Early Forms of Anarchy

Pure Freedom — The Idea of Anarchy, History and Future — Chapter 21

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> "The more laws and restrictions there are, the poorer the people become.
> The sharper the weapons, the more unrest in the land.
> The more clever and cunning the people, the stranger the events that occur.
> The more rules and laws, the more thieves and robbers."
> — Lao Ma (13th century BCE) aka Lao Tzu (5th century BCE)

> "A people ruled by a king lacks many things—but above all, freedom,
> which does not mean having a just master,
> but having no master at all."
> — Cicero

Before the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, there was no anarchism—but there were "anarchisms."

TO SPEAK OF ANARCHISM IN ANTIQUITY is a bit like talking about "pre-Christian Christianity." A bit paradoxical, in other words. "Anarchism" as a coherent system of thought—or even as a social movement—has only existed since the mid-19th century.

So is it even legitimate to search for traces of "anarchism" in antiquity, the Middle Ages, or the early modern period?

We would do well not to understand anarchism as an ideology. What interests us is a tendency, marked by very specific cornerstones: freedom, opposition to domination, solidarity, mutual aid, individual autonomy, networking of small units, self-determination, and rebellion against external control.

The historical expressions of such a tendency—some of which we will encounter on the following pages—are products of their time, their respective cultures, and the social problems they faced.

Modern anarchism as a movement arose in Europe and was shaped accordingly: it is a child of its time and responded to the social issues of the 19th century—industrialization, patriotism, militarism, the Church, the bourgeoisie, and the divide between rich and poor.

Therefore, our examination can never be about anarchism as such, but only about a snapshot of it. It would be a foolish mistake to measure, evaluate, or dismiss everything we encounter in our search for traces of anarchism against today's specific form of "anarchism." Such an omission would distort the picture in favor of a dogmatic and formalistic perspective—the kind often embraced by uncritical ideological histories. That, however, is not the intention of this book.

This is why the search for "anarchisms before anarchism" is both legitimate and necessary.

Like a "black thread", the longing for free forms of social life runs through the history of humankind. This thread is not always equally thick—rebellion rarely found its way into official historical accounts—but it was always there.

In the individual fibers of this thread, we can recognize the primary anarchist virtues as substance, not as labels—often hidden behind bizarre masks and usually appearing in contexts where the word "anarchy" was never used. A global vision of a libertarian world is also rarely discernible.

So this is a search for traces—not in the spirit of a formal and therefore ridiculous appropriation, but to show that the impulse toward freedom is an ancient component of humanity, and that modern anarchism was by no means an unexpected, spontaneous birth.

Before the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, there was no anarchism—but there were "anarchisms."

If we keep this distinction in mind, we can embark on this journey with an open heart…

Tao

In the thirteenth century BCE, we find—in the completely unfamiliar cultural world of feudal China—the first witnesses of anarchic thought, whose traces reach into our own time: Taoism, a tradition that continues to shape and influence Chinese society today—a blend of philosophy, social movement, life wisdom, practical science, and non-institutional folk religion. It is often regarded as a kind of primordial anarchist wisdom. Historian Peter Marshall calls it "the first clear expression of anarchist sensibility," and considers its main text, the Tao Te Ching, "one of the greatest anarchist classics."

Almost like a laboratory model, early Chinese high culture saw the confrontation of two "philosophical schools": Confucianism and Taoism. The former promoted a rigid, hierarchical order with virtues like duty, discipline, and obedience in a society where each individual was assigned an unchangeable place. It's not hard to see why Confucianism, in the expanding state system of sixth-century BCE China, quickly became the official state ideology—centralization and bureaucracy followed.

Taoists, by contrast, rejected governments and believed in a life of natural and spontaneous harmony, with a major focus on the human being in balance with nature. In the Taoist worldview, everything is in flux—nothing is fixed or permanent. Not coincidentally, Tao means "the Way." For Taoists, "reality" arises from the interplay of opposing forces—which, though contradictory, depend on each other and are capable of harmony: yin and yang. Much like modern social ecology, Taoism seeks balance within a colorful diversity.

Taoism, however, never degenerates into a mere religion. It doesn't force its worldview on anyone, nor does it develop cults, churches, or clergy. Instead, it evolves clear social and political insights: over time, Taoism articulates a coherent system of political ethics, with parallels to contemporary social movements. Its central principle, wu wei, often mistakenly translated as "non-intervention," is actually a synthesis of what we might call civil disobedience, anti-authoritarianism, or gentle technology.

Wu wei means the absence of wei—and wei refers to imposed, artificial, frenetic, authoritarian action that runs counter to natural and harmonious development. Politically speaking, wei represents the principle of authority. Put simply, Taoists believe: the more humans interfere, the more they try to control, the worse everything becomes—a perspective that aligns strikingly with the insights of modern ecology.

Accordingly, the Taoist school posits that the best government is the one that governs least—a view we find echoed in early libertarians like Wilhelm von Humboldt, John Stuart Mill, or Henry David Thoreau. And when the Taoist Lao Tzu rails against the bureaucratic, warlike, and commercial nature of his time, and portrays property as a form of theft, it sounds remarkably like Proudhon—though rendered in gentle, metaphorical poetry, the typical medium of Taoist wisdom.

Even clearer anarchic tendencies emerge in the writings of philosopher Chuang Tzu (569–286 BCE), who rejected all forms of government, advocating instead for the free existence of

self-determined individuals. The core idea of this Taoist ideal society is that people should be left to regulate themselves. This early Chinese version of laissez-faire assumes a high degree of trust in human social capacity—an issue still debated in modern anarchism.

In the Huai Nan Tzu, this question is resolved in a way that could almost be called "Kropotkinian": the well-being of each individual increases as the community prospers. Humans are both individuals and social beings—so whoever acts for the community also acts for themselves. This strongly echoes the "social egoism" of anarchists we've encountered before.

