

Long Live Anarchy

An Interview with Robert Anton Wilson

Robert Anton Wilson

1962

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Part 1

At some point in the late fifties or early sixties, Pacifica Radio's Charlie Hayden interviewed the inimitable Robert Anton Wilson on all things anarchism. Wilson waxes poetic on anarchism's foundations and answers some challenging questions from a presumable skeptic in Hayden. While the exact date of the interview is unknown, the early to mid-sixties appear to have been Wilson's most overtly anarchist period. Wilson references Ralph Borsodi's "School of Living" in the interview without mentioning anything about his position as editor of SoL's anarchist publication, "Way Out." This is a good indication that the interview likely occurred prior to the beginning of Wilson's tenure there in 1962. I maintain that Wilson seemed to be a lifelong anarchist in spirit, despite explicitly shedding that label in favor of the more ambiguous "libertarian" label in his later years.

Hayden: Today we're talking to Mr. Robert Anton Wilson who happens to be a freelance writer who's written for such publications as *Fact Magazine*, *The Realist*, *Jaguar Mazine* and *Liberation Magazine*. Mr. Wilson also happens to be somewhat of a strange political animal in our particular culture, namely, he calls himself an "individualistic anarchist." Mr. Wilson, can you explain yourself a little bit on what your political viewpoints are?

Wilson: Well, to begin with, an anarchist is a libertarian socialist. Originally all forms of socialism tended to be anti-state as well as anti-capitalism. There came a point in the development of socialism in which the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat was promulgated and the idea that through the political state, socialism would be implemented as a dictatorship and then the state would wither away — which is the orthodox Marxian theory. The anarchists at this point distinguished themselves by strongly opposing this ideology and insisting that socialism could only be implemented outside of the state that anything implemented through the state could never be socialistic nor could it tend toward socialism.

Hayden: You say "implemented outside the state"... today socialism is at least identified in the public's mind as statism.

Wilson: Yes, according to the anarchists this is a complete misunderstanding of socialism. The anarchists would say that anything implemented through the state is statism and the direct contrary of socialism. Socialism means a system oriented toward society. The state is not society. The state is a mechanism apart from and above society interfering at all times with the natural functioning of society. The anarchists believe that the only way socialism can be implemented is through free and voluntary associations within society not through the Frankenstein monster of a state above society.

Hayden: And what happened within the socialist movement once the anarchists began taking this different viewpoint from the others. I mean was there a large split within the movement at one time in the late 19th century?

Wilson: Well what happened in the first place was that Marx deliberately sabotaged the First International when he found out that there were more anarchists in it than Marxists. He sabotaged it by moving it from Europe to New York where there were at that time much less socialists than there were in Europe and therefore made it an organization without a head so to speak.

Hayden: What do you mean "in New York where there were fewer socialists than there were in Europe?"

Wilson: The International began in Europe and Marx had the headquarters moved to New York so as to prevent the lively anarchist movement in Europe, which was much livelier at that point than the Marxist movement from taking it over as they were obviously about to take it over

since there were more of them than Marxists. The Marxists, always hostile to democracy, didn't want to see the majority taking the movement over.

Hayden: And then what happened?

Wilson: Then in the Second International there was a split and the fight came out in the open and the Marxists, who at that point, were a majority, were able to push the anarchists out of the movement entirely so the so-called Black International was formed out of which the modern anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movements evolved.

