

Esther Ferrer's Letter to John Cage

In a letter, John Cage asked artist and anarchist Esther Ferrer to describe anarchism. This was her response.

Esther Ferrer

1991

Querido John,

Here are some quick thoughts to respond to your question as to the future of anarchism,

- For me, anarchism shall always have a future, and a present, for the basic reason that I associate it with creativity. Please, I don't mean art, which is something else, much more limited. I am talking about creativity in the sense that it comes from rejoicing, from pleasure and it serves first of all the person who practices it, without paying attention to the consequences and without feeling obligations to anyone else. There is no "master" except oneself.

Anarchy, like creativity, is thus a completely gratuitous choice, which engages only yourself and which you decided to practice; one could well define anarchy as a practice of liberty, first individual and then social. One can practice it alone, even if others are not at all interested. That is often the case, when one speaks of anarchism, others laugh or mistrust the idea, but that does not take away from one's own joy. This is to say that anarchistic thought is something out of time, even without time, and I would even dare to say that it is something anchored in human nature (there are other things anchored in human nature also, unfortunately) and like creativity, individualistic and individualized. This is the source of its attractiveness, and of its enormous risk, which in my opinion, makes it all the more attractive.

As a result, John, I think that in periods of "desánimo"¹ of "desesperanza", as today, when there is not, or seems not to be, any messianic hope to stuff our heads with, when the hopes have turned out to be largely inoperative, there is a return to essential things, and the essential things are never far away, because WE CAN FIND THEM IN OURSELVES, without needing recourse to ideologists and master thinkers, without needing to think outside of ourselves. Our liberty is only limited by the characteristics of our species in the most physical sense, and by the personal decision to employ liberty intelligently, that is, to consider others as beings who practice liberty too.

Anarchy is quite simply a problem of assuming individual responsibility. It is the idea that each person conceive of himself as a thinking being, capable of making his life decisions without

¹ Desánimo - Spanish term meaning "without soul", without force or courage. "Desaliento", meaning, "without breath" is a synonym. When someone dies one says "Dio su último aliento" he expelled his last breath. All these meanings are included in the term.

delegating his decision making capacities to someone else, whether it be a god, a king, a state, a party, an ingenious artist, a master of thought, a leader, a mother or a father. Now, to be more specific, for me, John, anarchy really does have the future that people are talking about, and for a reason much more concrete than the one, fundamental for me, which I spoke about before, that is, creative conduct, as opposed to subordinate conduct, and positive individualism:

In these times, which flow in a behavioral "grisaille"², it is no doubt attractive to follow a way of thinking that does not demand anything, that simply proposes the possibility that you have the courage to assume the decision and the consequences of your own acts, without protecting yourself in the imperatives of an ideology, a religion, or an authority, which convert you into an irresponsible person, first in regard to yourself, and then in regard to society.

In view of the unworkability of all the doctrines that claim to liberate humanity, such as capitalism, Marxism, or authoritative socialism³, the big loser of all the revolutions (Soviet, without forgetting Kronstadt, Spanish, etc.), that is, anarchism, seems for many to be once again a possibility. (As the Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza, used to say to me: "From failure to failure right up to the final victory"). Of course, that this possibility could become another fashion, another fad, is a new risk that anarchists must assume.

Why is anarchy a possibility? Because we begin to understand that we have delegated too much, believed too much in the daddy state, which protects us, and gives us such security (or the delusion of it) and puts us to sleep (in the best cases) or which exploits us (in the worst, and unfortunately more frequent cases). The daddy state also puts to sleep our capacity to think, to revolt, to manage our lives, because it promises everything and gives us practically nothing. Maybe it is easier, and even more comfortable, to delegate than to think.

Anarchism, in the face of all the other doctrines and ideologies, is a marvelous exception. IT PROMISES NOTHING! Wow! What joy! It gives us no model of pleasure to follow, to go for. It gives us no paradise, neither an artificial one nor a real one nor a proletarian one, at the end of an authoritative road. This is because, among other things, there is no road. Machado, a Spanish poet, exiled by the forces of General Franco, and who died in exile, has written: "caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar" ("Walker, there is no road, the road is made by walking").

So, from this struggle against the state, which does not mean the conquest of power, but rather its dispersion, anarchy struggles against the patriarchal family, of which the state is only one manifestation, (even if anarchist writing, with rare exceptions, make no reference to women, and even if, in their individual behavior, some of the great anarchist theoreticians were misogynist and authoritative). The term "patriarchal" really means any hierarchical pyramidal structure, in which the summit is occupied by a supreme authority traditionally masculine. Given that one of the goals of feminism is to decompose the patriarchal family (and not, if you please, to replace it by a matriarchal authority) in this sense the various feminist movements, can stimulate and actualize—thanks to women anarchists—some anarchistic ideas.

² "Grisaille" - It's as if it is a drawing in gray, with just a few touches of white. I like this very much in the field of art, but absolutely not in social intercourse.

³ The anarchists predicted this failure, even before their expulsion from "l'Internationale" in the 5th Congress in The Hague in 1872, when they argued directly to Marx, that a "proletarian state" was as bad as a bourgeois state, and that to accept the principle of authority of the state, was political tyranny. Any state would, by its own dynamic, develop into a suffocating dictatorial bureaucracy and would produce an enormous load of doctrinal and dogmatic thinking. They were right. "Where there is power, there is violence and coercion", wrote Kropotkin.

These ideas, John, at bottom, are simply natural creations of free thought, capable of generating someday, a fraternity and solidarity, conflictive, I hope (anarchy does not fear contradictions, she is submerged in them), but capable of inventing imaginative and joyful solutions.

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