Belief, anarchism and modernity

Daniel Colson

2007

Contents

ABSTRACT

This essay was originally published in the French-language journal Réfractions 14 (Spring 2005 pp43-52), which was a special issue on religions, values and identities. It considers the contemporary responses of the French left to the rise of Islam in the west, and notes the danger of opposing Islam by re-activating a French-Republican patriotism. Colson proposes a more subtle approach, arguing that anarchists should adopt a 'neo-monadism'.

For most of its brief existence and with one or two exceptions (notably Tolstoy) anarchism has rejected all religions. This rejection has been expressed in both theory and practice, and at times, for example in the Spanish Civil War, with great violence. Today, the libertarian movement's traditional anti-religious stance faces a new challenge. In Europe, where anarchism was born and where it drew its (feeble) strengths, Christianity is exhausted. Anarchists are challenged by the rise of Islam and, more specifically, by the rise of a fundamentalist Islam. To our horror or stupefaction, this new religious movement appears to embrace elements of our own past practice: violence, spontaneity and autonomous action; and it garners the support of a mass, even working-class audience. While waiting for a significant libertarian movement to develop in Muslim lands and milieus, it is hard to see how the anarchists, who are largely European and Christian in origin, can re-invigorate their anti-religious tradition against Islam. There is a real danger that in joining the opposition to Islam anarchists will once more go along with ethnocentric and colonialist causes, as happened in France during the Algerian war, and thus find themselves in the company of Gollnisch, Régis Debray, Chèvenement and other 'republicans'.[1] These activists, of both left and right, re-affirm the cultural superiority of European civilization. More than a century of colonial rule should provide sufficient evidence for libertarians to realize, perhaps belatedly, the singularly repugnant nature of such values.

The problem for anarchists, when considering their anti-religious struggle, is how to transcend the constraints of colonialism and imperialism and avoid dubious alliances with what remains of the rump of aged secularists and republicans. This is not simply a tactical problem, but an issue that necessitates a reconsideration of the basis of anarchist thinking. At its root, the problem arises from the context in which the libertarian movement arose. In reality, like all movements, anarchism was born in a particular moment: in Europe, in the middle of the nineteenth century. There are two important consequences:

1. In political and social terms, in addition to the other forces of modernity - good, bad or indifferent - such as the bourgeoisie, capitalism, political liberalism, belief in science and technology, the anarchist movement was forced to confront the old, long hegemonic domination of religious institutions.[2]

2. In intellectual terms, faced with the twists and turns of authority and theology, and the bitterness of the confrontation with these forces, anarchism never hesitated to use all the resources of

---

[1] Translator's note: Colson is here referring to a recent revival of French republican* patriotism which has drawn some once-left-wing militants into centrist positions. On this point, see my: 'An Extremism of the Center: Jean-Pierre Chevènement, French Presidential Candidate, 2002°, *French Politics, Culture and Society* 22:1 (2004), pp 76-97

[2] The anarchists' anti-religious violence cannot be understood without taking into account the situation in Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the 'Latin' countries in which the Catholic church imposed its domination with ferocity. For better or worse, anarchism, as a political and social movement, often found itself in practice alongside other republican and bourgeois forces, fighting the power and the domination of the church. In France, for example, where anarchism never failed to form the left of the left-wing of the republican and socialist camp during the great political and social clashes.

modernity - rationality, logic and philosophy - in wily and authoritarian ways. Yet at the same time, education, work and the economy were being transformed by the same methods and there was a real danger that anarchism would become nothing more than an extremist, marginalized variety of republican, liberal and democratic modernity.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ANTICLERICALISM