Hayden: About this time, unless I'm mistaken, there were various assassinations attributed to anarchists and there were riots led by anarchists and gradually the word anarchy became somewhat of a dirty word to the press and to the public generally

Wilson: If we must talk about the assassinations, and I guess we must... This always comes up in discussions of anarchism. Let me state first of all as the Encyclopedia Britannica itself points out in the article on anarchism — if you list almost all of the assassinations that have been attributed to anarchists and assume that all of them were performed by anarchists (which is a dubious assumption by the way — many of them were police frame-ups), but on that assumption it still turns out that more anarchists have been murdered by governments than all that can be accused of having murdered governors. The number of anarchists who have been killed by governments on trumped up charges, or sometimes without charges at all, goes way above the number of the governing classes that were killed by anarchists. Now at the time this wave of assassinations went on in the 1880s and 90s and up into the first decade of this century many of the leaders of the anarchist movement strenuously objected to this method and criticized it, said it would not advance anarchism and predicted that it would even lead to the decline of anarchism. It must be understood clearly that the men who committed these assassinations were almost unanimously working men who had never had a normal education. Many of them were completely self-educated, many of them had known intense misery in their lives. For instance Ravachol, the celebrated French anarchist terrorist who threw bombs into restaurants was a completely uneducated working man who had taught himself to read and who was supporting a sister with an illegitimate child on a salary that couldn't properly support himself as a printer. And Ravachol, in a fury at the poverty of himself and his sister one day decided to take revenge on capitalist society and began his wave of terror.

Hayden: Well, if these assassinations were not the reason for the decline of anarchism as a vibrant, very real political movement, what in your opinion was the reason for the nearly total demise of anarchism from the political scene?

Wilson: There were a number of causes. Anarchism declined rather slowly. In the 1930s anarchism was still a fairly large force. In the Spanish Civil War the communists managed to betray the anarchists with whom they were supposedly fighting side by side with against the fascists. And in the Spanish Civil War a great many of the best minds of anarchism perished frequently, so to speak, shot from behind by the communists instead of in front by the fascists. That was only one cause of course. Anarchism declined, I think, because nothing succeeds like success and it took a long long time. It still isn't complete for disillusionment with Marxism to set in. Once the Marxists had Soviet Russia, one-sixth of the earth's surface, it quickly became the dominant form of socialism. Because they actually had something and were doing something. They had their land and their plant and so on. And all the other forms of socialism, not just anarchism, declined because, as I say, nothing succeeds like success. As disillusionment with Marxism increases, one expects to see a gradual revival of anarchist ideology. It'll take a long time because

as soon as they... as soon as the majority of socialists get disillusioned with one Marxist experiment, another one is set up and it takes them about fifteen years or so to get disillusioned with that one. Hope springs eternal within the human breast.

Hayden: Have the anarchists ever had a chance to put any of their theories or ideas into action and if so have they been successful in doing so?

Wilson: There have been numerous successful anarchist experiments. There was one in the Middle Ages even. A town in Bohemia which for seven years had an anarchist regime and held off the entire Prussian army which was attempting to come in and crush them. After seven years they were finally defeated but the system did not collapse from within as all authoritarians would predict. The system of anarchism worked very successfully until the army came in and murdered them all. In America there were several successful anarchist colonies in the nineteenth century. The greatest success to date of anarchism was in the Spanish Revolution in 1936–37. For 18 months the factories of Barcelona were run by anarchist committees without any authoritarian capitalist or communist-type structure. And they actually increased production 19 percent during that period and were actually thriving at the point when Franco's fascist troops came in and blew the town to hell.

Hayden: Today are there many anarchists left? is there any such thing as anarchist publications? Anywhere in the world do the anarchists have any sort of political foothold and can recognize as any sort of sizeable or even fringe movement?

Wilson: There are many anarchist publications. I do not have with me right now any figures on the number of anarchists in the world. One thing for instance in Spain, you couldn't say there were any anarchists because anybody known as such would be shot. But one could wager, considering the number of anarchists when Franco took over, probably a considerable portion of the Spanish population are still anarchists. And if they could get out from under the Franco dictatorship they could attempt to implement anarchism once again. Through the rest of the world there are anarchist parties in most of the large nations. In England, there's a publication called *Freedom*, which comes out weekly in newspaper form. And they also publish a bi-monthly called *Anarchy*. In America there's *Views and Comments* published by the Libertarian League and there's also *Liberation Magazine* which has a very strongly anarchist tending policy. The Catholic Workers Movement is committed to anarchism of the peculiarly Catholic sort. And there's even the agrarian anarchist movement in this country centered around the *School of Living* in Ohio.

