My old sociology tutor once remarked that people under 35 are advocates of social change, while people over that age tend to be keen on social control. Certainly there seems to be a general idea around that as the years go by people become more and more conservative in their thinking. Tolstoy is a clear exception to this rule; the older he got, the more radical he became. As a consequence in the last years of his life he consistently expressed a religious form of anarchism.

Tolstoy’s politics, which combined Christianity, pacifism and anarchism, has always been a source of disquiet to his many biographers, and to many Marxists too. They laud the power, the realism and the sincerity of his literary imagination, but when they turn to his politics they seem to fall into despair! Lenin thought Tolstoy a genius and one of the greatest writers in history. He praised his passionate critiques of the state and the church, and his unbending opposition to private property. Tolstoy expressed, Lenin wrote, as no other writer did, the deep feelings of protest and anger that the nineteenth century Russian peasants felt towards the Tsarist state. Yet when Lenin came to consider Tolstoy’s ‘Christian anarchism’ he was harshly dismissive. Tolstoy was a ‘crackpot’, a ‘landlord ob-
sessed with Christ’, someone who failed profoundly to understand what was going on in Russia and who preached non-resistance to evil asceticism and an emotional appeal to the ‘spirit’ that were in essence reactionary, misguided and utopian.

A recent biographer, coming at Tolstoy from a very different angle expresses a similar disquiet. Clearly acknowledging Tolstoy as one of the great literary figures, and sympathetic to his subject, A.N. Wilson is completely at a loss when he comes to consider Tolstoy’s politics. Tolstoy’s critique of ‘property’ Wilson thinks is ‘silly’ — failing completely to understand that by ‘property’ Tolstoy meant the capitalist system, and he goes on to suggest that most of Tolstoy’s political writings are a ‘complete nonsense’. Wilson clearly fails to understand Tolstoy’s critique of the state when he opinion that Tolstoy has little to offer in our understanding of the First World War Russian communism and Nazism — all of which exemplify the evils of government that Tolstoy in fact wrote about.

Like Gandhi, who was his equally famous disciple, Tolstoy came to his anarchism by way of a mid-life crisis. For when he was around 50 Tolstoy began to seriously question the meaning of his life. The outcome was a series of books in which Tolstoy began to formulate his anarchist ideas, drawing on some of his earlier experiences — the trauma he experienced in Paris in 1857 when he witnessed with repulsion a public execution, his meeting and discussions with Proudhon in 1861, and the realisation he gained from a serious study of the Bible that the basic teachings of Jesus were absolutely opposed to violence of any kind. The books were My Confession (1881), What I Believe (1884) and What Then Must We Do? (1886). In 1894 Tolstoy published his major work on Christian anarchism The Kingdom of God Is Within You and for the rest of his life continued to write letters, essays and tracts on anarchism. But it is worth noting that because of the association of anarchism with violence and bomb-throwing Tolstoy never in fact came to describe himself as an anarchist. In recent years several anthologies of these writings have been published, the most useful being the collection

his passionate pleas to renounce violence, in his sustained critique of the state and contemporary capitalism, in his emphasis on the importance of agricultural labour — and the need to earn one’s bread by the sweat of one’s own brow — and in his suggestions that we critically examine much of what goes under the name of ‘science’, Tolstoy, as Ronald Sampson has long reminded us, offers us a way forward. He suggests a variant of the only rational solution to the poverty, the hunger, the political repression and the ecological degradation that constitutes the present ‘world order’, namely anarchism.

Tolstoy may have been a crusty, guilt-ridden, sexist and somewhat cranky old soul, but in the present state of manifest crisis — if you look beyond your own backyard — there really is no alternative to the kind of anarchism he espoused and tried to articulate. As Sampson says ‘We simply cannot afford to go on ignoring Tolstoy’s message’.

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... is to maintain superstition and deception among the people and thus hinder the progress of humanity towards truth and welfare (page 100).

Henry George’s project of land nationalisation, whereby all would come under the jurisdiction of the state and people would pay a ground rent rather than taxes — an idea that still has currency among some green economists — Tolstoy argues is no solution at all. It still involves slavery and state violence. Thus Tolstoy came to conclude that:

the slavery of our time was produced by the violence of militarism, by the appropriation of the land and by the exaction of money (property) (page 109).

