

# **Not protest but direct action**

**Anarchism past and present**

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## Executive Summary

- The media and other commentators in the UK constantly employ 'anarchists' and 'anarchism' as smear words unworthy of rational consideration, yet they refer to a long-established way of looking at the world which has a distinctive and impressive intellectual history.
- Anarchists disdain the customary use of 'anarchy' to mean 'chaos' or 'complete disorder': for them it signifies the absence of rulers in a self-managed society, more highly organized than the disorganization and chaos of the present.
- The historic anarchist movement of the late-nineteenth century was therefore distinguished from the rest of the international movement of organised labour by its rejection of state intervention from above in favour of self-organisation from below, as well as by its rejection of constitutional protest in favour of direct action.
- The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 redefined the framework of international labour politics, so that by the 1950s the remaining scattered anarchist groups seemed no more than ghosts of a once vibrant political movement.
- However, the new and largely youthful social movements originating in the 1960s saw a revival of the influence of anarchism, often unconscious or denied, but also often held as a self-conscious political ideology.
- Through all these phases of its history the anarchist emphasis on direct action has taken two quite different forms. Firstly, symbolic actions, whether violent or non-violent, but usually illegal, intended as propaganda by the deed: attempts to inspire wider popular revolt.
- Secondly, the building of institutions in the present which prefigure those which will exist in a post-revolutionary society (for example the occupation and running of factories, or the following of exemplary Green lifestyles), intended as demonstrations of the possibility of by-passing the existing social order.
- Self-conscious anarchists who have taken part in recent demonstrations against globalisation or cuts in state spending are therefore not attempting to influence official policy making: their aim is rather to influence their fellow citizens to reject all forms of authority from above and replace it with self-governing, cooperative associations built up from below.

## Introduction

Fifty to sixty years ago anarchism appeared to be a spent force, as both a movement and a political theory, yet since the 1960s there has been a resurgence in Europe and North America of anarchist ideas and practice. Britain nowadays must have a greater number of conscious anarchists than at any previous point in its history. In addition there are many more who, while not identifying themselves as anarchists, think and behave in significantly anarchist ways. The

last fifteen years has also seen the rise of the anti-globalization or anti-capitalism movement. At a series of international meetings of the key organizations that determine the global economic order - notably, the World Trade Organization at Seattle in 1999, the G8 at Genoa in 2001 and most recently the G20 in London in 2009 - minorities of self-professed anarchists have gone on the rampage, capturing the attention not just of the civil authorities but of the world's press, radio and television. To this extent the anarchists have announced their return as a significant disruptive presence, once again inspiring anxiety among governments and police chiefs.

Anarchists themselves disdain the customary use of 'anarchy' to mean 'chaos' or 'complete disorder'. For them it signifies the absence of a ruler or rulers in a self-managed society, usually resembling the 'co-operative commonwealth' that most socialists have traditionally sought, and more highly organized than the disorganization and chaos of the present. An anarchist society would be more ordered since the political theory of anarchism advocates organization from the bottom up with the federation of the self-governed entities - as opposed to order being imposed from the top down upon resisting individuals or groups. This is a long-established way of looking at things, with not just a distinctive but an impressive intellectual history. Yet the media and other commentators (including many who should know better) insist on employing 'anarchists' and 'anarchism' as smear words unworthy of rational consideration. The French anarchists' cult of dynamite in the 1890s had much to answer for the exceedingly negative image throughout the twentieth century. Now, in contemporary Britain, recent anarchist mayhem on the streets leads to a lazy, or frightened, association of all violent actions with 'anarchists', such as the unrelated student demonstration of November 2010 or the widespread urban rioting of August 2011, neither of which had any identifiable anarchist component.

The problem may be essentially British since, unlike France, Italy or Spain, this country has had no experience of a mass anarchist movement or an established anarchist tradition. The purpose of this paper, then, is to go some way towards filling this gap in the UK's historical memory by providing an introductory international survey of both the historic anarchist movement and the very different anarchist revival.