There is little need to discuss the social and political issues much further. The conjunction of forces was clearly a product of circumstances: the first libertarian groups entered into a variety of anti-religious struggles against oppressive powers in Europe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was particularly true in the Latin' and Catholic countries, where religious institutions exercised power independently and occupied a privileged and dominating position. State, Church and capital - army, clergy and the bosses - constituted three dimensions (the three parallel dimensions, as Proudhon observed) of the same domination, which was clearly visible and which carried obvious practical and intellectual consequences. It is possible to argue that this clash reflected a set of particular circumstances, unique to Catholic (and Orthodox?) states, where religion was served by institutions that were powerful, large, and disciplined. In the same époque, things stood rather differently in Protestant countries. The links between religion and power, while just as oppressive in their way, were constituted differently, perhaps giving rise to a libertarian movement that was generally less violent, sometimes avowedly non-violent, less committed to anti-clericalism and more interested in realising individual changes in lifestyle and moral outlook. It is an interesting question whether, having freed themselves from the blinding and catastrophic illusions about the nature of colonial rule, the anarchists could have developed their anti-religious arguments in other contexts. Would they have responded to African animism, to the clergyless monotheism of Sunni Islam, the incredible complexity of Hindu polytheism, or the strange - to our eyes - mystical-religious realities of China and Asia, in the same way as they did to Catholicism?
A century on, everything has changed. Despite the astonishing success and destructive force of capitalism, these great non-European religions, typically ignored by anarchism, remain. They are even within Europe, thanks principally to Sunni Islam and a growing number of other cultural and religious currents. As for the old enemy, the Catholic Church, it could be said that it is no longer present, or at least that it is in such a ramshackle condition that it is difficult to imagine its resurrection.

ANARCHISM, MODERNITY, AND THE TRAP OF RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

The intellectual consequences of anarchism's historical particularity are more problematic than the social and political context in which anarchists first operated. Specifically, these circumstances structured anarchist thinking, not just in the immediate period of the movement's rise or even in the first seventy-five years of its development, but in a far more significant and far-reaching way. There are two points I wish to make in this discussion and they are in tension with one another.
1. First and most importantly, anarchism was a late product of European modernity, born at the moment when modernity was deploying all its forces, for better or worse. In its social practice, principally in the different libertarian workers movements, and its theorising, principally in

the works of Proudhon and Bakunin, anarchism constituted a radical rupture with modernity.
2. Second, anarchism often made use of the forms of representation and structures of thought associated with those practices and ideas that it tried so hard to destroy. There were many reasons for this, which paradoxically can also be drawn from the radically innovative character of anarchism, from its first experiments and proclamations and from the bitterness of its fights, its debates, its defeats and its justifications. Take, for example, the idea of reason. This was too often reduced to narrow, textbook, utilitarian rationalism. Similarly, individualism was too often confused with its modern competitive form, exemplified by triumphant capitalism. Education and the diffusion of ideas were likewise wrongly reduced to an instrumentalized idealism and propaganda. Above all, and most pertinently to this discussion, consider the idea of emancipation. This was too often understood by the anarchists through the prism of a double mirage of reform and revolution identified as progress, or of the still more obscure mysteries of the Hegelian dialectic and historical materialism.

It is here that we return to the issue of religion and to the manner in which modernity was considered to have transcended religious beliefs, while it in fact only re-organized them in its own terms. Anarchism adopted many of modernity's illusions. As both Bakunin and Nietzsche remarked, it is not easy to clear one's mind of God and the very real domination that his shadow imposes on our lives. Once evicted he returns by the back door, and not just in the guise of an illegal, illiterate immigrant who clings on to outmoded beliefs, but in modern garb, talking in terms that are central to arrogant modernity. Indeed, as Proudhon, Bakunin and Nietzsche all perceptively noted, it is at the very moment that western societies believe that they have definitively transcended the religious issue that they adopt religion's most despotic characteristics: a belief in human destiny, the acceptance of divine providence and faith in the realisation of an earthly paradise. Naturally, these beliefs are expressed in non-religious ways: in the idea of historical determinism, the inevitable march of science, rationality and the progressive evolution of civilization - each justifying the global domination of order and western interests - and, finally, in the hope of a bright future in which human society will be reconciled with itself in the name of reason - dialectical or otherwise - by means of a new despotism, organised by the State, political parties and the elite.

REPETITIONS

After more than a century of catastrophes, and in view of the way in which western ideals have been reshaped to fit the destructive imperatives of an economic system motivated only by the nihilistic drive to reproduce itself on an ever-expanding scale, the libertarian movement has a real opportunity. If it cannot offer an immediate and effective alternative to western ideals, it can at least re-discover the power and originality of the movement's initial inspiration and the significance of its past projects.
While anarchism was born at a precise time and place, it is not defined by this historical context. On the contrary, it has always attempted to challenge the restrictive pretensions of history. In each of its struggles, large or small, in each of the extremely diverse contexts in which anarchists have mobilized, and for each of the collective identities or collective structures that have been articulated in particular times and places, the libertarian movement has never justified thoughts or actions with reference to an external dynamic of change. Anarchism has never claimed to be anything other than the unique situation and circumstances have allowed. In fact, for anarchism,