Hayden: Have there been any movements of social reform that anarchists generally have identified themselves with and have taken an active role in promoting and shaping?

Wilson: First of all there's the mutual banking idea in the early 19th century. The mutual banking idea was promulgated by two anarchists. Independently of each other, Josiah Warren in America, and completely unknown to Warren and also not knowing about Warren, Proudhon in France, began teaching the same idea. They both originated, independently, just as like Leibniz and Newton invented the calculus, or Darwin and Wallace invented the theory of evolution simultaneously, Warren and Proudhon devoted a great deal of energy to the mutual banking idea and although there are no mutual banks today there are in most parts of the world credit unions which are, from an anarchist point of view, a truncated, I might almost say castrated form of the mutual bank. But the fact that the credit union movement exists and is so widespread is a derivation from the original anarchist mutual banking idea. Also, the anarchists were pioneers of the labor movement at a time when the Marxists were very hostile to labor unions.

Hayden: What were the Marxists saying at the time they were hostile to labor unions?

Wilson: That the proper technique was for the workers to act through the state by voting in a socialist government. And they felt the labor unions could do nothing to improve the condition of the workers. The anarchists, especially in Italy and France were responsible for creating the labor union movement in this country; they played a large part in it also. A third thing which anarchists have contributed which has had a large effect on the modern world is the freeing of education. Long before Neill came along with Summerhill, there were similar schools founded by anarchists. In New Jersey around 1908 there was the Francisco Ferreira School named after the anarchist martyr Francisco Ferreira who had founded similar schools in Spain and was shot by the Spanish government for a crime which he didn't commit. The Francisco Ferreira School is even more radical than Summerhill and was founded here in America in 1908. Similar experiments in free education were started by anarchists in many other parts of the world.

Hayden: Well today are there any well known anarchists who are making any major contributions in any area at all? Arts, politics, religion, science?

Wilson: To begin with the most famous anarchist around these days, I suppose, is Paul Goodman, who I disagree with on many things. But he has certainly obtained a very considerable influence within the community of the social scientists and the universities. They all pay a lot of attention to him and his ideas are anarchistic and derived largely from Kropotkin. In addition to Mr. Goodman there are Judith Beck and Judy Molina of the Living Theater, both anarchists who have made a contribution the American theater, which I don't think will be fully appreciated for another fifty or a hundred years. But even today the real hip people realize what a great thing the Becks have done. And besides them of course there's Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement, who has probably more than anyone else been the center or the fountainhead of the pacifist protest in America in the last couple of decades.

Part 2

The following is Part 2 of Pacifica Radio's "Long Live Anarchy!" interview with Robert Anton Wilson. The interview ends abruptly, and unfortunately Pacifica was unable to find additional reels in their archives. – Chad Nelson.

Hayden: How do you answer the charge that anarchism's an outmoded political belief? That it was a nice theory to attempt to apply to an agrarian society, but in our modern day of technology and industrial society, that anarchism is just simply antiquated?

Wilson: Well, I would reply to that by saying bluntly that it's just not true. The anarchist idea, I think, is especially well adapted to industrial society. In the first place, as Marx (I always like to quote the enemy when I can), as Marx pointed out, industrial society is creating a sense of solidarity among the working class in a way that didn't exist under previous systems. Also, the modern tendency of technology as indicated in cybernetics, is towards the destabilization of industry, and towards the self-regulation of the machinery. The whole essence of cybernetics is self-regulating technology which is called homeostasis, or redundancy of control, in the technical engineering language of the cyberneticist. Now this implies, necessarily a decentralization of the human parts of industry. Also, and I am very amused to notice the American Management Association, in their bulletins on cybernetics, are continually forced to use the concept of decentralization. They have even come up with a phrase, "decentralization of authority and centralization of financial control," which is a flat contradiction.