The parallel comes full circle with the claim that such a society would not be conflict-free, but would offer every opportunity to find new balances through the free interplay of opposing forces and interests—in other words, to form new coalitions based on shared interests. This sounds almost like bolo'bolo with yin and yang…

Taoist tendencies have gone through many historical developments and continue to exert influence to this day. It's hardly possible to draw strict lines between wisdom and rebellion, mysticism and pragmatism, religion and social tendency—and that's probably how it must be, for this reflects the Taoist essence.

The practical applications of this philosophy go far beyond the social realm and are accordingly diverse: from meditation and mental focus, nutrition, physical training, psychological techniques, sexuality, talk therapy, all the way to medicine, Taoism offers practical guidance for many aspects of life.

So—just a serene philosophy of life for individuals, without social mobilization?

What's clear is that Taoism, relying with disarming gentleness on humanity's capacity for harmony, has never produced a "social movement" in the modern sense over the past 2,500 years. It differs from classical anarchism less in the radicalism of thought than in the role of action. Where anarchism emphasizes direct action, Tao tends to advocate for enlightened passivity.

Thus, Taoism will likely remain what it has always been: a source of practical wisdom for those who seek full harmony within their own being.

Buddhism

Less obvious is the libertarian spirit that experts identify in Buddhism—which is not surprising when one realizes that, unlike Taoism, Buddhism did give rise to a church and a state-supporting clergy.

Buddhism originally emerged as an Indian religion, founded in the 6th century BCE by Siddhartha Gautama, who called himself Buddha, "the Enlightened One." His rather complex teaching of human perfection revolves around the contradiction between material possession—viewed as a negative bond—and self-discovery, which culminates in the highest stage of enlightenment, Nirvana. Nirvana is the "nothingness" or "complete liberation."

Initially, Buddhism was purely an ethical and meditative movement that was quickly suppressed in India but managed to establish itself in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Tibet. Early on, it split into a power-politically interested, institutionalized branch called Theravada, and the Mahayana direction, which continued to pursue exclusively the self-liberation of the individual through the quest for perfection.

From the 6th century onward, a development began in China under the name Ch'an, which interprets Buddha differently: as the first rebel, the "breaker of chains" that bind humans in ig-

norance and unfreedom. This represents a genuine heresy, similar to those we know from the history of the church in medieval Europe. Ch'an reached Japan in the 12th century, where it developed into an independent tradition called Zen.

Zen is neither a church nor a state-supporting religion. Unlike the powerful medieval abbeys in Europe, a Zen monastery is not a center of power, wealth, and knowledge, but a place of equality and poverty. A Zen monk does not see himself as a mediator between "God" and humans but as a kind of teacher, a role model who can help on the path to self-knowledge. Zen recognizes no higher authority of truth than the intuition of the individual, above which not even Buddha stands. More than a sect, it is an experiment through experience, and decidedly egalitarian: Zen knows no elites, mocks authority figures, and promotes an autonomous, self-determined life. Its goal is the liberation of the individual from imposed morality, legality, and authority, in harmony with the environment. In the natural order, Zen finds no justification for rule and hierarchy.

For this reason, Zen Buddhism can be credited with a certain libertarian spirit, just as Taoism can. Both reject hierarchy and domination, both seek individual liberation through self-knowledge in full harmony with oneself. However, both remain silent on the question of whether such ideals are possible in the societies of the twentieth century outside one's own mind. How a society shaped by such ideals might arise is not their concern. Herein lies a fundamental difference from classical anarchism, for which freedom is not only an individual but also a social phenomenon.

Undoubtedly, the ethics of Tao or Zen would provide a more fertile ground for an anarchic society than, say, Catholicism or Islam. Yet, just as certainly, religious concepts such as Buddhism—based on belief in reincarnation and in which fateful karma weighs like a mortgage from the past on the present—introduce new chains. Social and spiritual freedom also find limits here. Either the world and thus humans are determined, in which case true freedom does not exist; or they are not, in which case karma does not exist.

The Ancient Greeks

Ancient Greece, always a favorite place* especially for the German educated middle class, is primarily known to us as the "cradle of democracy." And that is true: In the city-state of Athens, about 500 years before the Common Era, there were 30,000 citizens, of whom up to 6,000 regularly participated in parliamentary assemblies. Such a density of political participation is something modern democrats can only dream of. Administrative and governmental tasks were in the hands of the "Council of 500," whose membership was subject to a rotation principle. Judges were elected, disputes were publicly heard, and bureaucracy existed only in rudimentary forms that must seem quaint to us today. So, all around there were elements of direct democracy in small, manageable units. Political structures whose key elements were autarky and autonomy, in which the right to free opinion, free speech, and free action were concepts people dealt with both theoretically and practically. All this at a time when in our regions hardly anything else was known than the unchecked despotism of the powerful, and when an individual person did not even really have the right to their own life—let alone their own opinion. Well two thousand years before things like the Magna Carta, the Habeas Corpus Act, human rights, or even general elections came onto the agenda here. [Editor's note: Habeas Corpus Act, English law from 1679, according to which no prisoner may be held in custody without judicial examination.]

So, an island of humanitarian hope in the midst of a dark, barbaric world? One is easily tempted to attach a libertarian label to ancient Greek democracy, but social reality looked different.

First of all, ancient Greece was not only made up of democratic city republics like Athens but also many mini-dictatorships and petty tyrannies; there were the Spartans with their proverbial military toughness as well as the Macedonian Alexander, who set out to conquer a world empire and had nothing to do with democracy.

But even in places where classical democracy à la Athens was in effect, it was anything but libertarian ideals. It applied only to men; women had no rights. Slaves of course also had none. Nor did the majority of immigrant residents who lived in the polis* but were not citizens of the city. All of these made up the large majority but had no say. And political participation was not all that widespread: assemblies often resembled more a show than a place of serious political decision-making. Beautiful rhetoric in itself was an aesthetic value that made visiting the parliament an enjoyment at a time when there was comparatively little mass entertainment available. But real decisions were usually made within political elites, who kept the masses well on a long leash. It was no coincidence that democratic Athens was never free of expansionist and power ambitions and repeatedly threw itself into new military adventures, for example under the skillful leadership of Perikles.