there are only singular situations. And these are sufficient in themselves. Each situation has its own raison d'être, a point repeated ceaselessly in anarchist books and writings. As Bakunin tells us, following what one might call an anarchist neo-monadology, each being, each situation, each event, each moment, carries in itself - in a sense - the totality of that which is: the totality of good and bad possibilities, here and elsewhere, the past, present and future (see Appendix). Libertarian thinking thus allows an absolute freedom and absolute affirmation that at different moments libertarian movements have succeeded in putting into practice - notably in Spain and the Ukraine. Every entity, every event equally carries this potential within itself.

In contrast to the despotisms it challenges, anarchism does not constitute a superior, eternal truth and has no claim to an absolute beginning or end, whether constructed by Christ, the Quran or Modernity. It does not deify or generalize the forms or the moment of the movement's beginning, nor does it transform them into calendars, transcendent events or models closed to subsequent revision. Despotism, in the form of the State, Science, Capital and Religion, generalizes the particular. Anarchism, on the contrary, proposes what Deleuze calls the universalization of the singular.[3] The appearance of anarchist writings and the rise of anarchist actions in mid-nineteenth century Europe are not so much models or founding acts as they are rehearsals for all the books and rebellions that are to come. As Deleuze puts the point:

> the theatre of rehearsal is opposed to the theatre of representation . . . it is not the festival of Federation [of 1790] which commemorates or represents the taking of the Bastille [of 1789], [but] the taking of the Bastille which celebrates and rehearses all future Federations.[4]

Following a similar line of reasoning, Léo Ferré suggests that he sings for those who will be living in ten thousand years time: not because he believes that today's audience are incapable of understanding him but because his songs rehearse what will be re-said and re-made tomorrow and ever-after, and because each statement, unique in itself, is and will be today and tomorrow, at once the same and different.

Just as anarchism can conceptualize a future that is already present, so it can also view a past that will never end. This is the lesson of Proudhon's neo-monadology. Opposing the despotic illusions and pretensions of modernity, anarchism never creates a *tabula rasa* of the past. Like all other entities, anarchism has a heritage, but its inheritance is not transmitted like a title or property, a dogma or a state. Unlike the triumphal funeral cortege' loaded with the booty torn from those who work the soil, of which Benjamin speaks,[5] anarchism is linked to the living. The argument here is not merely that the qualities oppression' and 'emancipation', 'sadness' and 'joy', 'suffering' and 'happiness', 'submission' and revolt' had meaning before the appearance of anarchism. Human beings were involved in struggles long before anarchism emerged and these struggles should be remembered and celebrated. What I am suggesting is that the anarchist analysis with which I am concerned is drawn from the neo-monadological argument that all past situations and experiences, whether good or bad, happy or unhappy, finished or not, always present options. Thus, while repeating them in turn, each person - according to their abilities and particular views, whether emancipatory or oppressive - can choose to re-affirm them. In this

---

[3] See Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (PUF, 1968), p.8. Deleuze, pp.19 and 8.

[4] Deleuze, pp.19 and 8.

[5] *Ecrits français* (Folio essais, 1991), p.437.

manner we create those discontinuous series that Landauer calls traditions' - where every glance into the past or the present of human communities is also an act which draws towards the future and which constructs that future.[6]

ANARCHISM AND THE RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF HUMANITY

Two points can be drawn from the arguments presented above.

1.Once we are liberated from the vulgar, theological model of history that has been endlessly and scrupulously repeated by modernity, we should no longer be surprised or horrified by the 'return' of religion. Religion 'returns', but - like all other things - it returns in an infinite, unpredictable series of events and situations that are modified in turn by religious forms. Religion returns at once the same and yet different and surprising. Religion 'returns with archaic qualities, with misleading or threatening qualities in its inventions and innovation. Religion returns' in secular and atheist morality, even in the most anti-religious revolutionary thought, as well, of course, as in the most apparently traditional forms that, even given their familiar features, prepare us for unpredictable events.