## **Anarchist origins**

The historic anarchist movement is identified with a workers' movement which flourished from the 1860s down to the close of the 1930s. However, there is a consensus that anarchist precursors can also be traced back to Chinese Taoism and Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu as well as to Classical Greece and Zeno of Citium. It has been argued convincingly that the Mu'tazilite and Najdite Muslims of ninth-century Basra were anarchists. Examples begin to multiply in Europe from the Reformation of the sixteenth century and its forebears (for example, the Bohemian Taborites and German Anabaptists), and then the Renaissance (Rabelais and Etienne de la Boétie) and the English Revolution (not only the Diggers and Gerrard Winstanley but also the Ranters) in the sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries respectively. Some eighteenth-century figures are even more obviously anarchist: the Rousseau of *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), William Blake (1757-1827) throughout his oeuvre and William Godwin in his great *Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793) and the essays of *The Enquirer* (1797). Unlike Blake, whose ideas made no impact on his contemporaries, Godwin exerted considerable influence, most markedly on his future son-in-law, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who went on to become, in Peter Marshall's words, 'the

greatest anarchist poet by putting Godwin's philosophy to verse'. Marshall goes far beyond this fairly conventional wisdom by claiming both Blake and Godwin as 'founding fathers' of British anarchism. It is, however, significant that Godwin was not recognized as an anarchist thinker until the very end of the nineteenth century (and Blake not for another hundred years). It was the Austrian anarchist scholar, Max Nettlau, who in 1897 described *Political Justice* as 'the first strictly anarchist book', leading Kropotkin four years later to call Godwin 'the first theorist of stateless socialism, that is, anarchism'.

Godwin could not be identified as an anarchist until after anarchism had come into being as a social movement, which it only did from the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Moreover it also needed to be named as such, as it first was by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in 1840 in *What is Property?* where he not only called himself an 'anarchist' - 'I am (in the full force of the term) an anarchist' - but also attempted to appropriate 'anarchy' as a positive concept. While he appreciated that 'the meaning ordinarily attached to the word "anarchy" is absence of principle, absence of rule; consequently, it has been regarded as synonymous with "disorder"', he asserted that 'Anarchy, - the absence of a master, of a sovereign -...is the form of government to which we are everyday approximating...', emphasizing that he was 'a firm friend of order'. Like many anarchists to come, he considered anarchy to be the highest form of order, contrasting it with the disorder and chaos of the present.

## **Anarchism and workers' movements**

Karl Marx shaped the development of the Working Men's Association (the First International) in conjunction with British liberal trade unionists when it was established in 1864, but within a year or two they began to be challenged by the co-founding Proudhonist mutualists from France, reinforced by other libertarians as anarchist movements began to form also in Switzerland, Spain and Italy. A titanic clash of personalities and political philosophies ensued between Marx and Mikhail Bakunin; and by the late 1870s both the International Working Men's Association and a rival anti-authoritarian International had collapsed. Further conflict ensued within the Second International of 1889, leading to the permanent exclusion of the anarchists by the state socialists from 1896. Despite the prominence of Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin in Western Europe, anarchism only emerged as a significant movement in their native Russia as late as the Revolution of 1905. Anarchism was also strong, however, in the United States - not among native-born Americans, but within the immigrant communities, above all the Germans, Russians, Russian Jews and Italians - and in Latin America, whence it was in part carried by Spanish and Italian militants and immigrants, notably in Cuba, Brazil, Argentina and Mexico - where it was an influential current in the Revolution of 1910-20. Significant movements and traditions also existed in the Netherlands, Germany and Portugal, as well as East Asia: in Japan and China.

In the industrializing societies of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries trade unionists and revolutionaries at times countered with unrestrained retaliation the brutal intimidation and suppression their strikes and insurrections provoked. From the late 1870s the anarchists added to the traditional 'propaganda by the word' - agitation utilizing the spoken and written word - 'propaganda by the deed', acts of revolt such as violent strikes, riots, assassinations and bombings intended to ignite popular uprisings. This phase degenerated in France at the beginning of the 1890s into terrorism and the cult of dynamite, although care was normally taken

to ensure that the victims would be class enemies, not members of the labouring masses. Anarchist terrorism was snuffed out by the French state through vigorous use of *les lois scélérates* (as they were dubbed), criminalizing anarchist activity, but there were to be many assassinations - and even more numerous unsuccessful *attentats* on the lives - of monarchs and statesmen down to 1914. Thus, anarchists (though interestingly not the Russian Narodniks, whose methods they consciously adopted, or the Irish Fenians) became permanently, associated in the popular mind with bomb attacks, which did actually remain a continual feature of international, working-class anarchism down to its demise - and beyond, (as the preferred tactic, for instance of the Angry Brigade in Britain in the 1970s).

