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# How Anarchy Works

A Guide To Organising Anarchy

Andrewism

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1 May 2024

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1 May 2024

The Russian Counterrevolution by Crimethinc  
Anarchy Works by Peter Gelderloos  
Towards Anarchism by Errico Malatesta  
Your Politics Are Boring As Fuck by Crimethinc  
Life Without Law by Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness

sider responsible for the state of affairs we're in. I'm an anarchist because I see value in pursuing these answers through what I consider the creativity, honesty, and flexibility of the anarchist framework.

All power to all the people.

Peace.

## Further Reading

A New Glossary by Shawn Wilbur  
Are We Good Enough by Peter Kropotkin  
Anarchy vs Archy: No Justified Authority by ziq  
Words of a Rebel by Peter Kropotkin  
Anarchy by Errico Malatesta  
Anarchism and Democracy by Zoe Baker  
Reflections for the US Occupy Movement by Peter Gelderloos  
From Democracy to Freedom by Crimethinc  
Anarchism as Extreme Democracy by Wayne Price  
Majorities and Minorities by Errico Malatesta  
About the Platform by Errico Malatesta and Nestor Makhno  
Anarchy and Democracy by C4SS  
Democracy and Anarchy by Errico Malatesta  
Anarchists Against Democracy by Various Authors  
Debunking Democracy by Bob Black  
The Abolition of Rulership by William Gillis  
Worshipping Power by Peter Gelderloos  
Antinomies of Democracy by Shawn Wilbur  
Archy vs Anarchy by Shawn Wilbur  
Authority, Liberty and the Federative Principle by Shawn Wilbur  
Governing the Commons by Elinor Ostrom  
The Ecology of Freedom by Murray Bookchin  
Prefigurative Politics by Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin

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tion, and impermanence. I recommend engaging with those questions and remembering that while it's good to look at what worked in the past, there's no need to limit ourselves to what worked in the past.

We in the present must understand that anarchy is something we're striving toward that has yet to ever be achieved. Anarchy is unprecedented. That realisation can feel damning to some, but I find it exciting and liberating. If we base our judgement of what is possible only on what we have observed, we are doomed to create nothing new. There was a time when what exists now could not have been conceived, when the divine right of kings seemed inescapable, and yet here we are. We exist at a time with access to more knowledge than ever about what humans are capable of. Something not existing today does not mean it cannot be created tomorrow. Failures of the past do not guarantee failures of the future. Perhaps the anarchist philosophy is obscure now, but that says nothing of its merit for what comes next. Perhaps anarchy can never be achieved, but anyone who favours concrete steps toward free association and against hierarchy is an ally of mine.

As Malatesta said, "The subject is not whether we accomplish Anarchism today, tomorrow, or within ten centuries, but that we walk towards Anarchism today, tomorrow, and always."

I know that this project does not interest everyone, for any number of reasons, and as I said in my Leftist Disunity video, that's a difference in perspective I can accommodate to a point. I don't necessarily need everyone to identify as an anarchist yet, but I will do what I can to get people on the road to questioning their hierarchical assumptions. I will not compromise my principles, but I also will not refuse to build resilience with others in the face of our global crisis.

As a final note, don't trust anyone who claims to have all the answers. I'm not an anarchist because I have all the answers or think anarchism answers all my questions. I'm an anarchist because I'm curious to find the answers that exist outside the hierarchies I con-

Something I neglected to mention in my video on the State is an observation that Gelderloos made in *Worshipping Power* (2017), which is that colonising states appointed leaders to the horizontal societies they were trying to absorb. Why? Because hierarchical societies are easier to control and more vulnerable to the conquest of more powerful hierarchies. If a stateless people have no hierarchies that a colonising state can exploit, then state institutions will need to be provided, otherwise, the colonising state has very few possibilities to expand its control beyond attempted genocide or demanded tribute. An ungovernable people cannot be as easily conquered as a people already under the yoke of rule. Part of how we defend ourselves from authorities must involve refusing the seemingly “pragmatic” introduction of authority.

Finally, in responding to the question of defence, we must recognise that just like capitalists don’t do the work that produces their capital, authorities don’t do the violence that defends their authority, they order others in the form of police, military, or private security to fight for them. Given that subordinates are the ones who bear the cost of protracted conflict, history shows rates of desertion and occasional mutinies that anarchists can potentially take advantage of.

Ultimately, the pursuit of anarchy is an unending struggle that requires ongoing analysis and flexible adaptation to ever-changing conditions. There is no single prescription or plan set in stone; we need a diversity of strategies and experiments guided by anarchic principles to see success. I see many new anarchists falling into the trap of limiting their imagination to what has already existed, but it’s important to keep in mind that Civil War Spain, Black Army Ukraine, and the Zapatistas are not the boundaries of anarchist possibilities. Historical attempts at anarchist or decolonial social revolutions, while making some significant strides, still fell short, had structural failings, and made strategic errors. In *Anarchy Works* (2010), Gelderloos challenges us to think deeper about our history, raising questions about isolation, alliances, repression, collabora-

## Introduction

What if we didn’t need bosses, politicians, borders, landlords, police, or prisons?

There was a time when each of these things did not exist, and whatever you may believe now about their absolute necessity, have you considered that there can be a time again when we can do much better without them?

Anarchists dare to desire a world without rule.

Neither the rule of the minority nor the rule of the majority. Neither the rule of the capitalists nor the rule of the bureaucrats. Neither the rule of men nor the rule of royalty nor the rule of the elderly nor the rule of warlords. An-archy. Without rule.

