

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



# A Brief History of Individualist Anarchism

Faruk Pak

November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Throughout the world, the word “anarchism” has a variety of meanings. When most people think of “anarchism,” the first things that come to their mind are fire-setting bomb throwers and masked rioters smashing Starbucks and McDonald’s windows. In the popular imagination, anarchism is synonymous with chaos. Armed with this image of anarchism as a nihilistic, violent ideology, many people cannot fathom how anyone could self-identify as an anarchist. After all, don’t anarchists hate authority and government? Don’t they want to destroy society and bring about some kind of anarchic utopia populated by roaming gangs of drug-addled hippies who spend their days smoking weed and having sex with whomever they please in abandoned warehouses? No wonder so many people find this idea so laughable... However, within the broad category of social and political movements known as “anarchism,” there are many different ideas about how to achieve greater equality, liberty, and justice for all people. Some anarchists advocate for non-violent resistance or peaceful coexistence with other ideologies and lifestyles; other anarchists support vandalism and

Faruk Pak  
A Brief History of Individualist Anarchism  
November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Retrieved 11/29/2022 from [c4ss.org](http://c4ss.org)

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

property destruction as a tactic against oppressive institutions; some call for an abolition of government while others demand more local control over education, prisons, roads, parks, etc. In this article, we will explore early individualist anarchism in the US which is, in my honest consideration, the closest thing to what the concept of anarchism really is. Looking at the history of the anarchist movement, the main representatives of individualist anarchism are thinkers such as Godwin, Stirner, and Tucker.

Individualist anarchism is based on the extreme and sometimes vague points of libertarian philosophy, since it rejects the social basis of true anarchism while trying to ensure the absolute independence of the individual. In particular, it rejects the state as well as society in particular and reduces the organization to an association of egoists based on the mutual respect of unique individuals, each standing on his or her own two feet. According to these statements, individualist anarchism, based on libertarian philosophies, seeks to ensure a state of absolute independence for the individual and ignores the social basis. Individualist anarchists favored the absolute power of the individual over the social and argued that there is no real subject other than the individual; therefore, they opposed any structure, including society, overriding the will of the individual. Where individualist anarchists differ from socialist anarchists is not in their emphasis on the individual but in the radicalism of their emphasis on the individual. They were skeptical of social constructs from the very beginning and argued that they would hinder individual freedom.

Individualist anarchism is a political philosophy that advocates the abolition of all forms of centralized social and economic control (i.e. the state, capitalism, etc.) in favor of sole proprietorship and individual ownership of land and one's own productive means of production (e.g. factories, farms, workshops, etc.). In other words, individualist anarchists want to dismantle coercive monopolies like state-capitalism and in-

stead institute a society of small businesses and co-operatives where workers control the means of production. In an ideal world envisioned by individualist anarchists, there would be no class distinctions between business owners, workers, and consumers; there would be no state (or other forms of centralized government) to enforce legislation or monopolize the legitimate use of violence; there would be no forms of economic exploitation (e.g. landlords charging exorbitant rent on poor tenants, employers taking advantage of their workers, etc.); and there would be no artificial scarcity created by legal regulations (e.g. patents, copyrights, etc.).

The history of individualist anarchism in the US is incredibly important because it shows that anarchism is not just another word for chaos and disorder. Although individualist anarchism has been largely forgotten as a movement, it was once a significant factor in American politics and culture. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, individualist anarchists were a powerful force in American labor struggles, publishing several prominent journals, and running for public office. The history of the individualist anarchist movement tells us that anarchism is not synonymous with violent revolution and chaos. Nor does anarchism require that we all live in a world without rules and regulations, as some critics have suggested. The history of individualist anarchism in the US demonstrates that a free, equal, and just society may be achieved through anarchist practices, it may not be a tangible achievement, but it will certainly bring people closer together and the idea will spread easily.

William Godwin (1756–1836) may be considered to be a pioneer of individualist anarchism. As a philosopher, novelist, and political activist, Godwin's writings greatly influenced social movements like feminism and socialism, but few people today know that he also laid the foundations for anarchism. Godwin was an early critic of the idea that government is a "necessary evil," arguing that the state is neither necessary nor

beneficial to society. In Godwin's view, the government is an unnecessary "usurpation" that causes more harm than good. In his 1793 work, "An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice," Godwin argues that individual conscience and natural morality are sufficient for creating a just and equal society. Because human beings are naturally self-interested and possess a moral sense, Godwin claims that it is in everyone's best interests to treat each other with respect and refrain from harming one another. For Godwin, government is unnecessary because human nature itself is a "law."

The first modern American anarchist movement was the Council of Equity, which was founded by a man named Josiah Warren in 1833. Warren was a contemporary of Godwin and an admirer of his writings but disagreed with Godwin's vision of government. Godwin consistently emphasized two aspects in his thought, one opposing the need for government in human-oriented affairs, and the other emphasizing the importance of morality in order to bring about a moral change by reforming the political structure and thereby enabling society to acquire virtue. According to him, when man is prevented from behaving as his understanding dictates, he is transformed from a subject capable of unlimited perfection into the lowest vile being imaginable. Warren did not believe that government was unnecessary because human nature is a "law;" he believed that government is unnecessary because human nature is a "contract." In other words, Warren believed that government is a social contract: a free agreement between individuals to respect each other's rights and property. Anyone who violates this agreement (e.g. by stealing, murdering, or abusing others) should be punished according to their crimes, but government has no right to interfere in people's lives outside of this context. In the 1840s, Warren and his followers founded individualist anarchist communities called "Equity villages" based on these principles. In these villages, residents held their land and possessions in "free hands" (i.e. not owned by the state or any-

violated, they are driven to war. And they will inevitably be at war until peace is restored.

one else); people were free to come and go as they pleased, and there was no government or police force to interfere in how the village was run.