A further strategy dates from the 1890s when many anarchists began to focus on the trade unions as the primary organization for struggle. Anarchist communism was partially displaced as the dominant tendency with the formation in France of the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail) in 1895 and the rapid adoption of syndicalism elsewhere. Syndicalism combined a Marxist analysis of capitalism with, approximately, an anarchist strategy, employing the work-to-rule, the go-slow ('ca'canny'), the irritation strike and sabotage. This was not a negative, anti-social conception for, as Emile Pouget stressed in *Le Sabotage*, the militancy was directed 'only against capital; against the bank-account': 'The consumer must not suffer in this war waged against the exploiter.' All disputes between capital and labour were seen as contributing to the class consciousness of the workers and preparatory to the final struggle, envisaged as a revolutionary general strike that would enable the syndicalist unions to take over the running of all major social arrangements and establish a stateless co-operative commonwealth. In the USA revolutionary syndicalism took the form of the industrial unionism of the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World); and elsewhere syndicalism attained mass followings in France, Italy, Argentina and Spain, where the impressive CNT (Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo) was set up in 1910. It was the CNT which was responsible for the amalgam of 'anarcho-syndicalism', combining syndicalist preoccupation with the workplace, daily industrial conflict and the revolutionary general strike with the traditional anarchist belief in the need for an ultimate armed insurrection.

One of the major strengths of anarchist thought has been its insistence that means determine ends and that the institutions built to engage in current social conflict will prefigure the institutions that will exist in a post-revolutionary order. As the Preamble of the IWW put it, 'we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old'. During 1911 the Unofficial Reform Committee had formed in the South Wales coalfield, drafting a notable and libertarian programme, *The Miners' Next Step*, in which the objective was stated as 'to build up an organization, that will ultimately take over the mining industry, and carry it on in the interests of the workers'.

These decades of the heyday of international anarchism - subsequently weakened by the First World War - came substantially to an end as a consequence of the Russian Revolution. Many anarchists and, perhaps especially, syndicalists were deeply impressed by the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in October 1917, their anti-parliamentarianism and their determination to move forthwith, without waiting for the maturation of capitalism, to the building of a socialist society. Anarchists defected in large numbers to the national Communist Parties as they began to be formed. In contrast, the Insurgent Army of the Ukraine, under the inspired leadership of the peasant anarchist, Nestor Makhno, fought against first the Germans and the Whites and then the Red Army. We now know that French anarchism remained strong until the mid-1920s; then bounced back again ten years later with the Popular Front and particularly in response to the Spanish Revolution

and Civil War. Elsewhere anarchism withered away, save in the Hispanic world where in 1936 the CNT and FAI (Federacion Anarquista Ibérica) spearheaded a major anarchist revolution in Spain, only for it to be put into reverse the following year by Stalinist counter-revolution. With the defeat of the Spanish Republic early in 1939, proletarian anarchism entered terminal decline globally, with only isolated pockets retaining significant strength, as in Cuba it would appear (until falling foul of the Revolution of Castro and Guevara).

## **Anarchism and youth movements**

When George Woodcock published his splendid *Anarchism* in 1962 in the USA and the following year as a Pelican original in Britain, he concluded it with considerable eloquence:

I have brought this history of anarchism to an end in the year 1939. The date is chosen deliberately; it marks the real death in Spain of the anarchist movement which Bakunin founded two generations before. Today there are still thousands of anarchists scattered thinly over many countries of the world. There are still anarchist groups and anarchist periodicals, anarchist schools and anarchist communities. But they form only the ghost of the historical anarchist movement, a ghost that inspires neither fear among governments nor hope among peoples nor even interest among newspapermen.

Clearly, as a movement, anarchism has failed. In almost a century of effort it has not even approached the fulfilment of its great aim to destroy the state and build Jerusalem in its ruins. During the past forty years the influence it once established has dwindled, by defeat after defeat and by the slow draining of hope, almost to nothing. Nor is there any reasonable likelihood of a renaissance of anarchism as we have known it since the foundation of the First International in 1864...