The world around you illustrates the consequences of a life under archy. Under rule. Do the details of the crises playing out before our eyes even bear repeating? By now we should realise that there is more to life than this. By now we should know there is something wrong with a life of endless toil soothed by commercial distractions for the power and profit of authorities, while the Earth cries out and her children weep for lack of a future. How much longer do we let these rulers run our world to ruin?

These are the social, political, economic, and environmental consequences of a life under the rule of capitalists and statists. Beyond individual rulers, these are the consequences of hierarchical systems. Those above have the power to command obedience through police, courts, prisons, schooling, taxation, property, and other systems of control and those below can only submit. Hierarchy is among the greatest obstacles to the full realisation of a free and fulfilling social life.

No one person or group sat down to design this world, it is a product of historical developments, material conditions, and social relations shaped by billions across time that have slowly but not inevitably entrenched specific systems of hierarchical power. Patriarchy. Capitalism. The State. There is no reason to believe that

this is the best we can do. The assumption that what currently exists must necessarily exist is the acid that corrodes all visionary thinking.

Your ability to meet your needs, your ability to find belonging in the ups and downs of a free-forming social life, your ability to create and pursue life purpose, and your ability to explore the full spectrum of your potential is constricted by a life under rule.

Anarchists dare to desire a world without rule, and for that, across the spectrum of politics, we are mocked, ridiculed, and defamed.

But this message is for those who see what I see, who want to seek out new horizons for the future of humanity and a better way of life for oneself. For those, like me, who are ever seeking to learn and explore as much as possible. This message is for those curious about how we might organise anarchy.

## Defining Anarchy

To do so, we must first define anarchism, as it is widely misunderstood by nonanarchists, and even some self-identifying anarchists. Although, to be fair, quoting anarchist Shawn Wilbur, “As long as there has been something called ‘anarchism,’ anarchists have been struggling to define it—and, as often as not, they have been in struggle against other self-identified anarchists.” While the term originated with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the burning desire for freedom from rule that inspired it can be found across continents and aeons. Anarchism is the term given to the political philosophy and practice that opposes all hierarchies along with their “justifying” dogmas and proposes the unending pursuit of anarchy, a world without rule where free association, self-determination, and mutual aid form the basis of our society. By hierarchies, anarchists are referring to the stratification of society which gives some individuals, groups, or institutions au-

and consciousness that people develop are used to either maintain a given social system, change it, abolish it, or replace it altogether. If we want to create an anarchic society, then we need to develop people’s ability to self-organise, which will drive them to seek out and develop horizontal forms of organisation, which will shape their consciousness about hierarchy and empower them to resist domination both here and in future.

The question of defending the revolutionary process often begins from a faulty understanding of what anarchist social revolution actually entails. People ask this question with the assumption of a situation akin to civil war. My first response is to clarify, as I just did, what anarchists mean by social revolution. Revolution is a constant process that aims to continuously unmake hierarchy, not a flip of the switch or just a war on the streets. Only on that foundational understanding can I answer the question of how anarchists might deal with authoritarian reaction. Quite simply, by the use of organised force.

Neither force nor organisation, as we established, are intrinsically tied to hierarchy. Social revolution would involve upending the ideology that reinforces hierarchical power, dismantling the institutions that facilitate that power, and defending against the reaction of authorities by people themselves. Self-emancipation is the goal, so building a resilient and liberatory alternative to the status quo will inevitably produce a group of people driven to jealously guard their own liberty. Once there’s a genuine interest in pursuing and defending their freedom, people will choose to fight for themselves and their loved ones. They don’t need to be commanded to do so by an authority that will only prove counterrevolutionary to their freedom. All that might be needed is a measure of coordination. As I described it earlier, this would just require that individuals, preferably with expertise, consult and facilitate communication between defensive groups that have a shared responsibility to each other and a shared commitment to success.

The process of social revolution involves *acts of confrontation*, such as occupation and expropriation; *acts of noncooperation*, such as strikes and boycotts; and *acts of prefiguration*, such as establishing spaces of encounter, free schools, and alternative economies. If such efforts are effectively networked, they can grow large enough to practically counter the all-encompassing idea and experience of many that there is no alternative to capitalism and the State. I still recommend my video on the topic for a full explanation, with the obvious caveat that I would now challenge my consensus- and democracy-limited depiction of popular assemblies and cooperatives as a misrepresentation or needless restriction of anarchy, which can be more accurately referred to as participatory in general, serving as spaces of popular discussion, activity, and consultation without legislation.

The process of social revolution must also involve **affinity groups**, another term for groups formed on the basis of free association, utilising the practice of **social insertion**, which is an especifist term that describes the active involvement of anarchists in mass movements to influence their development in anti-authoritarian directions. By recognising the interrelation of powers, drives, and consciousness, we can shape the direction of revolutionary change.

\*\*\*Powers\*\* refer to your power to do something, not power over others, and such powers are continuously determined by both internal and external factors, like your ability to communicate with others or the social relations you're involved in. **Drives** encompass your conscious and unconscious goals and motivations, which are influenced by external factors and reciprocally affected by your powers. Finally, your **consciousness** allows reflection, deliberation, and the ability to direct and modify actions. Our consciousness is also contextual and impacts our powers and drives by aiding in the development of tools and concepts that enable us to critique societal norms, understand social dynamics, envision alternative social organisations, and organise for change. The powers, drives,

thority over others. In this context, authority refers to the recognised right above others in a social relationship to give commands, make decisions, and enforce obedience.