But it's the only way they can maintain the concept of centralization of financial control in a cybernetic world. They are trying to hold on to an antiquated way of thinking, which cybernetics is gradually going to force the whole world to abandon. Cybernetics is going to drive the whole world to decentralization which is what the anarchists have always urged.

Hayden: How do you explain the popular misconception, I gather, that anarchists are opposed to all forms of law and order? That anarchy means unrestricted, unrestrained, individual freedom, and actually has become associated (if you read the charges made by such distinguished Americans as Governor Wallace of Alabama, and what have you), that anarchy prevails, which is like saying "pandemonium and holocaust are upon us?" How did this type of idea regarding anarchism evolve? Were there anarchists who indeed were opposed to all forms of law and order or who did go about causing great disruption and problems? I'm thinking specifically of The Haymaker Affair [sic], which I'm only vaguely familiar with, through reading and what have you.

Wilson: Well, to begin with, anarchism is a word which is like a red flag to a bull. The man who coined the word, in the modern world, was Proudhon, and as much as I admire Proudhon, I must say he was overly addicted to the paradox like many great French writers. It's a peculiar trait of the French to delight in paradox, and Proudhon chose this word anarchism because it was so shocking and paradoxical to the average person who was as then, and still is now, the next thing to saying "I'm a lunatic," to say "I'm an anarchist." Proudhon took it, because as I say, he was addicted to paradox.

Most anarchists continue to use the word only out of a sense of solidarity and brotherhood to the great anarchists of the past, many of whom suffered martyrs' deaths. I'm thinking of Sacco and Vanzetti, and Joe Hill, and Landauer, and so many others, and also in tribute to the great brains of the movement who have contributed, who created so many splendid philosophical treatises, such as Tolstoy, and Benjamin Tucker, and Josiah Warren, and Bakunin, and Proudhon. Since all these men used the word anarchist, it seems to me rather dishonest to abandon the word, if one agrees with their thinking. A few anarchists down through the years have abandoned the word. They have chosen other words, such as libertarian socialist, or mutualist, and at one point, a fellow named [Francis Dashwood] Tandy tried to popularize the term voluntary socialism. I prefer to stick to the word as shocking as it is, in tribute to the great men who have used it in the past. As for The Haymarket affair, that was recognized as a frame-up by Governor [John Peter] Altgeld, who subsequently pardoned the anarchists who remained in prison. He couldn't pardon the ones who had already been hanged, but Governor Altgeld in his investigation, decided that all of those men had been framed. What happened was that the workers of Chicago were calling a strike, and at a meeting somebody threw a bomb, and several people were arrested who were anarchists, and they were convicted of having thrown the bomb, although subsequent evidence showed that none of them could possibly have had any connection with the making or the throwing of the bomb. Considerable evidence has been developed over the years that it was a police agent provocateur who threw that bomb by the way.

Hayden: How do anarchists generally (seems to me, I have to confess, that I probably hold a number of popular misconceptions regarding anarchy and anarchism), but how can an anarchist who is so totally committed to individual liberty and freedom seek solutions through a political system like socialism? It seems to me that if there was any type of a political or economic philosophy that anarchism could be involved with, it should be a right-wing type of thinking,

capitalism or even fascism. Something which did not involve the large concepts of the group working together, and what have you, that socialism involves.

Wilson: Well, here we can get rather deep into anarchist theory which is what I would like to do. I'm afraid once I start getting in deeply, you will interrupt and say it's getting too abstract. But, well, in the first place, the anarchist movement is part of what I would call the age old movement toward, for want of a better word one has to call it, common decency. If you go back about five thousand years you find the origins of the modern state and the modern class system. And what existed before that, loose tribal confederations, are sometimes called anarchistic. I agree with Benjamin Tucker, that this is an inappropriate use of the word. Tucker said anarchism is liberty possessed by libertarians. These early tribes had liberty in a loose sort of sense, but they were not sophisticated enough to know what they had, and it wasn't true anarchism. With the invention of the national state which incidentally seems to have come through conquest in every case, the German sociologist Manheimer [sic] pretty thoroughly demonstrated that all the states we have been able to trace to their origins, did arrive through conquest.