Addressing members of his own aristocratic class — and himself — Tolstoy suggests that if we really are concerned about the sufferings and the poverty of others, the answer is simple: we should get off their backs, stop exploiting the working people. If I pity a tired horse on which I am riding, he writes, the first thing I must do if I am really sorry for it is to get off and walk on my own feet.

This is what he tried to do in his own life. He gave up his inheritance and class privileges, refused to participate in any governmental activities and attempted to live and work as a simple peasant. For this he has been derided and ridiculed, especially by his academic biographers.

One might have serious misgivings about the ‘individualism’ of Tolstoy’s religious anarchism, and about his misogyny — which comes through forcibly in the final chapter of the book where he writes of the law of a woman’s nature is to bear lots of children. One might also chaff at Tolstoy’s preaching stance, and the moralising tone of much of his political writing. But the central message that comes through his book What Then Must We Do? is an important one, and it is one that still has contemporary relevance. For
fering simply by philanthropy. He tried ‘doing good’ by charita-
ble activities. Such charity however was resented and seemed to
come to nothing, and was simply a form of self-deception. So he
began a search for the causes of the poverty and the human degra-
dation that he had observed, and to try and rid himself of the ‘delu-
sions’ under which he had been living. And Tolstoy came to the
simple conclusion as to why people are cold and angry and desti-
tute: namely, that it is due to exploitation. He writes:

I see that by violence, extortion and various devices in
which I participate the worker’s bare necessities are
taken from them, while the non-workers (of whom I
am one) consume in superfluity the fruits of the labour
of those who toil (page 61).

Making some telling criticisms of classical economic theory, Tol-
stoy argues that the power of some people over others does not
arise simply from money but from the fact that the labourer does
not receive the full value of his or her labour. The separation of the
factors of production — land, capital (tools) and labour — which the
economist takes as a basic law of production is in fact historically
derived, and is a form of enslavement. To be deprived of land and
the tools of production, Tolstoy writes, is enslavement. Economic
science largely serves to justify this system. It is thus a pseudo-
science, devising excuses for violence.

Attempting to look at the issue from a historical and world per-
pective, and examining specifically American imperialism in Fiji
Tolstoy comes to suggest that basically three forms of enslavement
have historically arisen. Although they form a historical sequence
they are, he feels, all evident under existing capitalism.

The first mode of enslavement was that evident under the sys-
tem of slavery found throughout the ancient world. This was sim-
ply based on personal violence, the enslaving of humans by the
sword. Such violence was so intrinsic to the economic structure of
the ancients that even the greatest intellect of the age, Plato and
Aristotle, failed to notice it. They simply took it for granted. This
mode of enslavement has never been abandoned and continues to
be embodied in contemporary state structures — with its legal sys-
tem, prisons, military conscription and work discipline. It is naive
to think, Tolstoy maintains, that personal violence went out with
the abolition slavery.

The second form of slavery, begun in Egypt and reaching its
apotheosis in the feudal system, involved depriving people of land
and coercing the workers to pay tribute, either in labour or in crops.
This Tolstoy describes as a ‘territorial’ method of enslavement.

The third and final form of enslavement is based on a mone-
tary system, and this has involved the intensification of govern-
ment power. This system of slavery — which Kropotkin described
as ‘wage-slavery’ — is impersonal, and is based on the property
system which Tolstoy sees as the root of all contemporary prob-
lems, or ‘evils’ as he calls them. And property is simply ‘a means
of appropriating other men’s work’ (page 217).

It may be possible he writes, under slavery or feudalism to com-
pel a person to do what he or she considers bad, but it is not possi-
ble to make them think that while suffering violence they are free
or what they are compelled to do is for their own welfare. This,
however is precisely what is happening under the present prop-
erty system, Tolstoy argues that the primary function of science is
to hoodwink people, to make them feel they are free when they are
not, that the state exists for the good of the people when in reality it
is a form of violence that upholds ‘monetary’ exploitation. Science,
like art, is as necessary to humans, Tolstoy suggests, as food and
drink, and has always been a part of human existence, helping us
to understand the world in which we live. But science nowadays no
longer serves the general welfare: it has become, like the religions
of old, a ‘superstition’. The ‘business’ of science, Tolstoy writes, is
now to conceal existing reality: its aim