All of this does not seem unfamiliar to us today: discrimination, manipulation, parliamentary show performances, and the illusion of one's own decision-making among the electorate quite correspond to the appearance of our "modern democracies" over the last 150 years. That foreigners are not allowed to vote here is just as taken for granted as the fact that women were excluded from voting at the beginning of the last century.

No matter how democratic we may consider ancient Athens to have been — all this has little to do with "anarchy." Thus, the value of ancient Greece for anarchism lies less in its social reality and more in its philosophical significance. Undoubtedly, the relatively large freedoms offered by a democratic polis provided a good framework for the development of free thinking and unusual utopias, which can rightly be seen as precursors of modern anarchism. The magnificent ideas of some Greek philosophers were indeed embedded in a less magnificent social reality, but they were meant to serve as a source of inspiration repeatedly during the following long, dark periods of ignorance and despotism. Thinkers and philosophers, revolutionaries and reformers have drawn from them up to our days. Max Nettlau, the great and tireless historian of anarchism, somewhat pathetically* but fittingly compares them to the "veins of freedom," through which the often weak pulse of anarchist thinking survived even the worst centuries.

Not that the term "anarchy" had a good ring among the ancient Greeks. Homeros and Herodotos (ca. 490–430 BCE) used it to describe the unfortunate condition of the absence of a leader or general. For Aischylos (ca. 525–465 BCE), anarchy always leads to the dissolution of the community. Sokrates (470–399 BCE), who with his demand to think for oneself and always question authority leaves such a sympathetically anti-authoritarian impression, remains elitist* despite it all. He simply cannot imagine a community without rule. At least he paves the way for the insight that there are no absolute truths and that relative truth is best gained through controversial discussion. Undoubtedly, progress. For Heraklitos (ca. 550–480 BCE), similarly to the Taoists, reality is subject to constant change arising from antagonisms*. Of course, all within a "natural order" where there is no room for anarchy. Nor was Heraklitos a democrat: it would be best to force people to their happiness.

Things really get colorful only after Sokrates' death in 399 BCE, when his numerous students begin to stir up philosophical thought vigorously.

On one hand, Platon, a brilliant mind who, however, seems to have received nothing of the anti-authoritarian essence of his master. With his bestseller "The Republic," he becomes for all time virtually the designer of the authoritarian, centralistic, all-controlling state. He is one of the first to give the term "anarchy" a political definition and places it on an equal footing with "democracy." However, for Platon, both are equally reprehensible. He describes anarchy as colorful, unbound, and undisciplined — thus harmful. Platon's famous student Aristoteles places anarchists outside the state and accordingly condemns them as lawless, dangerous beasts. Such definitions were to become influential and remain valid for a long time.

On the other hand, various philosophical schools emerge from the intellectual legacy of Sokrates, which in the following centuries would become some of the most important currents of nonconformist thought: the Epikureans, the Kynics, and the Stoics. All of them are individualistic in one way or another, without slipping into crude egoism. And all of them more or less disregard the state, authority, and laws. The autonomous individual moves to the center of their thinking.

The school of Hedonism, founded by Aristippos in the third century BCE and later given the adjective "Epikurean" after the philosopher Epikuros, was the first to bring the legitimacy of pleasure into the focus of philosophy and loosen the slavish dependence of the individual on the terror of the gods. Epikuros, who in his "Garden," where he taught, welcomed women and men of all social classes for free, quickly became unpopular even as his following grew throughout the Mediterranean. His credo stated that societies founded on affection and friendship were more humane than those based on theoretical equality and justice. The Epikureans, far removed from the prejudice of blind pleasure-seeking and lust often attached to them, most closely correspond to the part of modern anarchism that is situated between conscious living, the right to one's own lifestyle, the legitimacy of earthly pleasure, and a combative individualism. Their predecessor Aristippos, who must have been a real snob in contrast to the "ascetic pleasure-seeker" Epikuros, is credited with the saying that the wise man should not sacrifice his freedom to the state.

The Kynics, too, were not necessarily what we today call cynics—that is, people who mock the feelings of others with clever but biting sarcasm. Sharp-tongued indeed, and notorious for their revealing paradoxes*, we can most appropriately see this philosophical school as the spearhead of an anarchoid guerrilla of fun in antiquity that recognized no established authorities. One of their most prominent students, Diogenes of Sinope, was the eccentric scoffer of civilization par excellence. He denounced slavery, proclaimed his brotherhood with all living beings, and declared himself the first "world citizen" in history. He did not want to live better than a dog. His dog-like—Greek "kynic"—way of life earned him a "barrel" as a dwelling, in front of which one day the mighty general Alexander appeared, offering the famous philosopher whatever he wished. Diogenes' request, that Alexander please step out of his light, was worthy of the authority-defying philosophy of a Kynic and became correspondingly famous.

The ideas of the Kynics focus on the concepts of physis (nature) and nomos (convention), which philosophy had so far tried to reconcile. The Kynic school, however, rejected human conventions, which they regarded as artificial, arbitrary, and imposed. Instead, they sought "natural laws"—physis triumphs over nomos. For example, the founding father Antisthenes, who had turned his back on his aristocratic class, preached to the working population at mass meetings in

the open air a path "back to nature," where government, private property, established religion, or marriage would no longer have a place, because in a "natural order" they would be superfluous.

For a Kynic, conventional rules are just as "unnatural" as they are annoying. Law, hierarchy, and customs differ among various peoples and times; therefore, they have no universality and consequently no moral authority. This anarchic element of the Kynic school is especially evident in the person of Diogenes, who despised money, practiced passive resistance, and lived a subversive everyday life.