## Opposing Authority

But why is it that anarchists oppose authority?

Well, the main issue is that hierarchical authority divides society between rulers and ruled, with harmful consequences for both. It is not that anarchists assume that human nature is all good all the time, but rather, as anarchist Peter Kropotkin argued in *Are We Good Enough* (1888), “both rulers and ruled are spoiled by authority” and “both exploiters and exploited are spoiled by exploitation.” Anarchists “admit the imperfections of human nature, but we make no exception for the rulers.” When the interests of rulers are prioritised above all others, everyone suffers. Those at the top might enjoy power and privilege, but their narrow position impedes the flow of information and insulates them from the experiences, ideas, and perspectives of those below them that can contribute to everyone's well-being. Those at the bottom are compelled to obedience and subordination by a system greater than themselves, which fosters dependency and erodes our capacity to self-organise without authority and control our own destinies. Not to mention, hierarchy creates conflict, as authorities compete for control, subordinates compete for scraps, and authorities and subordinates clash over their opposing interests—one seeks greater power over as the other seeks greater autonomy from. For these reasons and others, anarchists oppose authority, whether it's found in the spheres of society, economy, or politics.

## Dissecting Authority

In order to organise anarchy, we need to be crystal clear about authority. There's no such thing as a universal and constant def-

inition of any term, as meaning is constantly determined by our usage and debates over usage. Authority has been defined in many ways and contexts, but historically, anarchists have used it to refer to relations of command and subordination. I would argue that this definition is usefully specific, as we need to disentangle the authority that we oppose from the concepts that it has come to be jumbled with.

In various conversations, I've seen authority and hierarchy get confused with force, violence, expertise, influence, respect, and coordination. None of those concepts, on their own, necessarily grant authority as in the recognised right above others in a social relationship to give commands, make decisions, and enforce obedience.

Authorities might use **force** or **violence** to maintain their authority in certain cases, but the use of force or violence alone does not bestow authority. Using force to pull someone out of traffic doesn't make you an authority. As for violence, the ruling class and other authorities don't even directly carry out violence, at least not usually—that is the work of their subordinates in the police and military whom they authorise to use violence. It is the ruling class's recognised right above their subordinates to command that violence in a hierarchical power structure that gives them authority. If that right was not recognised and their subordinates did not accept subordination to their commands, then that authority could not exist. Which is why authority is primarily maintained by sheer inertia and social conditioning rather than outright violence.

**Expertise** merely refers to one's knowledge or skill in a particular field, but my understanding of CPR or ability to bake shortbread cookies does not make me an authority over you. Other than the conflation of force and authority, this is one of the most common confusions people have about anarchism, made worse by the fact that there are some anarchists who still use authority to refer to both command and expertise just because Bakunin did. Personally, I find that creates needless confusion. If you're using the word authority to describe everything from slavery to knowing how to

its parts. Furthermore, our approach to nature must similarly be based in complementarity. Rather than maintaining an antagonistic, dominating relationship with nature, we must strive to find a complementary melding of nature (first nature) and society (second nature), which Bookchin called third nature.

If that's piqued your curiosity, check out those videos I mentioned.

## Pursuing Anarchy

Going further, with the dissection of authority; the understanding of mutual interdependence; the principles of free association and federation; the critique of democracy and reevaluation of consensus; the practice and ideal of spaces of encounter and consultative associations; and the concept of the commons and the library economy in mind, we can now answer the question of how to pursue anarchy.

In short, a **social revolution** that “seeks to alter the whole character of society.” But what does that mean? People typically envision some massive uprising in the future akin to popular media's depictions of the French Revolution, but in reality, as anarchists use the term, social revolution refers to an ongoing and intentional transformation of our society, economy, culture, philosophy, technology, relationships, and politics. It is not starting from scratch, but rather utilising the shell of the old to build the new, taking on a conscious engagement with current conditions and using the means that are compatible with desired ends. That process might be punctuated with flashy moments where leaps and bounds may be achieved, but much of the real foundations of anarchy are established in the interludes between insurrections. It is not the single, momentous tsunami that shapes the coast, but rather the many small waves that erode the land with time.



Those associations would also serve to monitor the conditions and use of the CPR over time, disseminating information that would concern affected parties so that conflicts of varying tolerance can be resolved between individuals and groups with no single static approach, but a variety of approaches adopted on a case by case basis. CPRs would also most likely give rise to spaces of encounter where agreements about norms developed in compatibility with local conditions can be negotiated.

\*\*\*The library economy\*\* or “library of everything,” as I’ve used it, is a rhetorical means of communicating the concept of the commons as a socialised and participatory organisation of resources and distribution of goods and services. It is another way of conceptualising a potential outcome of free association in anarchy. The library economy is based on three key principles, drawing from Bookchin’s work in *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982): usufruct, the irreducible minimum, and complementarity.