2. Once we are liberated from the exorbitant and dominating pretensions of European, western modernity, we no longer have to keep referring back to a tiny part of Europe, amputated from its own past, to make sense of the challenges that currently face us. Elisée Reclus made an astonishing attempt to describe civilization in its 'infinite variety' and map its 'geographical individualities in order to create a genealogy of the thousand ways in which 'nature becomes conscious of itself and make clear the intimate link which joins series of human deeds to the subterranean forces of the earth'. For Reclus, "contemporary society contains within itself all previous societies?[7] Following him, we can analyse, in turn, the totality of those past and present human cultures that modernity either considers abandoned or which it tries to abolish and force into categories of equivalence, commodities and market practices. To the countless experiences, situations and traditions that led to the birth of anarchism in a specific time and place, we can add the infinite resources of other cultures and traditions. We can deconstruct the structures of domination in which they were caught; we can select and associate, here and elsewhere, all the revolts, affirmations and spontaneous acts, all the modes of being that are needed for an emancipatory transformation of that which is. We can rehearse a movement that is inspired by anarchism, by its multiplicities and its differences; by the capacity of beings to rely on themselves, by the singularity of the relationship each has to the world, because each of them, considered as unique and irreplaceable, is the bearer of all of the others.

Here, we return to the religious question. We will not brook any compromise. In fact, as soon as anarchism affirms its rejection of the modern distinction between the present (modernity) and the past (all previous periods), between here (the west) and elsewhere (the rest of the world), then anarchism must explain how it can accept themes and influences from that past, that elsewhere, how it can make them its own when they are so clearly marked by the oppressive religious representations that anarchism radically opposes. How can one accept that which one refuses? Here, I wish to show that anarchism has the means by which to confront such a dilemma. In practice, no one can escape the inheritance of the past, even those who claim to make a *tabula rasa* of history. Anarchist neo-monadology shows that the past does not pass, and that elsewhere

---

[6] Gustave Landauer, *La Révolution* (Champ Libre, 1974), p.11.

[7] L'Homme et la Ierre (Librarie Universelle), Vol I, p. 1and 2, Vol VI, p. 504.

is also here. Through a rehearsal in which every present situation, every present being, is at once the same and different; through an unceasing process of evaluation, selection, re-composition and re-arrangement of the present; through philosophical and practical experimentation, one can construct an emancipatory movement which is capable of defeating all forms of oppression. How can this libertarian reconstruction of the past be effected? If we wish to hang on to every emancipatory moment, even the smallest and the most fleeting, how can this be done with those that exist within oppressive structures or, more particularly, those marked by religious themes in which godly symbols form precisely the most sophisticated form of domination and dispossession of the self? Among the many ways in which to reply to these questions, one can, by way of a provisional conclusion, propose three approaches.

1. The first is clearly the least subtle and the most debatable. One could cite the old biblical image of separating the wheat from the chaff. How can we separate the good wheat of past revolts and struggles from the chaff of their religious symbolism? Among the jumble of old beliefs and practices, how can we reveal and identify those revolts and struggles that were inevitably without any public, conscious expression, as anarchism did not yet exist?[8] If we pull these revolts to the surface, if we cut them from the ideological veils which have covered them, if we identify these struggles without names, without sounds, without projects and without any terms to describe what they are to our eyes, we find that they were covered in the fogs and lies of a primitive conception of the world This first form of the exhumation of the past thus seems quite similar to the modernist approach which was denounced in the arguments above: it is a simple inventory of a twice-dead past: dead because it is past, dead because it has been care fully separated from its subjective expressions. However, you don't touch the past with impunity. This first form of scholarly re-appropriation of the past, considered as a simple prehistory, is certainly rudimentary and simplistic. But it can contribute to a neo-monadologic approach. Even the heart (or the soul?) of the most ossified scholar can be moved by the echoes of historic revolts, struggles and sufferings: those endured in the building of the Great Wall of China, by Spartacus and the Roman slaves, the movements of Roman plebeians, and so on. This feeling might take a vague, merely negative form in regret, loss or guilt. Yet by coming into contact with these events we cannot help but be tempted, like Walter Benjamin's angelus novus, to revive the dead - subjectively affirm the revolts of the past and nourish our present forces of life and autonomy.[9]

