

Anarchism in Britain

Benjamin Franks

2009

Contents

References And Suggested Readings	4
---	---

As far back as the nineteenth century there was a significant division between class struggle, social anarchism, and the alternative, individualist version of libertarianism. In the UK context this latter branch of anarchism was associated with Henry Seymour, a “disciple” of Benjamin Tucker. Seymour, who some claim edited the first anarchist newspaper in Britain, *The Anarchist* (1885), briefly collaborated with Peter Kropotkin, but their partnership soon folded because of philosophical differences (individualism vs. mainstream socialist versions of anarchism). Kropotkin departed to set up his own anti-capitalist anarchist paper, *Freedom*.

Kropotkin’s *Freedom* group also supported the radical organization of largely Jewish immigrants, based around *Der Arbeiter Freund* (*The Workers’ Friend*) newspaper, which was originally a non-aligned socialist periodical but increasingly identified itself as anarchist. With the assistance of the anarchosyndicalist Rudolf Rocker, the group helped to form unions of Jewish immigrant textile workers, and by 1912 organized a successful mass strike of thousands of tailors from across London’s communities.

The first decades of the twentieth century saw a considerable increase in agitation within British industry. By 1907 the growth was such that *Freedom* was producing its own syndicalist journal, *The Voice of Labor*, edited by the shop steward John Turner, a former colleague of William Morris. This intensified militancy did not originate from anarchosyndicalists, but did confirm the relevance of such tactics. The extent of syndicalist thinking in the more mainstream workers’ movement was demonstrated by the document produced by members of the unofficial rank-and-file committee of the Miners’ Federation of Britain (a forerunner of the National Union of Mineworkers). This plan, *The Miners’ Next Step*, was a lucid proposal of federal organization in order to wage effective class warfare. Even after the rise of Leninism in the Welsh coalfields, Albert Meltzer, a later class struggle anarchist, noted with pleasure that a small pocket of syndicalism continued there for decades.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, however, state communism began to dominate the non-social democratic wings of the British labor movement at the expense of more heterodox forms of socialism. The apparent vindication of Lenin’s centralized and “disciplined” methods in the October Revolution, along with the use of Russia’s financial reserves to provide a competitive advantage to revolutionaries who conformed to Lenin’s strategy, marginalized alternative radical movements. As Leninism and Stalinism dominated, the discourse of Marxism came to be associated with the increasingly odious rationalizations for totalitarian governance.

Despite the hegemony of Leninism over the use of Marxist terminology, there was a consistent, recognizable section of British anarchists that retained an insistence on identifying with the economically oppressed class. From World War II until the 1980s these tended to be, but were not exclusively, from syndicalist or quasi-syndicalist sections of anarchism, which, as a result, placed priority on radical action at the point of production. This syndicalist strand can be traced from the 1940s’ Anarchist Federation of Britain and Syndicalist Workers Federation, to Black Flag in the 1960s, the Direct Action Movement of the late 1970s and 1980s, to the present-day Solidarity Federation and the anarchist-influenced Industrial Workers of the World. There were (and are) other class struggle groups whose orientation was not confined to the syndicalist strategy of developing structures for waging industrial warfare at the point of production. Among the longest running of these were Solidarity (1960–92), Class War (1983–), and the Anarchist Communist Federation, now known simply as the Anarchist Federation (1986–).

By the mid-1960s the rift between class struggle anarchists and the increasingly liberal anarchist movement became more apparent. This liberal turn was identified with *Freedom*, a paper

which lay claim to being the linear successor to Kropotkin, and produced an edition celebrating the “first century”; however, between 1932 and 1944 there was a break in publication. The new *Freedom* and Colin Ward’s influential 1960s magazine *Anarchy* took anarchist ideas and revised and reapplied them to a host of concerns not previously covered by libertarian publications. With the rise of the counterculture, these publications took a more liberal, less class-oriented approach, aiming to influence policy-makers and white-collar employees rather than foment revolutionary change.

The division between the counterculture and class-based politics was permeable, as the squatting movements of the 1960s and 1970s and later punk-inspired milieus were to demonstrate. Nonetheless, the apparent shift away from class-based action was opposed by militants such as Stuart Christie; he sought more direct engagement with working-class opposition, and was famously caught smuggling explosives to the anti-Franco resistance. From the 1960s onwards other concerns that were not directly related to the extraction of surplus labor came to the political fore, such as campaigns against colonialism, promotion of environmental concerns including animal rights, and advocacy of feminism and sexual liberation. Some of these issues and forms of organizing sat uncomfortably with a more programmatic, class-based approach.

By the time of the Miners’ Strike in 1984, anarchism had minimal influence on – and in – working-class structures of resistance. The experience of the Miners’ Strike, shortly followed by the intense print workers dispute, however, played an influential role in resurrecting class-struggle anarchism in Britain. The main anarchist groups, as a result of the engagement in the strike (and its subsequent defeat), developed a more robust and coherent conception of the agency for libertarian social change, and helped to create social structures more consistent with the anti-hierarchical principles of anarchism. Whilst class oppression was not always the sole or main structure of subjugation, in many contexts (if not all) it was increasingly recognized as having a substantial role.

The various categories of British anarchism have shared a remarkable consistency in iconography, targets, and critical discourse: they have rejected the state, used the language of “resistance” and “liberation,” promoted self-activity, engaged in direct action, and used and adapted long-established symbols of revolt. More recently, however, degrees of convergence have come to the fore. Class-based anarchists have recognized that not all forms of oppression are reducible to class alone, while those involved in issue-centered campaigns (such as the environmental movement) have recognized the class feature inherent in many of these issues. Networks of solidarity between disparate groups became a prominent characteristic of anarchist organization and were a significant feature of the global justice movement (also referred to as the anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movement).

SEE ALSO: Anarchism ; Anarchocommunism ; Anarchosyndicalism ; Britain, Trade Union Movement ; Britain, Post-World War II Political Protest ; British Miners’ Strike, 1984–1985 ; Class Identity and Protest ; Class Struggle

References And Suggested Readings

- Aufheben (1998) *The Politics of Anti-Road Struggle and the Struggles of Anti-Road Politics: The Case of the No M11 Link Road Campaign*. In G. McKay (Ed.), *DIY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*. London: Verso.
- Christie, S. (1980) *The Christie File*. Sanday: Cienfuegos Press.
- Communist Party (1957) *Inner Party Democracy*. London: Communist Party.
- Dangerfield, G. (1997) *The Strange Death of Liberal England*. London: Serif.
- Gordon, U. (2005) *Anarchism and Political Theory: Contemporary Problems*. Doctoral thesis, Mansfield College, Oxford University.
- Kendall, W. (1969) *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Woodcock, G. (1975) *Anarchism*. London: Penguin.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Benjamin Franks
Anarchism in Britain
2009

Franks, Benjamin. "Anarchism, Britain." In *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present*, edited by Immanuel Ness, 108–110. Vol. 1. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

theanarchistlibrary.org