These comments were immediately greeted with criticism, even derision, for - as Woodcock was later to admit - in the decade that immediately followed 'the ideas of anarchism have emerged again, rejuvenated, to stimulate the young in age and spirit and to disturb the establishments of the right and the left'.

The profound cultural changes associated with the 1960s were responsible for a modest anarchist revival throughout Western Europe and North America. In Britain, for instance, the rise of the New Left and the nuclear disarmament movement in the late fifties, culminated in the student radicalism and general libertarianism and permissiveness, especially sexual, of the sixties, ensuring that a new audience receptive to anarchist attitudes came into existence. This anarchist resurgence climaxed with the remarkable events in France, where in May 1968 student revolutionaries fought the riot police, took over the Sorbonne, controlled the Latin Quarter, and precipitated the occupations of factories by their workers as well as a general strike. The origins of these *événements* can be traced to the University of Nanterre, on the outskirts of Paris, and its 'Movement of 22 March', whose leading figure, a 23-year-old Franco-German anarchist, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, became the articulate spokesperson of the wider movement. May 1968 revealed the existence of two new and original libertarian ideologies. Both advocated self-management and were anarchist, though they each denied that they were. First, there were the analyses of

*Socialisme ou barbarie* (despite it having ceased publication in 1965), whose principal theorist was Cornelius Castoriadis. Second, the Situationist International, whose twelve issues of *Internationale Situationiste* were brought out between 1958 and 1969, while in 1967 the group's two major theoretical works had appeared: Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. The Situationists' concept of 'the spectacle' and their dissection of consumerism are central to any serious understanding of the product, media and celebrity obsessed societies of the early twenty-first century.

Yet Woodcock's first thoughts of 1960-61 had been correct and he was to stand by them when he wrote in 1986: 'The anarchists of the 1960s were not the historic anarchist movement resurrected; they were something quite different - a series of new manifestations of the idea'. For the new anarchists of the sixties were students or peace activists or some such; their movement was not composed of artisans or labourers or peasants. To take a notable example, whereas in France *Socialisme ou barbarie* and Castoriadis did come out of the workers' movement and Trotskyism, the origins of Situationism in contrast lay in the artistic avant-gardism of various splinters derived from Surrealism, and far removed from the matrix of Proudhon's thought a century earlier.

## **Anarchism today**

The 'idea of anarchism' long predated the third quarter of the nineteenth century and this has survived the demise of the historic movement. Kropotkin believed that 'throughout the history of our civilization, two traditions, two opposing tendencies have confronted each other: the Roman and the Popular traditions; the imperial and the federalist; the authoritarian and the libertarian'. Thus there is no reason for thinking that conflict between authoritarian and libertarian tendencies will ever cease; rather it seems to be inherent to the human condition and its socio-political arrangements. Indeed, from the 1960s the revival of anarchist ideas and practice has spread throughout Latin America and, after the collapse of Communism, to Eastern Europe. Moreover, the ideas and practice have become deeply embedded in the new social movements of the last half century, although the activists of the peace, women's and environmental movements are commonly unaware of this. Yet in contrast to the historic workers' movement, this anarchist revival has been without any kind of purchase on the labour movements of Europe and the Americas: contemporary anarchists today are rarely trade unionists.

While all anarchists oppose the state and parliamentarianism and engage not in action mediated through conventional politics but employ direct action, they differ greatly when it comes to the means to be used to attain their ends, ranging from extreme violence to the non-resistance of Tolstoy and taking in all points between - other than constitutional political activity.

Thus the British anarchists currently participating in demonstrations do so not as reformers but as anarchists. That is to say, anarchists differ from the adherents of almost every other ideology, as well as all advocates of specific political or social reforms, in having little or no interest in altering the policies of states, in shaping the opinions of politicians and decision-makers. They reject authority - seen as imposed from above - and seek to replace it with self-government: organization through co-operative associations, built and federated from the bottom upwards. 'Anarchist protest' therefore appears oxymoronic. If anarchists are participating in - or initiating - demonstrations, it is not authority holders they are attempting to influence but their fellow cit-



izens, intending to galvanize them into action and to create alternative, non-hierarchical social structures.