\*\*Usufruct\*, as a pervasive norm, refers to the freedom of individuals or groups to access and use, but not destroy, common resources to supply their needs. This is as opposed to the limitation of access based on exclusive ownership. Personal possessions may always be a thing, but capitalist property certainly should not. *The irreducible minimum* is the guaranteed provision of the means necessary to sustain life. It is the level of living that no one should ever fall below, regardless of the size of their individual contribution, including access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, education, and healthcare. Finally, as a library economy would require a vast reorientation of our priorities from the centrality of capital and competition to the centrality of humanity and cooperation, the last core concept of a library economy is *complementarity*, which can now also be described as unrestrained mutual interdependence made manifest through collective force. Complementarity is a way of looking at non-hierarchical differences within a society as something generative, where each person, of whatever skill or ability, contributes a small part to an outcome greater than the sum of

build a bridge, then why use the word at all? Just use the word expertise when you’re talking about expertise. Listening to medical advice isn’t a hierarchy. Having expertise doesn’t give me the right to command you unless I hold a position in a hierarchical power structure that grants me that authority. As Bakunin himself said:

“...we ask nothing better than to see men endowed with great knowledge, great experience, great minds, and, above all, great hearts, exert over us a natural and legitimate influence, freely accepted and never imposed in the name of any official authority whatsoever, celestial or terrestrial.”

On the topic of **influence**, as should be clear, the mere capacity to have an effect on the character, development, or behaviour of someone is far more expansive than a relationship of command and subordination. As for respect, some authorities might demand respect as in obedience to their will, but no authority can demand that you feel respect for them, as in deep admiration elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements. That is beyond their control.

Finally, **coordination** might be more difficult to conceptually disentangle from authority, but I don’t think that the act of ensuring that the moving parts in an activity work together effectively requires command per se. In fact, it doesn’t need to be undertaken by just one person; it’s something that multiple people can engage in. Coordination can be conceptualised in anarchy not as making decisions for others but more as information transfer in a free agreement between equals. This is qualitatively different from command, as it just involves supplementing the capacities of others with a shared commitment to the smooth execution of tasks by keeping track and ensuring that people are aware of what others are doing in a project.

To reiterate, the point of this exercise in disentangling authority from concepts like force, violence, expertise, influence, respect,

and coordination is so that we can pre-empt this confusion of concepts authorities use to naturalise their rule. If we don't grasp these distinctions, we're not going to be able to understand anarchism on its own terms nor effectively resist hierarchy.

## Organising Anarchy

With all that out of the way, we can finally begin to explore how we might organise anarchy. As humans, none of us exist in isolation. The dichotomy between the individual and the collective is a false one; the freedom and well-being of the former is inextricably linked to the freedom and well-being of the latter. We rely on each other for various aspects of our lives, and that reliance creates a web of **mutual interdependence** that forms the basis of any human society, whether hierarchical or anarchic. Hierarchical society creates norms, practices, and institutions that shape how we cooperate. The predominance of hierarchy paired with our mutual interdependence compels us to obey authority and participate in exploitative systems whether we want to or not. Organising anarchy will involve developing consciously anarchic norms, practices, and institutions that will reshape the way that we cooperate on the basis of our mutual interdependence without hierarchy.

By recognising our mutual interdependence, we can understand the concept of **collective force**, which refers to the combined productive power generated by individuals working together as a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. In the context of anarchy, your individual labour must still intermingle with others to accomplish tasks, but your labour does so without the imposition of hierarchy, as collective force is instead harnessed through free association.

\*\*\*Free association\*\* is the founding principle of anarchic social organisation and refers to the ability of each individual to move around and associate or disassociate with others as they so choose

\*\*\*The commons\*\* are defined as a common-pool resource or CPR, which is a natural or man-made resource system that benefits a group of people, but provides diminished benefits to everyone if each individual pursues their own self-interest to the detriment of others. We must draw a further distinction between the resource system and the resource units produced by the system. Resource systems include forests, lakes, fisheries, pastures, and even infrastructure like windmills and the internet, while resource units consist of whatever users appropriate from those resource systems, such as cubic metres of lumber harvested, tons of fish withdrawn and fodder grazed, kilowatts generated and network bandwidth used. It's important to maintain the renewability of a resource system by ensuring that the average rate of withdrawal does not exceed the average rate of replenishment.

The term 'appropriators' refers to those in association who withdraw resource units from a resource system. Appropriators may use the resource units they withdraw, like residents powering their homes or farmers watering their crops, or they may transfer the resource units for others to use, such as a logger sending lumber to an association of builders. Producers are those in association who directly construct, repair, and sustain the resource system itself. In the organisation of commons, producers and appropriators are often the same people, but when they aren't, in anarchy they would still be rather closely associated as a consequence of their mutual interdependence.

Groups organised around CPRs will naturally develop norms that guide their behaviour and maintain mutual responsibility to each other. In doing so, I believe they may benefit from the guidance of the principles that I've somewhat modified that were originally outlined by Elinor Ostrom in *Governing the Commons* (1990). Those are:

Clearly defined boundaries, where those involved have a clear sense of the exact structure and characteristics of the CPR, which is part of where a consultative association would provide benefit.

Let me give an example to illustrate what this looks like in the context of anarchy. A group of builders might organise themselves upon identifying the need for more housing in their neighbourhood or might have that need brought to them in a space of encounter. Following the incentive to be as informed as possible to avoid unnecessary conflict, they will then need to access the information available in the consultative associations they are part of, including referencing any useful preexisting blueprints; surveying the wants and needs of those seeking housing; identifying the current land, labour, and resource constraints; and identifying any concerns that the neighbours affected by such construction might have. Once they've gathered a satisfactory amount of information, gathered the necessary resources, and addressed any potentially obstructive concerns, they can proceed to build the house.

