

# Anarchism – a slanted history

Sam Wiener

1964, April

The ex-anarchist George Woodcock has written a 476 page book, *Anarchism – a History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Penguin Books, 7s. 6d.), which we are afraid might be accepted as a reliable textbook on the subject. Valuable historical material is intertwined with factual errors and distortions. Flat statements are contradicted by equally emphatic “evidence”. More serious are the misinterpretations and distortion of Anarchist theory, as formulated by Bakunin, Kropotkin and, to a lesser extent, Godwin and Proudhon. It would take another book to straighten out the mess. We have already dealt with some objections to Woodcock’s “history” in *Views and Comments*, No. 45.

Before going into a few of Woodcock’s many theoretic falsifications, we shall cite one more glaring example of his numerous factual errors. Woodcock says:

“...the FORA (Anarcho-Syndicalist labour movement of Argentina) continued as a large and influential organisation until 1929, when it merged with the socialist UGT into the General Confederation of Workers and quickly shed its Anarcho-Syndicalist leanings” (page 426).

This statement is not true. The FORA was suppressed, militants were murdered, thousands suffered imprisonment and exile. Despite the persecutions, the FORA valiantly continued to function as an illegal underground movement. It merged with no-one and still functions. The FORA never abandoned its Anarcho-Syndicalist principles and participated in the recent congress of the Anarcho-Syndicalist IWMA.

Any exposition of *Anarchism* must begin with a concise definition of terms. What is the nature of the State... Freedom... Authority... Federalism? Woodcock gives neither his own definition, nor does he clearly state what the Anarchist thinkers mean by these fundamental concepts This major defect adds to the confusion. Woodcock says:

“The dissolution of authority and government, the decentralisation of responsibility, the replacement of states and similar monolithic organisations by a federalism which will allow sovereignty to return to the intimate primal units of society... necessarily implies a policy of *simplification*” (page 28, our emphasis).

This is a theoretical error. The direct and voluntary administration of all the affairs of society by all the people demands the creation of *more* and not less organisations. Such a society is bound to be more complex. In an authoritarian society all the affairs of the people are conducted by a comparatively few highly-centralised governmental agencies. All social life is standardised, “simplified,” compressed into rigid moulds to expedite the control of the many by the few. Soldiers and wage slaves lead “simple” lives. Everything is done for them and to them. All they have to do is obey. If they try to revolt and do things for themselves, by creating new organisations of their own, they are punished by the State. A free, pluralistic society, where all the countless needs of mankind are supplied by the people themselves through their infinite varieties of human association is necessarily a complex society. Kropotkin declares:

“The voluntary associations which to cover all the fields of human activity would take a still *greater extension* so as to substitute themselves for the State in all its functions... they (the associations) would represent, an interwoven network composed of an infinite variety of groups and federations... local, regional, national and international.” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1958). Woodcock finds fault with Kropotkin’s vision of Anarchist society, because it is *complexly organised* (page 221, our emphasis).

Bakunin and Proudhon envisioned a proliferation of voluntary associations co-ordinated by a vast and intricate network of federations and confederations on a global scale.

Anarchists accept the fact that society is complex and is bound to become more so. Because of this, they insist that society is too complex for any centralised authority to manage efficiently and still satisfy the needs of all with freedom and equality, and that the State hampers the harmonious functioning of social life.

Woodcock’s misinterpretation only reinforces the false charge of our enemies, that Anarchism will not work in an increasingly complex and interdependent world. This is, unfortunately, the theme of Woodcock’s book. That Woodcock’s brand of “simplicity” cloaks his essential reactionary, escapist ideas is demonstrated by the following quote:

