

Anarchism

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A doctrine whose nature is suggested by its name, derived from the Greek *an archos*, meaning 'no government'. The term *anarchist* appears to have been first used in a pejorative sense during the English Civil War, against the Levellers, one of whose enemies called them 'Switzerizing anarchists', and during the French Revolution by most parties in deriding those who stood to the left of them in the political spectrum. It was first used positively by the French writer Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in 1840 when, in his *Qu'est-ce-que la propriété?* (*What is Property?*), a controversial essay on the economic bases of society, he defined his own political position by declaring, perhaps to shock his readers into attention, 'I am an anarchist.' Proudhon then explained his view that the real laws by which society operates have nothing to do with authority but are inherent in the very nature of society; he looked forward to the dissolution of authority and the liberation of the natural social order which it submerged. He went on, in his rather paradoxical manner, to declare: 'As man seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy. Anarchy – the absence of a sovereign – such is the form of government to which we are every day approximating.'

Proudhon's attitude was typical of the anarchists in all periods. They have argued that man is a naturally social being, who through mutual aid evolves voluntary social institutions that can work effectively without the need for government, which in fact inhibits and distorts them. The important transformation of society, anarchists argue, will not be the political one of a change of rulers or a change of constitution, since political organization must be discarded; it must be replaced by the economic organization of the resources of a society without government. Thus, while they differ from socialists and communists in denying the state and any form of state control or initiative, anarchists agree with them in being opposed to capitalism, in seeking to abolish what one of their earliest thinkers, William Godwin, called 'accumulated property' and to replace it with some kind of common ownership of the means of production. Only a few extreme individualists have stood outside this pattern, as Max Stirner did.

The basic ideas of anarchism predate the use of the title *anarchist*. Some historians have found their origin in early religious movements that stood outside ordinary society, refused to obey its laws and attempted in some way to own their goods in common, like the Essenes, the Anabaptists and the Doukhobors. But in these cases the search seems to have been for spiritual salvation through a progressive retreat from involvement in the material world, and they have little in common with anarchism as a secular doctrine directed towards social transformation.

However, there are at least two social thinkers anterior to Proudhon who seem to fit the necessary criteria to be regarded as anarchists, since (a) they present a fundamental criticism of the existing governmental structure of society; (b) they present an alternative libertarian vision of a society based on cooperation rather than on coercion; and (c) they propose a method or methods of proceeding from one to the other.

The first is Gerrard Winstanley, the leader of the Diggers, a small communitarian group who emerged in England during the Commonwealth. In his 1649 pamphlet, *Truth Lifting Up its Head Above Scandals*, which departed entirely from religious orthodoxy by equating God with Reason, Winstanley laid down what afterwards became basic propositions among the anarchists: that power corrupts, that property and freedom are incompatible, and that authority and property between them are the main causes of crime; that only in a rulerless society where work and products are shared will men be both free and happy, because they will be acting according to their own judgements and not according to laws imposed from above. Winstanley went beyond theory to direct action when he declared that only by their own action could the people change their lot, and he led his own followers in an occupation of English common lands, where they

sought to set up an agrarian community in which all goods were shared. Despite the passive resistance they offered, the Diggers were finally forced off their land and Winstanley vanished into obscurity.

His ideas lingered in the dissenting sects of the 18th century, where they were picked up by William Godwin. In 1793 he published a massive treatise on the nature of government, *Political Justice*, which has often been described as the most thorough exposition of anarchist theory, though Godwin never called himself an anarchist. *Political Justice* does in fact admirably present the classic anarchist arguments that authority is against nature and that social evil exists because men are not free to act according to reason; 'accumulated property' is to be condemned because it is a source of power over other men.

Godwin anticipated the general anarchist emphasis on decentralization by sketching out a social organization in which the small autonomous community, or parish, would be the basic unit. He envisaged a loose economic system in which he anticipated Marx's slogan, 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs', by proposing that – capital in the form of 'accumulated property' having been dissolved – men would freely transfer goods to each other according to need, and all would share in production. Though he seems to have imagined fairly accurately the labour-saving powers of machinery, since he prophesied a drastic reduction of the work day, he does not appear to have taken into account the more complex work relationships that the industrial revolution and factory production were already beginning to create. In the political organization of his parishes he anticipated later anarchists by rejecting such standard democratic procedures as voting, since he regarded the rule of the majority as a form of tyranny. He not only envisaged society moving to a practice of consensus after its liberation from government, but also hoped that such a liberation would come into being through education and peaceful discussion. His anarchism was evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

The distinction between evolution and revolution is important since, apart from variations in their proposals for the economic organization of society, the main differences between the anarchists who began to appear with Proudhon were in their views of the necessary strategies for achieving the aim they all held in common – the abolition of the state and all forms of government, and their replacement by voluntary and cooperative forms of administration.