The Stoics are positioned even closer to anarchism. For Kropotkin, Zenon of Kition (4th and 3rd centuries BCE) was **"the best exponent of anarchist philosophy in ancient Greece."** No wonder, since he opposed Platon's state communism with the ideal of a free commune without government. Zenon recognized—just like his Russian admirer—that humanity has both the instinct of self-preservation, which manifests as egoism, and the social instinct, which leads to cooperation. Both tendencies are in free play, with social cooperation increasing as humans align themselves with their "natural needs." Coercive institutions would then become unnecessary.

Thus, the Stoics build on the Kynics' concept of "natural principle," but unlike them, they do not reject the benefits of civilization. They are more realists than provocateurs, and from the Epikureans, they adopt the capacity for enjoyment. A pleasant mixture that contains strong elements of what we today would call individualism, rationalism, equality, and openness to the world.

The idea of "natural principle" equates "God" with "Nature" and "Nature" with "Reason." A philosophical trick with far-reaching consequences for a long time: divine law thus corresponds to natural law; the limits of humans compared to the gods are exactly those set by nature. To rebel against nature (= God) is irrational. Therefore, it is rational to respect natural law (= divine order). Natural science would consequently be the study of this order. It is clear that such a concept of God increasingly distances itself from mystical religion. Rationality acquires a divine character, while the religious element withers. In all this, Stoicism strongly resembles the ideals of the Enlightenment, just as it shares the nearly boundless belief in the goodness of man, provided he can develop "naturally" — a belief, by the way, that has lost much of its persuasiveness since Rousseau and is now seen more critically in anarchism. However, 2200 years ago, this way of thinking was groundbreaking, as it was the first counterweight against the local, authoritarian, god-fearing power mentality in mainstream Greek philosophy with its personified deities. This allowed a coherent political worldview to emerge:

A wise person, according to the Stoics, participates in political life if not prevented from doing so, but the state by its nature prevents such engagement. Therefore, all states are equally evil. Stoics also prove to be true cosmopolitans. Unlike Platon and Aristoteles, they consider all people to be of equal worth and consequently oppose slavery in the polis. In Zenon's "Republic," there are no racial or social distinctions, no courts, police, armies, temples, money, marriage, or schools. In such a "natural order," "everyone works according to their abilities and consumes according to their needs." It would be more than 2000 years later before the tradition of such radical ideas was timidly revived: by Lessing and Fichte, and more vehemently by Godwin, Kropotkin, and Landauer.

But let us not forget one thing: Zenon's Republic was not a real existing territory, but philosophy. Ideas that have come down to us as written fragments or reports. Epikureans, Kynics, and Stoics were fringe groups of society, standing in opposition to the prevailing morals and philosophy. Probably considered "cranks" by most people who even knew of them. Little is known about

concrete attempts to put such ideas into practice. If there were approaches extending beyond the private homes of philosophers, they were unsuccessful—otherwise, we would likely have heard about them. Philosophy was a hobby of privileged people in ancient Greece.

Nevertheless, the impact of these philosophical schools should not be underestimated. On the one hand, they were trendsetters. Undoubtedly, they influenced the spirit of the age and affected the social life of an era. For example, Stoicism found followers throughout the Mediterranean, especially in Asia Minor and Rome, where it had a lasting influence on jurisprudence—the idea of natural principle (or sometimes natural law) replaced formal law. On the other hand, they became part of human cultural history and acted like seeds of freedom that survived for centuries until one day falling on fertile ground and sprouting in social reality. The few enlightened thinkers of the Middle Ages drew from this seedbed as did Renaissance philosophers, Enlightenment thinkers, and early anarchists.

Dark Times in the Shadow of the Church

The following centuries are poor in such freedom-giving "seeds," and the "veins of freedom" pulse very weakly for a long time. The Roman Empire was not only the political triumph of the state itself but culminated in an unprecedented imperialism. Almost the entire Western world was subject to a single, powerful, centralized state doctrine serving Rome. Bad times for the love of freedom.

Then came the so-called "Dark Ages," which, although not as dark in many respects as commonly believed, were so regarding global freedom. In the wake of the new Christian religion and its singular, strict, neurotic-authoritarian God, a new religious imperialism followed—with some delay: the church, clergy, and monasteries spread across Europe an equally dull and intolerant unified doctrine. It was built on fear and entwined excellently with secular state power. Thinking outside religious categories became nearly impossible for one and a half millennia.

Therefore, most of what has been preserved from these times in terms of freedom impulses is either direct rebellion against oppression or deviation from church doctrine. Slaves and heretics, peasants and dissenters are the protagonists of this resistance. The sources from today's perspective are almost maddening. Pure rebellion movements produced hardly any writings or theories; they are known to us only through the reports of the victors and fare correspondingly poorly. For heretics, there are more written documents since their thinkers mostly originated from the church itself and were diligent scribes. Much was destroyed, and the rest must be painstakingly pieced together from inquisitors' records. This is about as authentic as trying to reconstruct the worldviews of anti-Hitler resistors from Gestapo interrogation protocols.

Since the turn of the era, there has not been a century without uprisings and heresy. An unbroken chain of defiance accompanies the "official" development of society. Plebeians, Gracchi, Spartacus-led slaves, Cimbri, Teutons, and Donatists rose against the Roman Empire. In our immediate vicinity, Batavians, Saxons, Slavs, Frisians, Lutizens, and repeatedly the oppressed peasants resisted oppression and disenfranchisement. Cologne, Magdeburg, Strasbourg, Mainz, Würzburg, or Brunswick experienced uprisings against authority just as Bavaria, Alsace, Thuringia, Pomerania, Dithmarschen, or Sundgau did. They all cannot be enumerated or investigated here.

Did such rebellions have anarchistic traits? In a strict sense, certainly not, since they generally lacked the totality of a vision free of domination. Thus, Max Nettlau in his History of Anarchy concludes that the uprisings in ancient Rome exhibited authoritarian forms just as the early Christian communities did, which, despite their communist-democratic beginnings, were quickly absorbed into the new state religion. For the cause of freedom, Nettlau states, "none of these were relevant," allowing only a few exceptions. However, in the spirit of our impartial search for essentials beyond the modern concept of anarchism, a closer look is worthwhile.

