

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Anarchism

Geoffrey Ostergaard

1993

Geoffrey Ostergaard
Anarchism
1993

Published in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social and Political Thought*, pp. 12–14.

theanarchistlibrary.org

Repudiation of rulers is at the core of anarchism. In developing this negative notion, modern anarchists, broadly classifiable as either individualist or socialist, reject the state, hold that social order is possible in its absence and advocate moving directly towards ‘society without a state’. The first to elaborate a theory of anarchism was Godwin (1793) but Proudhon (1840) was the first to call himself, defiantly, an anarchist. As a social movement, anarchism, in a revolutionary form, crystallized in opposition to Marxism in the period of the First International 1864–72, partly over the issue of whether socialists should seek the immediate ‘abolition of the state’. In the twentieth century, as socialism became increasingly statist, the anarchist movement has declined but its ideas have influenced other movements and contributed to the critique of statist theories and practices. Anarchism also remains of interest because it raises issues fundamental to social and political theory.

One such relates to authority. ‘Philosophical anarchism’, a component especially of the individualist variety, rejects the idea of legitimate authority in the sense of the right of anyone (state official or not) to command the obedience of another. Individual autonomy, conceived morally, as by Godwin and by

Wolff (1970), requires individuals to act according to their own judgements. Conceived egoistically, as by Stirner (1845), it implies that 'the unique one' who truly 'owns himself recognizes no duties to others; within the limit of his might, he does what is right *for him*.

Since 'philosophical anarchism' makes cooperation and formal organization problematical, anarchists are often less radical. Although generally suspicious of authority, they may recognize the rational authority of experts within their fields of competence and the moral authority of basic social norms, such as 'contracts should be kept'. And in the sense in which 'politics' occurs in all organized groups when unanimity is lacking, they may recognize even political (but not state) authority. Thus, decisions taken participatorily by members of a commune or workers' cooperative may be deemed morally binding. But they reject authority backed by coercive power — the kind institutionalized, preeminently but not exclusively, in the STATE.

Anarchists reject the modern state because, within its territory, it divides people into rulers and the ruled, monopolizes the major means of physical coercion, claims sovereignty over all persons and property, promulgates laws held to override all other laws and customs, punishes those who break its laws, and forcibly appropriates through taxation and in other ways the property of its subjects. Further, with other states, it divides human society against itself into national societies, and periodically wages war, thereby authorizing mass murder. For anarchists, even a democratic state lacks legitimacy since it is not based on consent in any strict sense and the ruler-ruled relationship is merely masked. Anarchists may admit that sometimes the state performs useful functions, such as protecting — as well as also violating — human rights, but argue these could and should be carried out by voluntary organizations.

In rejecting the state, anarchists deny the widely held view, classically expressed by Thomas Hobbes (1651), that in its ab-

of ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM, anarchist ideas reemerged, sometimes spectacularly, in the context of the New Left movements of the 1960s. Their influence is still discernible today, notably in movements for peace, feminism, lesbian and gay liberation, radical social ecology, animal liberation and workers' self-management. Direct action, the classical anarchist alternative to conventional political action, has also become popular. At the other end of the political spectrum, individualist anarchism, reborn as anarcho-capitalism, is a significant tendency in the libertarian New Right.

The anarchism that survives and fertilizes other movements does not call, as Bakunin did, for the immediate abolition of the state. It calls, rather, for 'anarchy in action' here and now and for changes that promote the 'anarchization', not the 'statization' of human society. Beyond that, it survives as a permanent protest against all coercive power relationships, however disguised, and all theories that deny the fundamental insight of liberalism: human beings are naturally free and equal.

Reading

- Apter, D. E. and Joll, J. eds 1971: *Anarchism Today*.
Bookchin, M. 1982: *The Ecology of Freedom*.
Crowder, George 1991: *Classical Anarchism*.
Guerin, D. 1970: *Anarchism*.
Guerin, D. ed. 1998: *No Gods, No Masters*, 2 vols.
Miller, D. 1984: *Anarchism*.
Pennock, J. R. and Chapman, J. W. eds 1978: *Anarchism*.
Ritter, A. 1980: *Anarchism*.
Ward, C. 1982: *Anarchy in Action*.
Woodcock, G. 1963 (1986): *Anarchism*, 2nd edn.

the bourgeois state, and that, even if it did not, the second would lead to a dictatorship over the proletariat and hence to a new form of class rule. But underlying these differences, there are others, notably about the nature of the state. While anarchists agree that dominant economic classes use the state to maintain their dominance, they see the state as embodying political power which cannot be reduced, even 'in the last analysis', to economic power. Because political power has independent roots, the state is an organization with its own dynamics and 'logic'. Unless resisted, that logic leads to the complete domination of society by the state: **TOTALITARIANISM**.

Sharply contrasting with revolutionary anarchism in its methods but not in its vision of a new socialist society is anarchism that derives from the pacifist tradition (see PACIFISM). 'The law of love', expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, led Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, to denounce the state as 'organized violence' and to call on people to disobey its immoral demands. The call influenced Gandhi in developing his philosophy of non-violence in India. He popularized the technique of mass non-violent resistance and originated the key notion of anarcho-pacifism: 'non-violent revolution', described as a programme not for the seizure of power but the transformation of relationships. For him, national independence was only the first step in such a revolution which Vinoba Bhave, campaigning for voluntary villagization of land, continued in an effort to realize Gandhi's dream of an India of self-sufficient, self-governing village republics (Ostergaard, 1982).