Some, like Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau and the Dutch anarchist leader, Domela Nieuwenhuis, were pacifists, aiming to change society by the practice of civil disobedience. Mohandas K. Gandhi, who more than once termed himself an anarchist and who envisaged a decentralized society of village communes, was perhaps the most important of their company.

Proudhon was nearer to the pacifists in his view of the tactics of social change than he was to the later leaders of organized European anarchism. Though he often spoke of revolution, he hoped that peaceful change might come about through the creation of workers' economic organizations. Proudhon's mutualism, as he called it, was a mixture of peasant individualism and cooperativism aimed at the reorganization of society on an egalitarian basis. He set out to shock his readers by declaring that 'property is theft', but by this he really meant the use of property to exploit the labour of others. 'Possession' – the right of an individual worker or group of workers to control the land or machines necessary for production – he regarded as necessary for liberty. In the book that may be his masterpiece, *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, written in prison because of his criticisms of Napoleon III, he sketched out the picture of a society of independent peasants and artisans with their small farms and workshops, and of factories and utilities like railways run by associations of workers, linked together by a system

of mutual credit based on productivity and administered by people's banks like that which he attempted to establish during the revolution of 1848. Instead of the centralized state, he suggested a federal system of autonomous local communities and industrial associations, bound by contract and mutual interest rather than by laws, with arbitration replacing courts of justice, workers' management replacing bureaucracy, and integrated education replacing academic education. Out of such a pattern, Proudhon believed, would emerge the natural social unity which he equated with anarchy and in comparison with which, he believed, the existing order would appear as 'nothing but chaos, serving as a basis for endless tyranny'.

Proudhon was the real founder of the organized anarchist movement. He laid down its theoretical foundations in a continental European context where Godwin was virtually unknown, so that Mikhail Bakunin, possibly the best-known and most influential of anarchists, once admitted: 'Proudhon is the master of us all.' Proudhon's followers, who called themselves mutualists, were active in the foundation of the International Working Men's Association, the so-called First International, which provided the first of many battlegrounds between the authoritarian socialism of the Marxists and the libertarian socialism of the anarchists.

In the early days of the International the struggle was between Marx and his followers and the disciples of Proudhon, who had died in 1864, the year the International was founded. Later the struggle took a new form, since Proudhon's disciples were replaced in opposing Marx by the followers of Bakunin, a Russian aristocrat turned conspirator, and the conflict between them eventually destroyed the organization. It was basically the conflict between Marx's idea of the workers seizing control of the state to carry out the revolution, and Bakunin's idea of the workers carrying out the revolution in order to destroy the state and all the other manifestations of political power.

Bakunin accepted Proudhon's federalism and the argument in favour of working-class direct action, which the latter had developed in his final posthumously published work, *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (The political capability of the working classes). But he argued that the modified property rights (the rights of 'possession') which Proudhon contemplated for individual peasants and artisans were impractical, and instead he proposed that the means of production should be owned collectively (hence his followers were called 'collectivists'). However, he still held like Proudhon that each man should be remunerated only according to the amount of work he actually performed; in other words, though in a slightly different form, the wages system would continue.

The second important difference lay in views of revolutionary method. Proudhon believed that one could create within existing society the mutualist associations that would replace it, and for this reason he came to oppose violent revolutionary action which aimed at an abrupt transition. Bakunin did not believe that such a piecemeal method could work. As a romantic revolutionary, he argued that 'the passion for destruction is also a creative passion', and taught that a violent uprising was the necessary prelude to the construction of a free and peaceful society.

The individualism and non-violence implicit in Proudhon's vision were thrust into the side currents of anarchism; Tolstoy, who had known Proudhon, largely incorporated them in his teachings of a radical Christian anarchism. But down to the destruction of anarchism as a mass movement at the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939, Bakunin's stress on violence and on a collectivized economic system remained dominant among anarchists in most countries.

The tactics of violent action varied, though they tended to be conditioned by the doctrine of propaganda by deed, which emerged during the 1870s among the Italian anarchists and was

particularly propagated by Errico Malatesta. Individual assassinations, largely justified by this doctrine, became numerous around the turn of the century; a President of France and a President of the United States were among the victims. There were anarchist-inspired mass insurrections in Spain and Italy and, during the Russian Civil War, in the Ukraine, where for several years the anarchist leader Nestor Makhno established libertarian institutions over a wide area and protected them by a numerous Insurrectionary Army.

There were also variations in the concepts of collectivism which the anarchists pursued, exemplified particularly in anarchist communism and anarcho-syndicalism.

