mean anarchists think everyone will be perfect in a free society. People are not perfect and there will always be arseholes – the difference is they will not be in positions of power! It is because people are not perfect that we are anarchists – you cannot give imperfect, flawed people power over others! Hence our arguments for free association, election, mandates, and recall – power corrupts both those at the top and those below.

Another myth, although perhaps a more understandable one, is the notion that ***anarchism is Proudhonism, Bakuninism, Kropotkinism, and so on***. This is wrong because we do not (like some!) name ourselves after individuals. Individuals, as should be obvious, can be wrong! While Proudhon laid down many of the keys ideas of anarchism he was completely wrong – and self-contradictory – on the issue of feminism. His sexism is an obvious example of why we reject calling ourselves after individuals.

No one is completely consistent and even the best anarchist makes mistakes – Kropotkin in the First World War springs to mind! So it is not the case that because an anarchist said it that it is anarchist but rather whether the statement is it consistent with anarchist principles. Thus Proudhon’s patriarchy was inconsistent with his own principles – why should the home be excluded from the critique of hierarchy made with regards to the state and property? Similarly, Proudhon’s opposition to strikes is not reflected in the works of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman and other revolutionary anarchists.

Thinkers are part of a wider movement and gain influence because they chime with it. They lose that influence when they no longer do – as Kropotkin found out in 1914! – and so we reject the idea that quoting individual anarchists is sufficient to define anarchism. Yet, for all that, there are individuals whose work helped define and shape anarchism and it is useful to discuss the myths associated with specific individuals for these will help debunk some common myths about anarchism as such.

Myths about Individual Anarchists

Fittingly, I will start with *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* who, in 1840, proclaimed himself an anarchist. There are many myths about Proudhon and these are, in the main, due to a lack of translations of his voluminous output and unreliable commentators (like Marx).

Suffice to say, Marx did *not* refute him in *The Poverty of Philosophy* – that book is a hatch-job and there is simply too much nonsense within it to go into here. As an example, Marx simply asserts Proudhon advocated “Labour Notes” and fails to mention the numerous passages which show this is definitely *not* the case.

Proudhon, regardless of Marx’s implication, did not oppose large scale industry nor did he advocate “small-scale” property. In fact, his theory reflects the rise of industry – rather than ignore or deplore it – by arguing for workers associations (co-operatives) to run workplaces. Nor was he an individualist for he recognised that groups were greater than the sum of their parts due to what he termed “collective force”. Groups were as real as the individuals who make it up and so these had to be self-managed to ensure it group reflects individuals and their ideas. He also saw the need for wide-scale organisation in the form of a federation of self-governing associations in both society – communes (or self-governing communities) – and the economy – associated labour (self-managed workplaces). He even argued for a democratic armed forces were soldiers elect their officers.

This would be a bottom-up federation with elected, mandated and recallable delegates – as applied in the Paris Commune in 1871 and praised by Marx. In short, he was the first modern socialist.

The next anarchist to discuss is *Michael Bakunin* and, again, there are many myths about him – perhaps due to him being right on Marx? After all, social democracy became as reformist has he feared while the dictatorship of the proletariat indeed became the dictatorship *over* the proletariat as he predicted.

Needless to say, he was not an advocate of “pan-destruction”. Indeed, the famous “urge to destroy” quote used rolled out was uttered long before he became an anarchist. During his anarchist phase he repeatedly stresses that violence should be directed at institutions not people (but

recognised that this was unlikely to happen in practice due to the popular passions produced by years of exploitation and oppression).

As an anarchist, he advocated what would later be called a syndicalist strategy – working class self-organisation and struggle by means of unions, strikes, general strikes, insurrection, workers councils. This would build the new world while fighting the current one but while recognising the need to win reforms by direct action Bakunin was not a reformist like Proudhon but built on his ideas to advocate a revolution in the popular sense of the word and, regardless of what Marxists may say, he also recognised need for defence of a revolution by means of a federation of workers councils and workers militias. In short, he was the first modern – revolutionary – anarchist

Finally, I must mention Peter Kropotkin who was *not* a gentle prince of co-operation or “non-violence” as some assert (pacifist, according to one Marxist!) but rather a revolutionary anarchist like Bakunin. He, also like Bakunin, advocated what would be termed a syndicalist strategy – unions, strikes, general strike, workers councils, and so on.

Kropotkin did not think revolution would be easy. Quite the reverse for he argued anarchism was needed because a state could not handle the inevitable problems a social revolution would throw up. Nor did he deny the role of individual or class struggle as many claims – he was very clear that mutual aid was just *one* factor in evolution. Finally, he did not think anarchy would just appear like manna from heaven and so, again like Bakunin, saw the need for anarchists to organise as anarchists and work within the masses to spread anarchist ideas.

Conclusions

I was going to discuss the great revolutions – the Paris Commune, Russia 1905 and 1917, Spain 1936 – but there is no time and I’m not a big fan of being lectured to. Suffice to say, each one confirmed anarchist theory in one way or another.

This includes the Spanish revolution which showed that anarchists make mistakes rather than pointing to so fundamental flaw in anarchist theory as Marxists proclaims. In short, the Russian revolution failed because Marxists applied their ideas while the Spanish one failed because anarchists did *not* apply their ideas – a *very* big difference!

I’ll end with the final myth, namely that ***anarchism cannot appeal to working class people***. This is obviously wrong as most anarchists – now and then – are working class. I’m working class, a trade unionist, and see its benefits. The real question is: how do we apply ourselves in making anarchism a social movement again?

If we can burst this myth we will burst all the other myths about anarchism as a consequence.

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