The demonstrations surrounding the G20 meeting in London in March 2009 and the input by anarchists exemplify these principles. On Saturday 28 March, 35,000 marched through central London - from the Embankment to Hyde Park - in a challenge to G20 policies organized by 'Put People First' and supported by a large number of diverse trade-union, green and NGO bodies, including also the TUC itself. Anarchist groups in London issued a communiqué hoping for the participation of a mass libertarian 'militant workers' bloc' while commenting on the demonstration: 'This is not an end in itself, but a means to meet each other and collectively get involved in supporting a working-class fight back to the crisis'. Direct action was placed 'at the core' of this resistance. In addition, Wednesday 1 April, was designated as 'Financial Fools Day' by the anarchist 'G20 Meltdown', which called for an assembly at noon outside the Bank of England. At the same time a non-violent 24-hour 'Climate Camp' was set up nearby in Bishopsgate. The G20 Meltdown poster, urging 'Storm the Banks!', not only jeered at traditional protest - 'The pathetic TUC can only organize boring bog standard marches from A to B addressed by Labour has-beens - trying to keep a lid on our anger' - but also exhorted: 'In every street there are empty Woolworths which should be seized and turned into action centres or indoor car boot sales. Sacked workers should occupy factories and offices, home repossessions should be resisted'. In the event, some 7,000 participated, an office of the especially unpopular Royal Bank of Scotland was ransacked, the Climate Camp was broken up by the police in the early hours, and the aggressive policing - involving the controversial tactic of 'kettling' and the death of the newspaper seller, Ian Tomlinson - was condemned by radicals and liberals alike.

The G20 Meltdown demonstration was an example of propaganda by the deed, and together with the symbolic action of the Climate Camp, designed to change people's minds and get them to participate in actions of their own.

The violent spontaneity of the student protest against university tuition fees in London on 10 November 2010, in which the Conservative Party headquarters were attacked and vandalized, must have owed much to the events of March 2009, but were otherwise entirely dissimilar. The students' objective was to prevent the implementation of university fees, not to usher in a new society. As a leader in *The Times* was to observe perceptively, the anarchist groups 'do not care that much for the limited causes of the protests; if your goal is to topple the system, you are not especially bothered about student debt' (12 January 2011).

Yet on 26 March 2011 the massive anti-cuts demonstration organized by the TUC in London and attended by an estimated half-a-million people, was in part hijacked by anarchist direct action in which the Ritz was attacked, the windows of West End banks smashed and the police fought. *The Guardian* (2 April 2011) interviewed several of the anarchist militants, all saying that the 'the failure of the peaceful anti-Iraq march to overturn government policy (in 2003) was formative in their decision to turn to violence': 'We realized that political change in this country isn't predicated on being right and winning a debate'. An unemployed anarchist in his mid-twenties stated:

We are not in any way setting out to terrorize the public. We are the public...We are not calling for political reform or changes to the tax system. We are sending a clear message to capitalism that we can't be bargained with. There is no reform. We only seek your abolition.

## Conclusions

The historic anarchist movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries had been grounded in the working class and peasantry and their institutions, but its philosophy had been adumbrated over several centuries, even millennia, and on several continents. Its ideas and practices have been shared by the socially very dissimilar anarchists of the revival that has taken place since the 1960s. In particular, parliamentarianism and constitutional protest have been eschewed for direct action which may take two entirely different forms. Firstly, there are the symbolic actions, whether violent or non-violent, but usually illegal, intended as propaganda by the deed. Secondly, by occupying factories and then running them, for example, or following exemplary Green lifestyles in eco-communities, the existing social order may be bypassed by, in the words of a Shropshire militant, 'putting anarchism into action at the grassroots' (Freedom, 29 August 2009).

Both of these forms of direct action can be seen as merely disruptive by those who believe that society has to be run from above if it is to be orderly and efficient. And either of them can easily be mixed up with any other form of violent protest by lazy commentators. However, as this brief history of the international movement has attempted to show, anarchism needs to be understood as a distinctive and coherent tradition of political theory and practice. This may help its own proponents to reflect on the some of the adverse consequences of violent action, and it may persuade the wider public to take its ideas and examples more seriously as a significant alternative approach to social change.

## Further Reading

- Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)
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- George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2nd edn, 1986)

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