2. There is a second method by which one can re-appropriate the past. It is similar to the first, in that it also aims to separate the wheat of revolts from the chaff of illusions and the ideological and religious masks in which they were hidden. But this second approach proposes a form of separation that is at once more subtle, more wide-ranging and more sensitive to the autonomy and subjective expression of each of these past events. Here, the proposal is not just to distinguish between, on the one hand, clear examples of oppression and revolt and, on the other hand. an erroneous consciousness of these situations which must be set aside in the name of modernity. Instead, it is to consider whether there was a link between the subversive and emancipatory dimension of the events and the explanations that were provided the discursive and imaginary constructions that structured their subjective autonomy. In this approach, we would not be concerned to strip past struggles of all that made them particular, in accordance with our

---

[8] We leave to one side the Marxist response to such issues because, in general, Marxism has adopted a religious, theological vision of the world which, while clearly in competition with all the other theologies of the past that it claims to eradicate, is also extremely similar to them.

[9] *Ecrits français* , pp.438 and 440

reductive and objectifying interpretations. On the contrary, we would consider the particular justifications for these struggles, recognise their raison d'être, affirm their subjective autonomy and acknowledge forms that were more or less religious (and therefore strange to our eyes), but that nonetheless carried in themselves original expressions and statements of emancipation capable both of surprising us and enriching our cultures of struggle and agitation. The third-century Taoist yellow turbans, with their strange cults and banquets in which men and women mixed as equals; the twelfth-century reformed Ismaeliens of Alamut, with their fortresses and their peculiar interpretation of Islam; the neo-Franciscans of thirteenth-century Italy; the Czech Hussites of the fifteenth century; the Protestant Camisards of the Cevennes; and the Hassidic Jewish movements of eastern Europe - such movements constitute the most visible moments of ancient, imperceptible class struggles. Deviant forms of 'Taoism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism were produced by great movements of revolt: they are not more or less deceptive coverings which, in the absence of an explicitly revolutionary programme, tricked the rebels they inspired and forced them to submit to an ideological, religious order. On the contrary, in this second approach, we wish to consider seriously how these rebels modified the religious ideologies of their time, we want to think about what we might learn from them.

3. The third and last approach of appropriating the various emancipatory traditions of the past can only be sketched. It develops the second approach, but is quite distinct. It is not concerned with making simple distinctions between emancipatory struggles and the social, cultural or religious base from which they emerge, or between the religious, oppressive cultures and the more or less original, desperate initiatives of the rebels and deviants who, while waiting for future revolutionary ideologies, seize these ideas and turn them against the rulers. This third approach, closer to the original inspiration of anarchism, is more concerned with widening our evaluations and analyses of oppressive and emancipatory structures to consider the totality of forces and relationships of past societies, including its representations, perceptions and even those relationships that can be termed religious' but which today, as yesterday, carry within themselves the totality of possibilities.

APPENDIX: ON MONADS (by Patricia Clark)

Colson is arguing that anarchism contains its own justification. Some things are justified by appeal to external considerations; e.g. some religious believers are good for the sake of getting divine approval, and some people will justify exercise for the sake of health. But other things are intrinsically valuable and contain their own justification; art for art's sake, for example.

The German philosopher, Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) invented the term 'monad', which he derived from the Greek word for one or unit: monos. Monads are basic individual entities which make up the universe. For Leibniz, they are immaterial, yet somehow give rise to the phenomenal world around us. Monads are individual, indivisible entities which are absolutely independent of each other (or 'windowless", as Leibniz puts it). However, Colson - and Bakunin - borrow the term because they wish to highlight the properties which Leibniz attributed to monads, namely that the condition of each monad, or individual, is a result of its previous state. Thus, as Leibniz says, "the present is big with the future and laden with the past' [New Essays, Preface], so that if we could completely understand a monad's present state then we could deduce its past and future states. And, since the state of each monad reflects the state of all the others (in a more or less obscure way), each reflects the state of the universe. Again, this is in principle intelligible,

were we to have intelligence sufficient to deduce natural laws.

Putting this together, anarchism contains its own justification because freedom is intrinsically valuable. We do not seek freedom for the sake of anything else but for its own sake. Individual acts of liberation are like monads in that each is completely independent, yet, if we fully understood the circumstances, then we would comprehend the reasons behind the act and be in a position to make some predictions about its outcome. Moreover, each liberatory act tells us something about its context and the society in which it occurs. Nonetheless, each act is independent and not to be analysed in terms of anything else (unlike Marxist theory, religion, or any other dogma).

NOTES

theanarchistlibrary.org