In a century that has witnessed everywhere a vast increase in the power of the state, its further militarization and its general acceptance as the normal political organization of national societies, anarchism has clearly been 'against the current'. But it survives and shows a notable ability to outlive specific anarchist movements. A generation after the eclipse

sence there is no society and life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. Humans, they believe, are naturally social, not asocial; and until the first states developed some five thousand years ago all humans lived in stateless societies. Anarchists take John Locke's view that 'the natural condition of mankind', in which all are free and equal, no-one having the right to command obedience of others, does constitute a society. They do not accept Locke's justification in terms of consent of the limited state, an agency for protecting natural rights, especially the right to property — the nightwatchman view of the state associated with *laissez-faire* liberalism, which reappears in the libertarian work of Nozick (1974). But they endorse Locke's view, later vividly expressed by Paine (1791–2, pt 2, ch. 1) and recently restated by Hayek (1973, ch. 2), that social order exists independently of the state an order spontaneously generated, a product of human sociability. What distinguishes anarchists from such liberals is their belief that this natural order does not need supplementing by order imposed from above. In the language of rational choice theory, although social order is a 'public good', a good characterized by indivisibility and nonexcludability, people — under conditions envisaged by anarchists — will cooperate voluntarily to provide it themselves (Taylor, 1982). For anarchists, unlike classical liberals, the state is not a 'necessary' but a 'positive' evil — a major source, as in war, of disorder in human society. They champion, therefore, the idea of 'natural society', a self-regulated, pluralistic society in which power and authority are radically decentralized.

In distinguishing sharply between society and state, both individualist and socialist anarchism build on liberal foundations. The former may be seen as liberalism taken to an extreme, or logical, conclusion. The individual is the basic unit, 'society' is a collective term for aggregations of individuals, FREEDOM is defined negatively as absence of coercion, and the aim is to maximize individual liberty in ways compatible with the equal liberty of others. Against the state's claim to sovereignty is pit-

ted the principle of 'the sovereignty of the individual'. On the economic side, individualists have usually insisted on the importance of private property or possession, favoured individual production, condemned all monopolies, and praised the free market. In the belief that their proposals would secure to persons the fruits of their own labour and not lead to accumulation of possessions through the exploitation of the labour of others, nineteenth-century individualists sometimes thought of themselves as socialists. But their successors today, such as Murray Rothbard (1973), having abandoned the labour theory of value, describe themselves as 'anarcho-capitalists'. Their programme amounts to complete privatization. They argue that the free market can supply all goods and services, including protection of persons and property, now allegedly provided by the political monopoly called the state.

Socialist anarchism may be seen as a fusion of liberalism with socialism. High value is placed on individual liberty but freedom is defined not only negatively but also as the capacity to satisfy needs. Insisting on social and economic equality as a necessary condition for the maximum liberty of all, it rejects capitalist private property along with the state. Social solidarity, expressed in acts of mutual aid, is emphasized. Society is thought of as a network of voluntary associations but, more importantly, as composed of local communities. Communal individuality is the ideal.

Socialist anarchism was largely shaped by Proudhon's ideas: liberty is the mother, not the daughter, of order; all political parties are varieties of despotism; the power of the state and of capital are synonymous; the proletariat, therefore, cannot emancipate itself by the use of state power but only by (peaceful) direct action; and society should be organized as autonomous local communities and producer associations, linked by 'the federal principle'. However, his successors, Michael A. Bakunin and Peter A. Kropotkin in Russia, substituted for his 'mutualism' first 'collectivism' and

then 'communism' — the latter implying 'everything belongs to everyone' and distribution according to needs.

Also, under Bakunin's inspiration, anarchists adopted the strategy of encouraging popular insurrections in the course of which, it was envisaged, capitalist and landed property would be expropriated and collectivized, and the state abolished. In its place would emerge autonomous, but federally linked, communes: a socialist society organized from below upwards, not from above downwards. To foster the spirit of revolt among the oppressed, anarchists adopted the tactic of 'propaganda by the deed' in the form of, first, exemplary local insurrections and, then, acts of assassination and terrorism. Faced with the consequent repression of their movement, other anarchists adopted an alternative strategy associated with SYNDICALISM. The idea was to turn trade unions into revolutionary instruments of class struggle and to make them, rather than communes, the basic units of a new society. It was through syndicalism that anarchists exercised their greatest influence on socialist movements in the period 1895–1920. The influence lasted longer in Spain where, during the civil war of 1936–9, anarcho-syndicalists, with some shortlived success, attempted to carry through their conception of revolution.

In Spain, as earlier in revolutionary Russia, anarchism continued its quarrel with Marxism, even though anarchists often accepted much of Marx's economic analysis, while Marxists agreed that the coming classless, communist society would be stateless. The differences were in part about means to this end. Anarchists opposed the Marxist idea that workers should organize themselves into a distinct political party to win concessions from the bourgeois state as a prelude to its overthrow. And they opposed the idea of a workers' state — 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' — which, supposedly, would 'wither away' as capitalist property relations were abolished. Anarchists argued that the first would lead to the degeneration of the workers' movement and its cooption by