Consultative associations would not exist as distinct and static entities separate from their constituents, but will no doubt overlap and diverge unrestrained by the firm or the polity form. This echoes Kropotkin's description of Communes in an economic context in *Words of a Rebel* (1885), as he says that "[...] economic frontiers do not exist: the zones of production and exchange of various products interpenetrate each other, tangle with each other, impose themselves on each other." Consultative associations can be formed here and now, to connect existing projects and disseminate the lessons we learn from them and to bring together the information and actors necessary to accomplish our various goals.

## Librarying Economies

How do these concepts fit into library economies? Great question. In case you haven't seen them, in 2022 I made a video on the commons and a video on library economies. I'll try to summarise them both here, in the context of everything we have discussed so far.

without being subject to authority. Free association empowers individuals to connect with each other and form groups based around shared interests or desired actions to pursue those interests or actions. Groups don't form without a specific goal in mind, whether that is maintaining roads, producing and distributing food, or building housing. In anarchy, the ability to accomplish anything is proportional to the will of free people to get it done. You cannot order someone else; deciders and doers are the same people. So if it won't be done without subordinating people to the will of authority, it doesn't get done. As a natural consequence of groups forming around existing points of consensus and intended goals rather than trying to subsume diverse interests into a static entity that exists for its own sake, the social fabric is continuously altered as groups inevitably overlap, merge, split, and dissolve.

Of course, forming groups around shared interests doesn't prevent conflict between groups, but since the escalation of conflict can upset the social equilibrium in unpredictable, potentially harmful ways, everyone is incentivised to prevent escalation and adjust to find compromise. In the absence of legal order implied by anarchy, **mutual responsibility** informed by our mutual interdependence will guide our action. Since there is no authority to impose a set of rules and punishments, conflicts are resolved organically as they emerge. It's not that there aren't consequences, quite the opposite in fact, it is just that consequences are not predefined. Free association creates a social environment of constant negotiation and consultation where needed to avoid unnecessary conflicts.

Because you can't form an entire settlement around a "point of consensus" and because shared territory is rather limited in its ability to unify diverse interests, it begs the question of what "**the Commune**" even looks like in the context of anarchy. The anarchist commune can be easily confused with intentional communities or administrative divisions, but if we're going by Kropotkin's description in *Words of a Rebel* (1885), chapters 10 to 11 make it clear that Kropotkin used the term Commune to

describe any group formed on the basis of free association. In fact, he juxtaposes the free Commune with traditional conceptions of it, claiming:

“For us, ‘Commune’ no longer means a territorial agglomeration; it is rather a generic name, a synonym for the grouping of equals which knows neither frontiers nor walls. The social Commune will soon cease to be a clearly defined entity. Each group in the Commune will necessarily be drawn towards similar groups in other communes; they will come together and the links that federate them will be as solid as those that attach them to their fellow citizens, and in this way there will emerge a Commune of interests whose members are scattered in a thousand towns and villages. Each individual will find the full satisfaction of his needs only by grouping with other individuals who have the same tastes but inhabit a hundred other communes.”

Kropotkin’s commune is essentially a fluid collective of individuals and groups, wherever they find themselves, coming together of their own volition and according to their shared interests, projects, and activities without being bound to territorial designations. This is what distinguishes the anarchist commune from the municipal democracy of Bookchin’s communalism. This commune does not require that the individuals involved subordinate themselves to some form of local government made up of the whole. In other words, a truly anarchist commune does not take on the **polity form**.

But the concept and critique of the polity form may require further explanation. Wilbur uses polity form as a descriptor for “more or less fixed, static associations or organisations” that anthropomorphise social collectivities as “bodies with the organs of direc-

ing about goals, strategy, and which tactics to allow, thousands of people in autonomous groups were able to pursue and synchronise their wide array of plans for action. Crimethinc concludes with the recognition that:

“Only when we understand ourselves as nodes within dynamic collectivities, rather than discrete entities possessed of static interests, can we make sense of the rapid metamorphoses that people undergo in the course of experiences like the Occupy movement—and the tremendous power of the encounter to transform us if we open ourselves to it.”

Finally returning to the concept of federation as promised, we can look to *Antinomies of Democracy* (2017), where Wilbur writes about how federative organisation would be the process by which we identify specific social selves, as in interests or needs, and establish their involvement in large scale collectivities that are formed on the basis of those converging interests. He specifies that these collectivities would exist on a specifically consultative basis, quite literally to seek and disseminate information or advice as it relates to those interests, with the recognition where relevant of expertise. These “**consultative associations**” might be organised to collect and relay information related to everything from armed defence to cohousing construction to agroforestry. There might be consultative associations with a journalistic focus and consultative associations with a rewilding focus. They may exist on any scale, depending on the specificity of the information needed, from as local as an apartment building to as far-reaching as a continent or even the entire globe. Consultative associations can create blueprints, document the available labour and expertise, source resources, and share feedback. All so that interested and affected individuals and groups can easily access everything they need to make informed decisions.

how much intimacy and interdependence proves beneficial for the participants. When a configuration must change, this need not be a sign of failure: on the contrary, it shows that the participants are not competing for hegemony.”

## Exploring Alternatives

When exploring what it means to organise anarchy, we must both consider what the future that we are striving toward might look like and understand what is required to accomplish those goals in the here and now. That is what is meant by *means* and *ends*. The two cannot be separated. I know that this discussion can all feel very vague, so let’s look practically at how we can agitate for anarchy.