"Oh, you fools! Anyone can write whatever they want in a book; and the one who wrote the Gospel could also write whatever he wanted." Such disrespectful sentences coming from the mouths of convinced Christians sound unusual. And yet they are typical of that egalitarian and anti-authoritarian thread that runs as opposition throughout the history of Christianity and has never been silenced to this day.

The quote comes from the final phase of the Cathars, an immensely popular Christian protest movement that spread over large parts of southern Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries. These people understood themselves, following the Greek kátharos, as "the pure ones" — a word from which the German word Ketzer ("heretic") developed. They opposed widespread poverty and the privileges of the nobility, mocked the institutional church along with its dogmas and pomp, preached a simple life, and regarded all people as equal. This also applied to women, which in the patriarchal world of the Middle Ages was an incredible provocation.

Apparently, such ideas met the needs and tastes of broad segments of society and became a serious threat to the church. Since heretics also lacked the necessary respect for the Holy Scripture and the Holy Roman Church, Pope Gregory IX found himself in such a tight spot that in 1232 he invented the "Holy Inquisition," a tribunal that was supposed to combat all kinds of "heresy" by means of court proceedings, torture, and the death penalty. This was followed, hand in hand with state power, by outright extermination wars — for example, against the Albigensians in Provence or the Waldensians in France and Northern Italy. Despite all the brutality, it took more than seventy years before the Cathars were finally destroyed — only to make room for new protest movements that were also persecuted. The Inquisition — which still exists today but is no longer allowed to impose secular punishments — has never been idle in its almost 800-year history.

Church rebels — whether in word, writing, or deed — have been generally called "heretics" since the days of the Cathars. And heretics, unless they were repentant and pardoned by the mother church, were burned, hanged, quartered, or broken on the wheel well into the 18th century. Often it was enough just to deviate from the official opinion and to think independently. More accurately, the word heretic (from the Greek hairesis, meaning "choice") designates people who "adhere to self-chosen views or ways of life." Already in the second century AD, the church used the word for the crime of "arbitrary human opinion" and henceforth denoted a "deviant" from the divine truth, which, naturally, was defined by the church. And deviation was considered a grievous sin worthy of death.

Yet "heresy" existed before the church — strictly speaking, even before the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. He was only one of many "utopian cranks" who, at the time, wandered around the Jewish homeland with their provocations and prophetic visions and presumably got on the nerves of the respectable citizens. Much like during our own hippie era, in Palestine at that time, difference, universal love, challenges to authority, new ways of life, visions of equality, and of course resistance to state power were very much in vogue. And before that ridiculed provocative

prophet Jesus was crucified, became a myth, and under the nickname "the Anointed One" (Christ) became the founder of a new religion, he had most likely been connected with a radical religious sect, the Essenes. They lived in a kind of village commune on the shores of the Dead Sea and practiced a "pre-Christian" love communism in equality, poverty, leaderlessness, and religious searching in harmony with nature and its laws. Without doubt, much of what the wandering prophet Jesus said and did was borrowed from here.

Only decades and centuries later did some people who were not there write down all the anecdotes and legends about Jesus that circulated by word of mouth. Thus the "Gospels" came into being — part of that dubious collection of texts called the Bible, which as the "Book of Books" still must not be questioned today. From this quickly grew a package of "truths" that served a power-obsessed, dogmatic, and intolerant church calling itself Christian. Presumably, the historical Jesus of Nazareth would have been the church's first rebel.

This means nothing less than that heresy, in its true sense, is not a deviation but rather something typical of Christianity itself — quite simply because Jesus of Nazareth, as a free seeker of divergent views and ways of life, was himself a typical heretic. In this respect, the Christian church would be the real degeneration* of Jesus' ethics. At least that is how more or less all heretical movements see it: they always strive for a "true" Christianity, wanting to return to the unadulterated origins. In doing so, they seek the meaning of the message less in the meticulous interpretation of church texts and more in the spirit they believe they have found exemplified in the life of Jesus. This tendency is not limited to the Middle Ages. It runs uninterrupted from the Essenes to Tolstoy. Jesus as a rebel — that inspires to this day!

For example, the "Liberation Theology" of Latin America, the Catholic worker-priesthood, or the work of the religious-pacifist socialist Leonhard Ragaz. Groups like the "Catholic Workers" from the USA go even further. They apparently have no difficulty reconciling Christ and anarchy. Their activists Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy, and Peter Maurin represented a kind of religious anarchism, similar to what the Russian thinker Nikolai Berdyaev did on a philosophical level.

Religious, and indeed explicitly "Christian anarchism," has long formed a small but interesting side thread in the "black thread" of the libertarian movement. Religious views are not forbidden in anarchism, and atheism is by no means an automatic requirement. Nevertheless, most anarchists cannot follow here. In our age, they argue, "religion" and "nature-harmonious worldview" are clearly separated, making the "philosophical trick" with natural law unnecessary. It is all the more incomprehensible how anyone wants to reconcile freedom from domination with submission to divine authority and omnipotence.

"Nothing is more foreign to us than the state" — this statement by Tertullian, one of the oldest Latin church fathers, shows how strongly and naturally Christian-anti-authoritarian virtue was still represented in the 2nd century. That was soon to change. The sect of Christians built its own hierarchical apparatus even while persecuted by the Roman Empire and eventually became the state religion. Christianity made a radical turn from its communal roots toward the persecution of utopian-Christian visions. From then on, all those who rejected collusion with power and wealth and instead saw the true message of Jesus in the egalitarian example of love became persecuted. Even Tertullian broke with the bishop's church during his lifetime.