We had the beginnings of the class system, in which the great majority toil, not to support themselves, but to support a minority of parasites who live off them. This in its classical form is the slave state as we find it throughout the ancient world. Over the millenniums, this gradually evolves into the feudal state, and later into the capitalist state, but, the basic gimmick remains the same. As for example, the basic gimmick in the land swindle is still the same as it was under the slave state. A small minority own the land. The theory originally given is that they are anointed or chosen by God, and the King rules by divine right. God has elected him to rule. His relatives who are known as the nobility, own the land because they are relatives of the man chosen by God. Everybody else who has been disinherited by God, the rest of us creeps, we don't own the land.

In order to work the land, to grow crops or whatever else we're going to do, run a shoe making shop, or whatever, we must purchase that piece of the land on installments from one of the owners. Under feudalism, the lord of the land, the King's relative, ruled on the basis of this supernaturalistic theory; I don't think in spite of the hangover of theology into the modern world if anybody got up and pronounced that argument today, that the landlords rule by God's right, anybody would take it seriously. The reason people continue to pay rent today is that they don't think about the subject at all. If they did think about it, they'd realize that the only justification the landlord has, is this supernatural theory, and I don't think they'd stand for it.

Hayden: Well, are anarchists opposed to (there's an anarchist around New York who has buttons that say "I am an enemy of the state") ... And are the anarchists now, necessarily opposed to the existence of national state and local governments? And how would an anarchist feel towards the beginnings of world government such as the exhibited maybe in a UN with growing power and what have you?

Wilson: An anarchist naturally feels that world government would be just a little bit worse than national government, because [it'd be] more centralized, and even more omnipotent.

Hayden: How would you have international controls enforced, how would you manage to regulate such things as health and disease? How would you settle problems like debates over who gets water from the Colorado River? How would you handle the growing complexities of international trade and commerce if you didn't have some sort of governmental control that could function on a scale this large?

Wilson: Well the answer to that is that the idea that these things only can be done through governmental control is an error of the human mind similar to the error a long time ago that the earth was flat. This is firmly implanted in everybody's head. But the anarchist just happens to be the man who challenges it. What the anarchist says, in a nutshell, is anything that can be done through involuntary association can be done through voluntary association if it is worth doing. Now that's the whole function of the state. The state is not to do those things which are worth doing which can be done through voluntary association. Obviously, you don't need a state for that. The purpose of the state is to get done those things which aren't worth doing and couldn't be done through voluntary association. Namely, to protect the interest of the ruling classes, and to suppress the servile classes.

Hayden: But (you speak in terms of socialism too) most of or many of the concepts inherent in socialism, what I think of as social service programs, don't they necessarily involve coercion and force, and by this I mean things like medical care for the aged, requiring medical men to take care of poor people who are sick, building codes which make landlords repair a buildings, which control rent, which prevent fire, disasters, and what have you? It seems to me, all sorts of regulations which are in the interest of the individual, necessarily rely on a larger governmental agency forcing unwilling, even unscrupulous people from violating laws that have been passed in the public's interest. Do you think this could be solved through voluntary associations? What if the landlords had a voluntary association that had more money, and more guns, or what have you than your voluntary association of an anarchist or citizens.

Wilson: Well this gets to the very bedrock of anarchism. To begin with the anarchist says that all forms of coercion, of a left-wing nature, that we have in the modern world, are the result of not really facing up to the nature of the ruling class, and what has to be done about it. These are all half-measures, and the anarchist opposes all these coercive methods because he thinks that they have not faced up to the real issue. Social security, for instance, although I personally wouldn't want to see it abolished, under the present circumstances, under the present class tyranny, it's a necessary protection for the victims.

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