After the Council of Equity dissolved in the 1850s, individualist anarchism went into decline in the US. Max Stirner was not a member of the Council of Equity, but he happened to share many of the same views of Godwin. Like Godwin, Stirner believed that government is a form of “usurpation” rather than a “necessary evil.” Like Warren, Stirner believed that government is not something that exists “out there” in the real world; it is a form of “injustice” in our own minds. And like the German individualists who followed him, Stirner advocated for a decentralized social and economic system based on free-market individualism. But, this does not indicate that Stiner shared views with liberals or most of the free-market advocates. Stirner’s criticism of the liberal political set of beliefs is that liberalism is no different from the meta-narratives opposed in anarchist philosophy. In his fundamental work *The Unique and His Property*, liberalism is portrayed as a political ideology concerned with general ideas and thoughts ... a political ideology that is concerned not with individual interests, but with general ends, a political ideology that is not specifically concerned with the idea of the flesh-and-blood self, but with ultimate ends. Stirner attacked the modern idea of the state and sovereignty, the habit of legitimizing the existence of the state. The idea that there are no sharp differences between state and society, and even the idea that society develops the state. Stirner also criticized society. However, in the absence of an idealized society and the state, which is portrayed as a monster, the problem of how even the simplest human relations would be carried out is a problem that needs to be answered by Stirner: For this reason, the thinker argued that the existing social structure and the form of the state should be transformed into a “union of egoists.” Stirner, who is opposed to any kind of meta-narrative,

institutionalization, and organization, proposes a unity of his own as to how human relations are to be achieved in the absence of such structures, even in the simplest sense of socialization. this unity he proposes has two characteristics: (a) It is based on purely voluntary action. (b) There is a unique choice among those who participate in it.

After Stirner's death, American individualist anarchists began publishing and distributing libertarian literature from an organization called The New England Free Culture Forum. Led by a man named Ezra Heywood, the Forum advocated for free love, free speech, free land, and free thought, and held weekly meetings in several cities. Heywood and his fellow Forum members did not call themselves "individualist anarchists," but they were essentially individualist anarchists who advocated for a decentralized society where government intervention was minimized and the free market was allowed to flourish. Like Stirner, Heywood and the Forum were critical of capitalism and believed that economic exploitation was just as harmful as government oppression. Although The New England Free Culture Forum was small and short-lived, it played an important role in the development of American social movements.

Benjamin Tucker, born in 1854, was an American individualist anarchist. His most important venture was the magazine *Liberty*, which he started in 1881 and shared his ideas with different writers, which ceased publication in 1908. He became one of the most important figures of American anarchism by interpreting Proudhon's anti-market anti-capitalism in a different way. He was the first person to translate Max Stirner's book *The Unique and His Property* from German into English. His theory of the four monopolies, including the land monopoly, the money and banking monopoly, the customs monopoly, and the copyright monopoly, is one of his most important ideas. He later abandoned the individualist market anarchism of Proudhon and Spooner, to adopt Stirner's egoistic anarchism, which

created confusion in the *Liberty* circle. In 1908, his entire corpus of books was destroyed in a fire, after which he went to France with his wife and died in Monaco. In anarchist circles today, it is argued that his ideas may have constituted a preliminary step in the synthesis of anarcho-capitalism. This idea may be true, especially considering that Rothbard explained that he was influenced by Spooner and Tucker. The American libertarian writer Benjamin Tucker, who advocated a somewhat moderate form of individualist anarchism, refused to resort to violence in order to refuse obedience and, like all individualists, opposed all forms of economic communism.

The last major figure in the history of individualist anarchism was a lawyer named Lysander Spooner (1808–1887) who founded a publication called "The Anarchist." Like Godwin, Warren, and Stirner, Spooner did not call himself an "anarchist"; he called himself a "no-government man." Spooner believed that the only legitimate role for the government is to protect people's rights and that the only way to maintain a free society is to prevent the government from becoming too powerful. Spooner put forward an individualist anarchist worldview, commonly referred to as "Natural Law" or the "Science of Justice", which draws its inspiration from deist and utilitarian considerations, according to which the first coercive actions against individuals and their property, such as taxation, are in fact criminal, because they are first and foremost immoral. Proudhon's famous "property is theft" argument, the motto of anarchism, would crystallize in its American counterpart in the proposition that "taxation is theft", which does not directly target private property but openly challenges state power. According to Spooner, the nature of a crime must be determined essentially by its violation of natural law; it cannot be argued that acts that are supposedly criminal according to positive laws become criminal merely by violating man-made (arbitrary) laws. People live in peace as long as they fulfill the principles of justice, but whenever one of these principles is