The Gnostic* Carpocrates of Alexandria demanded in his book On Justice in the mid-2nd century a communism that he considered willed by God and observable everywhere in nature: Everyone should equally share all goods; no one should possess more than another. Lust and desire should not be suppressed since they are also natural and therefore pleasing to God. Bishop

Ambrose of Milan (340–397) also appealed to this equation of natural law and divine will, proclaiming: "Nature has produced the law of community. Arrogance created private property." In Syrian Antioch, John Chrysostom (354–407) expressed similar views and later, as bishop in Constantinople, preached a communal social system with common ownership to subjects groaning under Roman tax servitude. He died in exile. Augustine, a student of Ambrose, gave away all his possessions to work in Africa. A sharp opponent of the entanglement of church and state, he created with his book De civitate Dei ("The City of God") the first Christian-inspired political utopia, in which the Golden Age of humanity was not in the lost paradise but in the earthly future. This vision of God's kingdom culminates in the sentence "Love and do what you want," which almost literally reappears in 1534 in the utopian writings of the French "early libertarian" Rabelais. Augustine thus becomes the founder of millenarianism, the hope for a thousand-year reign of God on earth, characterized by equality, justice, brotherhood, and love. Many later church rebel movements would draw from this source.

Yet ideas like those of Carpocrates, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine, and others almost always remained without practical consequences. The early Christian communities initially lived in a kind of primitive communism anyway, and the bulk of the population barely reached these teachings. At best, smaller groups took such sermons to heart and followed men like Basil, who around 370 propagated the vision of a city of charity and care. The result was a number of monasteries. Furthermore, the early critical thinkers of the church were usually either stripped of power or corrupted.

An exception is the state- and church-critical Donatist movement, which in the 4th and 5th centuries in the North African province of Numidia inspired the social rebellion of impoverished tenant farmers against large landowners and appears in many ways as a precursor to the German Peasants' Wars. There were tax strikes, land occupations, and finally armed conflicts with the Roman Empire. Bishop Donatus, elected in 314 as a "grassroots candidate" against Rome's favorite, supplied the rebels in their fight for rights with biblical ammunition. For him, who is credited with the phrase "What has the emperor to do with the church?" natural law of man mattered more than the interest of the state. When the Donatist uprising and its militant wing, the Circumcellions, threatened to spread to other Roman provinces, Rome cracked down hard. Donatus was exiled to Gaul and the movement outlawed, persecuted, starved, and slandered.

In the 9th century, rebellious ideas broke out again and grew into a broad social movement: In the Balkans, the Bogomils taught disobedience to authority, mocked the church, and refused to serve the nobility. Extremely popular among the peasant population, the movement sent missionaries to Western Europe, where their example fell on fertile ground. Over the centuries, from these roots arose the Cathar movement, which we have already encountered. They too followed the ideal of voluntary poverty and rejected rule. They understood their life as a radical break from usual norms and order: state, marriage, secular courts, military service, and oaths were equally taboo, as was the killing of humans and animals. Many Cathars chose a wandering life, and so the idea spread epidemically: in Belgium, Italy, Germany, and especially France, the movement predominantly seized the urban population.

Persecuted, suppressed, and beaten, however, "heresy" never came to an end. It merged with new movements, changed, and soon it became difficult to clearly distinguish between the different heresies. Despite all persecution, they survived—such as the Waldensians, who arose in the 12th century—and endured underground, in exile, and in guerrilla warfare until the German and Swiss Reformations, thus lasting until our days.

At the end of the 12th century, Joachim of Fiore announced the dawn of the "third age of the Holy Spirit," in which all lords would disappear, and life would be pure joy and pleasure. Tens of thousands of ecstatic people danced through the lands, unsettling both upright citizens and church authorities alike. Similar upheavals to this millenarian wave were caused by the uncompromising pacifist Francis of Assisi, whose radicalism the church, however, was able to channel into a monastic order.

In the 13th century, the Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit appeared, who adhered to a radical pantheism* and placed the unity of God and nature above secular law. They based this on Paul's words in the Letter to the Galatians: "But if the Spirit governs you, you are not under the law." With their free communism, they consciously positioned themselves outside society, its morals, and customs. They were closely intertwined with and hard to distinguish from the Beguines and Beghards, who also practically organized themselves in residential and work communities.

With the Beguines, we encounter a very early and extraordinarily active women's movement of the Middle Ages. They increasingly succeeded in fighting for free spaces for their feminine, pantheistic, and mystical religiosity in their own convents. The practical goals of these mostly upper-class women aimed at economic independence through work in a domain free from domination—the women's monastery. The wandering Beguines, in contrast, were not tied to monasteries and roamed freely through the land. It is reported that they occasionally chased the satiated* monks out of their monasteries with slogans like "Death to the Church." The Beguines violated the church's views on property, work, chastity, and the sacraments. Women like Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, or Sister Katrei, who was close to the heretical mystic Meister Eckhart, were increasingly perceived as threats by the church hierarchy. After the wandering Beguines were eliminated, Rome forced the women's monasteries into obedience or destroyed their movement by fire and sword. Marguerite Porete was publicly burned in Paris in 1310.

In England, in 1381, the peasants rose in revolt against the nobility and oppressive taxes, led by the priest John Ball. He gave voice to the protest in a now-famous couplet: "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?" Although the movement, after initial successes, marched with 100,000 armed men into London, it was stalled by the king's promises and finally outwitted. Nevertheless, John Ball's radical sermons, calling for the abolition of nobility, judges, lawyers, and all the powerful to secure the communal equality of the coming society, remained unforgettable for centuries.

In 1419, the execution of the moderate church critic Jan Hus in Bohemia triggered an uprising. While the Hussites were more authoritarian-nationalist in outlook, the Taborites, arising from this movement, attempted to found a community later classified by historians as an "anarcho-communist experiment": In a small town on a mountain near Prague, baptized Tabor after the biblical model, they founded a commune without property and taxes, where no authority applied except the Bible. They shared possessions and production and believed, in typical millenarian idealism, that the promised kingdom, in which all laws were abolished and the elect immortal, had now begun. Singing, dancing, and often unclothed, they roamed through the forests. Given such ecstasy, they paid little attention to worldly things like effective production and distribution of goods, so the experiment economically collapsed after a few years. Some Taborites then turned to begging and theft, while others enjoyed their role as the armed arm against the Antichrist and called for the slaughter of all nobles.