One of the proposals that Crimethinc advocates in place of formal sites of centralised decision-making are **spaces of encounter**, where people of diverse interests can find and connect with others of common concern in accordance with the principle of free association. These spaces of encounter might be created or found in libraries, parks, community centres, cafes, makerspaces, common rooms, schools, or even online. Spaces of encounter might also be developed along existing supply chains on the factory floor, in warehouses, in stores, on farms, or in offices as part of a radical transformation of labour. All it takes to get the ball rolling is an opportunity, perhaps an initiating event, for folks to come together, start sharing their offers and needs, and experiment with solutions. On that foundation, the full potential for spaces of encounter can be built.

Crimethinc points to the example of the space of encounter that preceded the demonstrations against the 2001 Free Trade Area of the Americas summit in Quebec City. Rather than employing an organisational model intended to produce binding central unity that would have participants spending the entire night fruitlessly argu-

tion placed in some ‘head.’” He argues that this ‘archic’ conception of social organisation tends to inform our understandings of “the patriarchal family, the governmental state, the capitalist firm, the democratic ‘People’ and, sometimes, even the anarchistic commune, community, or federation.”

As Wilbur points out:

“Even when, in a democracy or some forms of communism, the People at the top of the hierarchy is presumed to be the sum of the persons at the bottom, the doubling is almost always explicitly for the purposes of imposing the will of the whole on more recalcitrant parts.”

In other words, the domination of the minority by the majority. When we start with some abstract grouping like “The Community” that may not necessarily share any real interests in common and then place some decision-making system at its head that is responsible for identifying and enacting the will of this abstract entity, it tends to take a life of its own—often led by the group’s most dominant voices—and subordinate real individuals to the “will” of the nebulous collective.

Organising anarchy must involve breaking free of this “polity form.” The alternative principle of social organisation lies in **federation**, not in the sense of networking conventional static polities like a confederation of city states, but instead bringing together the information and perspectives necessary to facilitate the dynamic process of free association. We’ll explore how we can visualise this concept of federation later on, but now that we understand at least the basics of these concepts, we can take a moment to reflect on what falls short of organising anarchy.

## Transcending Democracy

For some time now, there has been a debate among anarchists concerning the idea of **democracy**. Historical anarchists have mostly abhorred it, but these days, some anarchists oppose democracy, while other anarchists support democracy. Some say the debate is just a matter of semantics, others argue that it most certainly is not.

Anarchist YouTuber Zoe Baker's video on *Anarchism and Democracy* (2022) is treated by many as having settled that debate. She concludes that "modern and historical anarchists advocate the same core positions" and "what many modern anarchists label as democracy without the state, historical anarchists just called free association or anarchy."

For a long time, I considered myself neutral in this debate, indeed considering the distinction mostly semantic. I accepted Baker's conclusions and moved on. But since then I've concluded through research that pro-democracy and anti-democracy anarchists are not, in fact, just "describing the same thing with different language." I understand that democracy has some positive associations that some anarchists, myself formerly included, may want to latch on to our very misunderstood ideology. But I no longer believe that democracy can ever be truly descriptive of anarchy. To understand how I reached this conclusion, let's start with the definition of democracy.

Now, democracy is a historically contested term, but it is also widely understood primarily as a form of government by the whole population, typically through elected representatives. It is also used to describe the control of an organisation or group by the majority of its members. Looking at its etymology, democracy quite literally means rule by the people. *Demos*, the people, and *kratos*, the rule. As anarchist Peter Gelderloos recognised in his *Reflections for the US Occupy Movement* (2011), "From the very origins of the democratic concept, 'rule by the people' has always been a way to in-

compatriots so as to control them by monopolising decision-making in unitary structures."

Later on in the book, Gelderloos develops a necessary litmus test for anarchy: if the system that you create is so interchangeable with the existing order that you can take out the assembly, replace it with a tyrant, and the society keeps functioning, then you have failed to truly revolutionise the social fabric. I don't think that we should dismiss consensus; I think we need to interrogate some of the assumptions that would see it become just another means of rule. If consensus stays tied to rigid polity forms, then though it will give us practice in egalitarian social relations, we can go much further still in our pursuit of freedom. As Gillis concludes in his piece:

"Truly anarchist approaches to consensus would prioritise making the collectivity organic and ad hoc [...] This would mean adopting an unterrified attitude about dissolution and reformation, learning new habits and growing new muscles that have atrophied in the totalitarian reference frame of our statist world. [...] For consensus to be truly anarchistic we must be willing to consense upon autonomy, to shed off our reactionary hunger for established perpetual collective entities."

This sentiment is echoed by Crimethinc, as in seeking to answer the question of our responsibilities to each other, they accept that:

"[we must create] mutually fulfilling collectivities at each level of society—spaces in which people identify with each other and have cause to do right by each other. [...] At the same time, we recognise that we will have to reconfigure them continuously according to

take the necessary repairs come together on that basis, evaluate what resources are available to accomplish their goals, and take action. Of course, if they wish to avoid upsetting the social equilibrium, it's in their best interest to consult with the people who might be affected by the repairs prior to action and find compromises where necessary, but this is not the same as submitting their activity to the decision of a collective body. Perhaps this process of consultation, problem-solving, and conflict resolution can be described as a consensus process in some cases, but of course not every effort to resolve conflict or solve problems can be limited to the traditional process of consensus. Beyond that, some problems can only be solved by disregarding "consensus." Minorities need not find consensus with majorities for permission to retain their autonomy. Ultimately, anarchy is not and has never been about everybody "voting" for everything everywhere all at once to get anything done.