Anarchist communism was mainly developed by Peter Kropotkin, a Russian prince and a distinguished geographer who abandoned his privileges for the revolutionary cause, though the idea may have been developed first by the French geographer Elisée Reclus. Kropotkin wrote a number of the seminal works of anarchism, including *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, in which he traced the development of cooperation among animals and men, and *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, in which he argued for the decentralization of industry that he considered an essential accompaniment to a non-governmental society.

The work in which Kropotkin most developed the idea of anarchist communism was *La Conquête du pain* (The conquest of bread), a kind of non-fictional utopia sketching out the vision of a revolutionary society organized as a federation of free communist groups. Kropotkin moved beyond Bakunin's collectivism, which envisaged common ownership of the means of production, to a complete communism in terms of distribution, which meant that need rather than merit would be the reason why a man should receive the means of life. Kropotkin argued that any payment according to the value of the work was a variant on the wages system, and that the wages system condemned man to economic slavery by regulating his patterns of work. Just as Kropotkin's anarchism was based on the idea (developed in *Mutual Aid*) that man was naturally social, so his idea of free communism was based on the notion that man was naturally responsible, and in a free society would neither shirk on his work nor take more than he needed from the common store.

Anarcho-syndicalism arose out of the involvement of anarchist activists in the French trade union movement, which revived during the 1880s after the proscriptions of working-class organizations that followed the Paris Commune of 1870. Industrial militancy seemed to offer a broad field for the direct action which the anarchists already advocated, and the anarcho-syndicalists tended to oppose to the gradualist tendencies of orthodox unionists, who sought the best possible deal with existing society, the intent to change that society by proceeding directly to the assumption of industrial control by the workers. Thus their unions, while not neglecting to fight for better conditions, were ultimately revolutionary in their intent, and a philosophy of incessant struggle developed among them. This concept was adapted by writers like Georges Sorel, who in *Réflexions sur la violence* suggested that the important aspect of revolutionary syndicalism was the myth of struggle and the cult of violence, which he believed had a regenerating effect on society. However, the working-class anarcho-syndicalist spokesmen, like Fernand Pelloutier, Emile Pouget and Paul Delesalle, rejected Sorel's theories, and believed that relentless industrial struggle, by violent and peaceful means, culminating in general strikes, could in fact destroy the capitalist system and the state at the same time. When that happened, the syndicates would be transformed from organs of struggle into the organizational bodies of the new society, taking over places of production and organizing transport and distribution. In this way they were developing Proudhon's concept of mutualist institutions evolving within the society they would eventually

replace. Anarchist purists, notably Errico Malatesta, distrusted the anarcho-syndicalists, fearing that a trade union movement that controlled all industry might itself be corrupted by power.

For many years before World War I, the anarcho-syndicalists controlled the leading French trade union organization, the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail); after the war it was taken over by the communists, who had gained added prestige among the workers through the success of the Russian Revolution.

Anarcho-syndicalism, however, spread from France to Spain, where it became a powerful working class movement. The anarchist federation of unions (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo) was the largest labour organization in Spain, at times reaching more than two million members. It was a model of anarchist decentralization, employing only one paid secretary in its federal office, the actual tasks of organization being carried out in their spare time by workers chosen by their fellows. The CNT was strong among the peasants of Andalusia as well as in the factories of Catalonia. The civil war in 1936–39 brought Spanish anarchism to its apogee, which was followed quickly by its downfall. The experience of decades of street fighting enabled anarchist workers in the eastern cities of Spain to defeat the generals in the early days of Franco's military uprising. Later they sent their militia columns to the various fronts. At the same time they tried to bring about their anarchist millenium behind the lines by expropriating the factories and the large estates. Reports suggest that many of the factories were well run by the workers and that the collectivization of the land induced the peasants to work with pride and devotion. But the experiments were too brief for valuable conclusions to be drawn from them, since the anarchists' hatred of authority made them as inefficient in creating armies as they seem to have been efficient in organizing collective work, and their experimental communes were suppressed at the time of Franco's victory.

The outcome of the Spanish civil war led to a general decline of anarchism during the 1940s and 1950s. However, in the generally radical atmosphere of the 1960s it underwent a revival; anarchist groups appeared once again in Europe and North America, the movement's history was written by scholars, and the works of the great anarchist theoreticians appeared again in print. Anarchism has not become again a mass movement of the kind that once flourished in Spain and to a lesser degree in France, Italy and briefly in the Ukraine. But it is a visible movement once more. Anarchist ideas of decentralization have spread widely and have merged with those of the environmental movement. It now survives more as an intellectual trend, encouraging a critical view of the institutions and practices of authority, than as a quasiapocalyptic movement which envisaged the end of government as a possible and not distant goal.

See Also

Bakunin, Mikhael Alexandrovitch (1814–1876)
Godwin, William (1756–1836)
Proudhon, Pierre Joseph (1809–1865)

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