A portion of the Taborites distanced themselves from this turn to violence and moved under Peter Chelčický to rural Bohemia, where they founded a pacifist community from which later the "Moravian Brethren" emerged. In his book Net of Faith, Chelčický interprets state and political power as punishment for original sin, which, although currently a necessary evil, would be superfluous in the community of true Christians. For this reason, Kropotkin counts him among the precursors of anarchism, and Rudolf Rocker even regards him as an early Tolstoy.

Against the backdrop of such turbulent heretical ideas, Martin Luther's reform approach seems rather tame. In fact, Luther's criticism of the Catholic Church and the conditions in the German Empire was anything but radical. Primarily, it was intended as a proposal for reforming entrenched institutions, and at first, Luther was no more than one heretic among many, just somewhat luckier than others. That his theses nevertheless caused such a stir and eventually led—through devastating wars—to the birth of a new church was due less to Dr. Luther's originality than to papal stubbornness and the power-political constellations of the time: the collapse of feudalism was becoming increasingly apparent. New social classes had risen, old ones fought against their downfall, and the eternally disenfranchised demanded their rights. But the social structures were ancient and no longer suited for the new era. The call for an "imperial reform" grew louder but was not realized. For over 100 years, peasants throughout the German-speaking area had been rising up against poverty and lack of rights and increasingly took up arms. Emperors, merchants, the church, patricians, imperial knights, and humanists mixed their respective interests into the ferment of this turbulent 16th century. The Reformation unleashed forces within these contradictory interests that could no longer be controlled and also drew foreign powers into play. However, wherever the desire for true liberation and radical change of conditions shone through, the "great reformers" like Luther, Calvin, or Zwingli became determined defenders of peace and order. They never questioned rule, submission, or hierarchy.

But the turbulent century of the Reformation and Peasants' Wars also brought forth other names typical of that bizarre, fractured world.

At the beginning of the 16th century, almost the entire southern German region was in upheaval. The peasants formed actual armies and pressured the authorities with a mix of demands, combat, and negotiation tactics. One of these legendary peasant leagues was the Bundschuh; its structure would today be called "grassroots democratic." The twelve articles of their statutes denounce injustice and demand rights, assert equality and communal ownership, and denounce the privileges of the nobility and clergy—all founded on the spirit of the Gospel. The intellectual, spiritual, and military leaders of these various "peasant mobs," such as Florian Geyer, Ulrich von Hütten, Götz von Berlichingen, Wendel, Hipler, Thomas Müntzer, or Joß Fritz, were not peasants themselves, but pastors, imperial knights, or notaries who joined the movement for quite different reasons: from deeply felt humanism to a sense of justice, religious conviction, political reform visions, and even calculating self-interest.

Some—though few—names from among the peasants are also known, but the sources usually portray them as shady figures. Desperados, as we would call them today, who often aimed for loot and personal revenge. With their extreme hatred of priests and nobles, they certainly provided plenty of material for the legends later embraced by the left. However, their often senseless and reckless excesses contributed significantly to the fact that little new emerged from this struggle. Their anger was justified and easy to understand—and the cruelties on the side of the princely troops were often even worse—but it increasingly led to defeats and the discrediting of this pow-

erful, restless movement. As a result, hardly any visions for a new order could flourish, and plans rarely extended beyond the immediate moment.

The protest focused on details and, as the historian Christa Dericum writes, was more a concentration of revolting forces than a revolution. Neither the intellectual elite nor their radicalized base ever reached the visionary heights of, say, the ancient Greeks; their concept of freedom did not go beyond the Bible. The third article of the Bundschuh reads: "It is found in Scripture that we are free, and we want to be free. Certainly not so that we want to be completely free and have no authorities. God does not teach us that."

Thinking beyond God was simply taboo. This applied even to the interesting "marginal phenomena" of the Peasants' Wars, which appeared with almost unprecedented radicalism, such as the Anabaptists, the communes of Münster and Mühlhausen, or about a hundred years later, the Diggers and Ranters, with whom the religiously inspired revolts in England came to an end.

In the wake of all these upheavals, a wave of expectation for salvation swept across Europe: The longed-for kingdom of God's justice had arrived, and it had to be lived here and now! The Anabaptists traveled through the lands, quoting millenarian prophecies and proclaiming the new era to the chosen ones. As everywhere, the ideas of radical equality and the end of economic bondage were well received by the common people.

In the Thuringian town of Mühlhausen, the armed secret society of Thomas Müntzer succeeded in conquering the city, and with the help of the peasantry, a commune was established that attempted the practical experiment of communal property. In 1525, Müntzer's peasant army was defeated in Frankenhausen. One of the survivors, the printer Hans Hut, then began preaching a generalized militant uprising. His program amounted to a social revolution: Christ would wield the sword to punish all sins, destroy all governments, and divide all possessions. Even after Hut's execution, the Anabaptist communities continued to spread. They lived in communal groups and rejected church rituals and sacraments.

Only after the suppression of the Anabaptist commune of Münster in 1535 did this movement dwindle. Jan Bockelson (Johann of Leiden) had won over the inhabitants in 1534 for his millenarian visions and proclaimed the "New Jerusalem" in the Westphalian city. For one year, an extensive communal property system was practiced here, including both production and consumption. Money was abolished, and everything was available to everyone. However, the driving force behind this experiment was not Bockelson's love of freedom but the religious fanaticism of the "chosen ones."

The Anabaptist regime was, contrary to all legends, thoroughly authoritarian and led to a new tyrannical code of laws that permitted men to practice polygamy* and forbade children from talking back to their parents under penalty of death. It culminated in the coronation of Jan Bockelson as "King of the Children of God and ruler of the new Zion." The rebellious citizens and peasants of Münster had indeed proven that they could free themselves from the authorities and organize themselves successfully, even economically—but only at the cost of a new rule that was hardly less tyrannical than the old. After a long siege and famine, Münster was finally taken by episcopal troops.