In *Worshipping Power* (2016), which I highly recommend, Gelderloos challenges us to accept this more "chaotic" organisation:

"Chaotic decision-making fosters the recognition that society can function spontaneously as a decentralised network, permits conflict as a healthy force in our lives, encourages a multiplicity of decision-making spaces pervading all moments of life, well beyond the formal, masculine sphere of the congress or the dictat, and allows different, even conflicting, decisions to be made at different points in the human network, while encouraging a collective consciousness so all decision-makers can maximize their intelligence and accordingly harmonise. Humans have an evolutionarily tested ability to utilise chaotic decision-making at a macro scale, and the only people who dispute this are those who wish to permanently infantilize their

crease participation in the project of government, and 'the people' have always excluded classes of slaves and foreigners, whether inside or outside of national boundaries. The question of freedom lies not in who rules, but whether anyone is ruled, or whether all are self-organising." Anarchy means no rule, making it inherently incompatible with democracy on purely etymological grounds. But anarchist proponents of democracy use the term to describe either a particular system of direct democracy or rather broadly as a synonym for making decisions, which is a rather unique use of the term.

They argue that true democracy is direct democracy that exists outside of and against the State. But, as the anonymous writers at Crimethink identify in *From Democracy to Freedom* (2016), there are fundamental problems with this approach. Their main contention is that democracy has historically been used to describe government and that history cannot be so easily erased through linguistic prescription. Furthermore, quote:

"any form of government requires some way of determining who can participate in decision-making and on what terms—once again, who counts as the demos. [...] And if there is no way of enforcing decisions—no kratos—the decision-making processes of government will have no more weight than decisions people make autonomously."

Now I can't speak on all pro-democracy anarchists as I've seen them use the term to describe quite different systems, so I will focus on just one established proponent of "anarchist democracy." Not Graeber, because he defines democracy vaguely enough to include direct democracy, consensus, and basically any problem-solving that takes place in a group. Not Bookchin, because even he eventually realised anarchism wasn't compatible with majority rule and created his own ideology; not Chomsky, because his grasp on anarchism is questionable at best; Instead, we'll look at the guy who

consistently described anarchism as democracy without the State: Wayne Price.

In *Anarchism as Extreme Democracy* (2000), Price argues that while more areas of life should exist outside the realm of collective decision-making, where needed such decision-making falls into a dichotomy of either minority rule, which he finds and opposes in both capitalist democracies and consensus systems, or majority rule, which he describes and supports as direct democracy. He argues in favour of majority rule with accommodations for minority rights, going as far as to state that minority rights are safest when the majority rules. But when minorities find themselves opposed to majorities, Price only offers them the option to voice their position and try to win a majority to their views.

It should go without saying that, despite Price's insistence, this system of majority rule does not describe anarchy. If hierarchy refers to a relationship of command and subordination, and if the majority commands that a minority be subordinated to their decisions binding on the whole, then this direct democracy, while extremely participatory, is still a form of hierarchy.

As Crimethinc points out in the aforementioned article:

"The important distinction is not between democracy and the state, then, but between government and self-determination. Government is the exercise of authority over a given space or polity: whether the process is dictatorial or participatory, the end result is the imposition of control. By contrast, self-determination means disposing of one's potential on one's own terms: when people engage in it together, they are not ruling each other, but fostering cumulative autonomy. Freely made agreements require no enforcement; systems that concentrate legitimacy in a single institution or decision-making process always do."

The consensus process, as I described it, requires commitment, trust, respect, active participation, self-empowerment, and a common goal. It also requires a tonne of patience, as the process involves submitting proposals, clarifying questions, and often lengthy general discussions where all concerns are listed and explored and consensus is sought after each resolution. If consensus isn't reached, individuals have the option to either stand aside or use their veto to block the proposal.

Although I did mention the need for a unity of purpose for the group and acknowledge that consensus won't work for all situations, I still carried on in the video with the implicit assumption that I was describing an ideal process for a fixed, rigid group. Some of my criticisms of the problems with consensus, such as issues with vetoing or the need for splinter groups to amplify the voices of marginalised folk within larger collectives, carry that implicit assumption that we're dealing with a fixed polity. Even my concession to majority rule in instances where consensus fails exemplifies that unconscious bias.

But free association implies far more fluidity in group formation and composition. It does away with the polity form. In fact, it's a bit out of order to say that a proposal is brought to the group, especially if the group is some centralised entity that has the power to permit or forbid action within a certain territory. If we're describing a situation of free association, it would be more accurate to describe a group forming around a proposal, AKA an existing point of consensus. If that's the case, then there's no need for standing aside or vetoes within the group, just consultation with those outside of the group who might have valid concerns and consideration of what resources are available to accomplish the task. In this context, free association provides the best means to achieve flexible social forms that truly benefit their constituent individuals.

If, for example, the sewage system needs to be repaired, in a situation of free association, there's no need to seek permission from some communal authority. People who are willing to under-



Starting from the beginning, I don't think my definition of hierarchy was precise enough. I defined hierarchy as "any system or relationship of coercive power and domination" but these days I find it more useful to focus on the relationship of command and subordination, as I don't believe the term coercion alone accurately describes the dynamic most prominently at play.