“... But we would miss the essence of the Anarchist attitude if we ignored the fact that the urge toward social simplification rises not from any desire for the more efficient working of society, nor even entirely for a wish to eliminate the organs of society that destroy individual freedom, but largely from a moral conviction of the virtues of a simpler life.” (page 28) Woodcock speaks only for himself. No Anarchist will agree that a moral life is possible without freedom. No Anarchist will sacrifice the “efficient working of society” and, above all, his freedom, in order to live the “simple life.” To attain a simple life without freedom is easy. No change in society is necessary. One can escape to a hermitage or a nunnery. Such irresponsible statements amount to the renunciation of Anarchism. Woodcock’s criticisms of some of Kropotkin’s ideas are completely unfounded. One of the basic tenets of Anarchism is that society is natural to man. Man is social by nature and will act cooperatively when the State and other artificial restrictions to mutual aid and freedom are removed. Woodcock objects to this. He argues that Kropotkin ignores the “... fact that when men have been conditioned into dependence, the fear of responsibility becomes a psychological

disease that does not disappear *as soon as* its causes are removed” (page 206, our emphasis).

This is a typical capitalist argument. Kropotkin did not expect that men would miraculously become saints as once. What he did maintain was that, once the causes of the disease were removed, a cure would follow. The cure for mental and physical slavery is the practice and the habit of freedom.

Can Woodcock suggest a better remedy?

With the exception of Stirner and Woodcock, every Anarchist writer from Godwin to Malatesta and Rocker upholds the right of freely constituted associations to exert moral pressure, persuasion and public opinion to convince anti-social individuals to honour their voluntarily accepted obligations. If they refuse to do this, they are no longer entitled to receive the benefits of the association and are free to leave. Kropotkin illustrates this point. He says to a man who refuses to do his share of the work:

“If we are rich enough to give you the necessaries of life we shall be delighted to give them to you. You are a man, and you have the right to live. But as you wish to live under special conditions, and leave the ranks, it is more than probable that you will suffer for it in your daily relations with other citizens.” (*Conquest of Bread*, quoted by Woodcock)

Woodcock disagrees with Kropotkin. He insists that moral pressure by public opinion against individuals who will not keep their agreements violated fundamental principles of Anarchism. Does Woodcock propose to abolish public opinion? If so, how? By State decree? Today public opinion is tyrannical, because it reflects the amorality of Statist society. No-one will have anything to fear from “public opinion” when it will be enlightened and inspired by the humanistic ethics of freedom, solidarity and love.

Woodcock correctly asserts that “the Anarchist movement made its earliest appearance within the First International” (page 240) and that “the Anarchist movement was his (Bakunin’s) last and only creation” (page 183). (Note: First International or International Working Men’s Association, founded 1864.) The conscientious historian must, therefore, thoroughly explain the principles and tactics of the International, as worked out in its congresses. He must, above all, present a well-documented, clear and concise exposition of Bakunin’s ideas and his activity within the International. In *Anarchy or Chaos* Woodcock established the indisputable fact that the IWMA was and still is an Anarcho-Syndicalist labour organisation, described its tactics and reprinted its Declaration of Principles. In his present work he does not do this and confines himself to a few, scattered remarks.

Woodcock devotes 38 pages, a whole slanderous chapter, to Bakunin, which he calls for no logical reason, “The Destructive Urge.” Why does not Woodcock record the facts about Bakunin’s constructive Anarcho-Syndicalist theoretical and tactical principles? There is not a single responsible historian of the socialist movement who does not recognise the enormous contribution made by the First International and the Bakuninists in the evolution of modern Anarcho-Syndicalism. Why does not Woodcock give a single quotation to establish this connection?

Anyone has the right to criticise our movement and we must learn from our mistakes when they are pointed out to us. Woodcock has the right to change his mind. But he has no right to slant his “history” of Anarchism in order to justify his defection from the Anarchist Movement.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Sam Wiener  
Anarchism – a slanted history  
1964, April

Direct Action: Monthly Paper of the International Workingmen's Association, April 1964, vol. 5  
no. 4 (34), converted April 14, 2026 from .pdf version at  
<https://files.libcom.org/files/DA-v5-4-34-1964.pdf>

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](https://theanarchistlibrary.org)**