The victors took bloody revenge.

After this experience, the Anabaptists became strict pacifists. Especially in Central Europe, they founded numerous communes and communities. The communitarian-pacifist millenarian Jakob Hutter became the founder of a economically flourishing settlement movement in Bohemia, Moravia, southern Germany, and Austria. Although the Hutterites knew no private property and lived relatively modest lives, their solidarity economy brought prosperity to their communities. Besides religious intolerance, economic envy was a main reason that led to their expulsion in 1622. Quite a few emigrated to the New World, where their colonies in the USA and Canada still exist today.

None of this sounds particularly encouraging, nor does it sound like "early forms of anarchy." But let us not forget that we were searching for essentials. So let us try a summary:

Almost all uprising movements show striking similarities. They are always about regaining or defending "freedom." Freedom initially always means shaking off concrete rule. Wherever goals become apparent, they almost without exception point towards equality, community, and justice. Often, as with most peasant revolts, old rights are demanded that are based on collectivity: cooperatives, autonomy, or common property such as the commons*.

With religious heretics, the picture is the same: the guiding motif is always the (re)establishment of a Christianity perceived as "true." And "true" interestingly always means: living in community, acting in solidarity, condemning wealth, shared possessions, rejecting bondage, church hierarchy and power, respect for life, love for people, and — within the limits of an intuitively felt divine ethics — freedom of spirit and usually of the individual person. This reads almost like an anarchist manifesto from the 19th century, if — yes, if only — the dear Lord did not constantly peek out between the lines.

The concept of God is therefore the key to understanding all these rebellions.
We probably cannot comprehend today the simple fact that the Middle Ages was an era in which thinking outside the framework of "God" simply did not take place. Godless thinking was literally unthinkable. "God" was not primarily a religious object here; above all else, God was the only existing system of knowledge. Beyond this image, there was simply nothing, period. "God" was synonymous with "worldview."

Today religion is a private matter. Not every believer in God is religious. Not every opponent of religion is an atheist. Atheists can follow the most varied philosophies. But let us try to imagine today any social or political movement outside our modern worldview! Do Social Democrats, Islamic fundamentalists, fascists, Christians, anarchists, voodoo followers, communists, Buddhists, liberals, existentialists, esotericists, or materialists doubt that a plane flies because forces act according to Newton's laws? Or that the Earth revolves around the Sun? Or that the Moon causes tides? Even the Pope believes this.

The role that natural sciences play in our worldview today was played by God in earlier times. Certainly, many modern people doubt scientific findings — maybe Newton was not right after all, and who really understands Einstein! There is plenty of scientific criticism, and sometimes rightly so, but still — and this is what matters — we all think within the framework of our current system of knowledge. Of course, so does Einstein, every devout Catholic, and even the esotericists who more than anyone else like to convince with logical analogies.

Precisely for this reason, the idea of "natural law" is so important, that "trick with consequences" that appeared among the Cynics and the Stoics: God is nature and nature is reason!

Someone in the Middle Ages could have been seized by exactly the same ideals, feelings, and thoughts as a 20th-century anarchist — yet he would hardly have been able to arrive at a "worldview without God," even if that same person today would probably be an atheist. Just as little as an anarchist today can arrive at a "worldview without nature." Of course, he can criticize the natural sciences, but he nevertheless remains within the framework of our current positive knowledge. Likewise, a thousand years ago he could criticize religion, but not deny the idea of "God" — because that would have meant negating everything conceivable. Max Nettlau's suggestion that fear of persecution prevented many medieval thinkers from sharpening their criticism must be taken with some caution. Clear minds and brave visionaries like Meister Eckhart, Giordano Bruno, Margarete von Porete, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Galileo Galilei, Copernicus, and countless others were not afraid to write down what they thought. For much less, people were burned at the stake back then. Therefore, even if they were genuine precursors of modern natural science, we should hardly understand many thinkers' reference to a divine order as a tactical disguise to protect themselves from persecution. There are no "atheists" in the Middle Ages not because there weren't any, but because they themselves could not possibly have defined themselves that way conceptually.

We would therefore do well to understand many instances where critical medieval thinkers use the term "divine" as an axiom*, much like how today someone says "natural." Many strange restrictions on the concept of freedom then appear in a different light. When old sources say that human freedom finds its limits where it violates divine order, we must "translate" this as our freedom ending at the limits of nature. That suddenly does not only sound understandable but even very reasonable. We can certainly debate these limits of nature and its essence, just as the people of antiquity debated the nature of God and its limits. But arguing whether God existed must be imagined as absurd as a dispute today over whether nature exists.

From this perspective, we should repeat our critical assessment of those movements, and now it becomes really interesting. The question where the libertarian dividing line runs would then be whether God was understood as a religious figure or as an ordering principle. Was He a tyrant or nature, the fearsome monster with a flowing beard, or the fact that the year has four seasons? This test should be applied to every single movement and philosophy we have encountered if we want to assess their content of "anarchism." The more "God-ordained order" was understood as a synonym for "natural harmony," the closer the spirit of such movements was to the positions of today's anarchism. The more critically they distanced themselves from the Bible, the more they resembled today's libertarians who hold a science-critical approach.

Only very few great minds of the time had the education and will to understand the world and at the same time read the Bible against the grain. From rebellious peasants, most of whom could barely read, we should not expect such intellectual achievements at a time when the first Bible translations were still freshly printed. From them sprang the spirit of outrage and revolt.

Ultimately, it is interesting that what both groups — critical thinkers and outraged rebels — imagined as ideal goals closely corresponds in essential parts to what is also the quintessence of modern anarchism: freedom, community, mutual aid, economic equality, and disgust for tyranny. This shows at least one thing: that there apparently has been a drive in this direction at all times, and libertarian ideas can hardly be dismissed as an "overblown invention of modernity."

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