Moving on from that small quibble, in both the original title and description of my video, I referred to the process as "consensus democracy." I've since corrected it because, unlike anarchist David Graeber, I don't think it's accurate to describe consensus as a form of democracy by equating all decision-making with democracy. I think it just creates further confusion, particularly with the implication of voting that democracy carries. If consensus is treated as direct democracy taken to its extreme, then it's just another instance of rule, one that was observed in the general assemblies of Occupy Wall Street. As the writers at Crimethinc recognised in *From Democracy to Freedom* (2017):

"Though David Graeber encouraged participants to regard consensus as a set of principles rather than rules, both the proponents of consensus process and its authoritarian opponents persisted in treating it as a formal means of government—while anarchists who shared Graeber's framework found themselves outside the consensus reality of their fellow Occupiers."

I think my description of consensus in the video was slightly more flexible, as I defined it as a decision-making process founded on consent among the members of a group. Accordingly, consensus aims to value every voice and concern, foster an environment where conflict is embraced and resolved cooperatively, rather than avoided or dismissed, and find creative solutions that improve upon initial proposals.

It's true that some historical anarchists have ended up organising along democratic lines. But the question here isn't whether that excuses us in the present to organise that way or not, the question is whether that mode of organising gets us closer to the goal of anarchy. Does retaining that form of rule, however decentralised and participatory, get us any closer to a world without rule? As Proudhon recognised in his manuscript writings on Napoleon III:

"...archy or anarchy, no middle ground. Archy can have one or several heads: monarchy, polyarchy, oligarchy, exarchy, heptarchy, etc. If the polyarchy is composed of the wealthiest, or of the nobles and magnates, it is called aristocracy; if the people en masse is the preponderant element there, it is a democracy. But the number of heads changes nothing in the end;"

Early in his politics, anarchist Errico Malatesta was in favour of majority voting within anarchist organisations when there was no consensus, yet he still conceded that decisions should only be binding on those who favoured them. Later on, he would reject the rule of the majority entirely. Exactly 100 years ago, in 1924, he wrote:

"Therefore, those who really want 'government of the people' in the sense that each can assert his or her own will, ideas and needs, must ensure that no-one, majority or minority, can rule over others; in other words, they must abolish government, meaning any coercive organisation, and replace it with the free organisation of those with common interests and aims."

Malatesta's position resonates with a slew of both historical and modern anarchists, as documented in the article *Anarchists Against Democracy* and elsewhere. Anarchist Tasos Sagris argues

that, quote: “Homogeneity is the ultimate imperative of any democratic procedure, “direct” or representational—a homogeneity that ends up as two final opinions (the majority and minority), losing the vast richness of human intelligence and sensibility, erasing all the complexity and diversity of human needs and desires.” Anarchist Bob Black, meanwhile, lists as many as eighteen solid objections to democracy, both direct and representative, in his article *Debunking Democracy* (2011). As he concludes, neither version exhibits any clear advantage over the other and each also has vices peculiar to itself. You’re still free to advocate for direct democracy, but it’s plain inaccurate to conflate it with anarchy, because the anarchist alternative to majority rule via direct democracy and minority rule via capitalist democracy is no rule, no democracy, just free association.

Some of the pro-democracy anarchists might then argue that they are not in favour of majority rule, they do desire free association, they just use the term democracy for rhetorical purposes to refer to any egalitarian collaboration between people, with decisions not binding upon them. But again, without *kratos*, without rule, why even call it democracy, with all its connotations and baggage? I’m no longer convinced that the label democracy can be accurately applied to all forms of collective, egalitarian organisation. It might seem convenient as an entry point, but looking solely through its lens can also mislead and elicit further confusion about what anarchy entails. If we want people to actually understand anarchism, we have to challenge them to critically think about even their most cherished ideals.

Democracy is a historically contested term, and everyone seems to want a piece of the pie. As Bob Black observed: “For champions of capitalism, democracy is inseparable from capitalism. For champions of socialism, democracy is inseparable from socialism. Democracy is even said to be inseparable from anarchism. It is identified with the good, the true, and the beautiful.” But although many good things—such as discussions, collectives, assemblies, net-

works, and anarchic federations—have been described as “democratic,” it may be better to view them outside that lens of governance. Perhaps we should look at the positive values that drew us to democracy in the first place, like egalitarianism, inclusivity, and self-determination, and take the time to properly evaluate whether democracy can effectively actualise such values.

In the end, democracy is not the same as egalitarianism, inclusivity, or self-determination. Democracy is a historically contested term, but that doesn’t mean it can be stretched to near meaninglessness. Words still mean things. No matter how much you might try to rebrand it, democracy still refers to rule. As anarchist William Gillis argues in *The Abolition Of Rulership* (2017): “Etymology isn’t destiny but it does carry a strong momentum and corrective force.” The language we use matters. And yes, anarchy is also a nebulous term to some, as is freedom, but, quote, “The fight over ‘anarchy’ is an inescapable one for anarchists because the world we want will never be obtainable as long as the term’s historical definition [of chaotic, violent, dog-eat-dog situations of strong (albeit decentralised) power relations] goes unchallenged.” The battle over democracy is not so inescapable. We can afford to let go of democracy and popularise a far more descriptive and accurate term: free association.

## Revisiting Consensus

But wait, I hear you asking, what about **consensus**?

Nearly three years ago, I released a video on consensus. Since then, I’ve meant to follow up on it. While I was aware of democracy’s flaws back then and considered consensus a more valid alternative, I hadn’t fully questioned some of my underlying assumptions. I still recommend that you watch the old video, as it does hold up in some respects, but now, after three years of study, I have a few critiques of past Andrew’s video.