Anarchism

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Anarchism is the view that a society without the state, or government, is both possible and desirable. Although there have been intimations of the anarchist outlook throughout history, anarchist ideas emerged in their modern form in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the wake of the French and Industrial Revolutions.

All anarchists support some version of each of the following broad claims: (1) people have no general obligation to obey the commands of the state; (2) the state ought to be abolished; (3) some kind of stateless society is possible and desirable; (4) the transition from state to anarchy is a realistic prospect.

Within this broad framework there is a rich variety of anarchist thought. The main political division is between the 'classical' or socialist school, which tends to reject or restrict private property, and the 'individualist' or libertarian tradition, which defends private acquisition and looks to free market exchange as a model for the desirable society. Philosophical differences follow this division to some extent, the classical school appealing principally to natural law and perfectionist ethics, and the individualists to natural rights and egoism. Another possible distinction is between the 'old' anar-

chism of the nineteenth century (including both the classical and individualist traditions) and the 'new' anarchist thought that has developed since the Second World War, which applies the insights of such recent ethical currents as feminism, ecology and postmodernism.

Anarchists have produced powerful arguments denying any general obligation to obey the state and pointing out the ill effects of state power. More open to question are their claims that states ought to be abolished, that social order is possible without the state and that a transition to anarchy is a realistic possibility.