

Anarchism: A Social Movement and Way of Life

The history, present, and possible future of an often unfairly maligned idea.

Swan Dao

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Contents

Anarchism: A Social Movement and Way of Life by Dr. Swan Dao	4
Anarchism Today	9

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— Swan Dao

Editor's note: On May 18th, I posed the reflexive question "Why are we publishing a book about anarchism?" in reference to Carne Ross's fabulous new text called *There We Are Human Again: A Diplomat's Journey to Anarchism*, which is officially published on Tuesday, June 9th. (*There are still a few places for the invitation-only book launch event in North London on Tuesday evening. If you are keen to attend, please email Perspectivateam a*t g mail dot com.*)

We are publishing *There We Are Human Again* because it's a compelling read. The deeper rationale is that for anyone who takes the metacrisis seriously, anarchist ideas seem remarkably pertinent and generative in a time of ambient governance failure. Needless to say, you do not have to be an anarchist to learn from anarchism.

Carne's book is a kind of theologico-philosophico-politico memoir, or *Bildungsroman*, and although there is a great deal of reflection on anarchism in history, theory and practice, its main aim is to narrate his own transformation from proud advocate for state interests as a diplomat, to deep scepticism towards the state's capacity to serve the common good, now as a self-described anarchist.

To help contextualise the value of Carne's book, but also for broader edification on anarchism, I am delighted to have permission to share the following paper which reflects on anarchism's reputation, evolution, and continuing relevance.

The author, Swan Dao, PhD, is the founder of the Institute of Devotional Arts, which designs and leads transformative learning experiences through the expressive arts. His practice helps people reconnect with moral imagination, creative agency, and collective intelligence. Swan studied and taught philosophy, theology, psychology, and theatre across Oxford, Melbourne, Paris, Chicago, and Cambridge. A certified coach and psychotherapist, educator, and experience designer, he works internationally across leadership, innovation, and culture change. Blending social science, embodiment, and theatre, Swan revives the original spirit of both art and psychotherapy: tending to the soul with depth, creativity, and care. (Ed* He also has extraordinary sartorial standards, does a handstand with disconcerting ease, and regularly breaks into song).

Swan's text is scholarly and lengthy for a Substack post (3754 words plus 2603 in notes), but it is otherwise unpublished, and it seems timely to share it. I trust it will be an enjoyable weekend read for many, a good source of hinterland for Perspectiva's new book, and a valuable reference for researchers getting to grips with anarchism for years to come. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did. Thanks to Swan for sharing it.

You can find Swan via *The Institute of Devotional Arts* and LinkedIn and he recently joined Substack.

Jonathan Rowson, CEO of Perspectiva.

Dr. Swan Dao

“I’m Swan Dao. Trained as a moral philosopher and theologian, I found in anarchist principles forms of ethical praxis that I felt compelled to investigate.

Part inquiry into my own political engagement, part critical and historical demystification, this piece below emerged from my PhD thesis at the University of Cambridge some years ago, which explored the relationship between self-transformation and system change.

From my time in anarchist spaces, I wish to retain the sense that every manifestation of oppression also reveals a corresponding possibility for liberation. Freedom, like love, is both a practice to be renewed daily and the horizon towards which we all strive.” — Swan Dao (June 4, 2026)

Anarchism: A Social Movement and Way of Life by Dr. Swan Dao

*C’est un malfaiteur, un philosophe, un anarchiste ! Il fera le malheur de tous avec ses utopies, c’est un ennemi du peuple.*¹

Anarchism is a contentious, enigmatic, and nebulous subject. As a political movement, it is all too often misconstrued and distorted: when not trivialised or censored, it is maligned and demonised. For the general public, the figure of the anarchist brings to mind bomb-throwing terrorists, violent strikers, or unprincipled vandals.

In France, one may recall the bombings of Ravachol, the assassination of President Sadi Carnot, or the robberies of the Bonnot Gang during the heyday of anarchism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today, one may think of the black bloc composed of alleged hooligans who set cars on fire, smash symbols of multinational power, and cast cobblestones at law enforcement officials. Historically, anarchy was an epithet of political abuse (as was the term democracy) connoting social mayhem.² Anyone who challenged the socio-political orthodoxy could be accused of being an anarchist.

Artistic depictions of anarchy as the quintessence of disorder abound, ranging from a mad blindfolded woman in rags with dishevelled hair, a broken sceptre, and a shattered yoke lying at her feet³ to portrayals of monsters and demons, such as dragons, gargoyles, or Hydra – the many-headed serpent.⁴ Literary representations of anarchists in the novels of Zola, Henry James, or Chesterton also portray anarchists as dangerous perpetrators of chaos.⁵ The list of disparaging descriptions of anarchism, often propagated by the media and state actors, is a very long one indeed. The recurrent message is clear: anarchism wreaks havoc on society.

Anarchism has no monopoly on political violence.⁶ The overemphatic association of anarchism and violence is an ill-founded generalisation and demonisation to discredit the movement. All revolutionary movements, indeed, all attempts to bring about social change, are bound to include some form of violence. Political assassinations, which are perhaps most closely linked to anarchism, were committed in much greater numbers by nationalists, republicans, or Marxists.⁷ In fact, compared to other socio-political movements, there were relatively few anarchist acts of violence.⁸ What is more, the anti-authoritarian and anti-hierarchical violence of the oppressed is incommensurable with that used by coercive, authoritarian, and hierarchical institutions seeking to protect and maintain their privileges.⁹

In any case, anarchists’ advocacy of radical social transformation does not make them fanatics. Quite the reverse, their strategies for emancipation from oppression are manifold and carefully

thought out. They do include violent tactics such as propaganda by the deed and guerrilla warfare, but also comprise non-violent ones such as the general strike and civil disobedience. The question of the use of violence is, and has always been, controversial insofar as violence implies coercion, constraint, or obligation, which are fundamentally antithetical to anarchy. Whilst some anarchists believe that violence is a painful necessity (e.g. Bakunin, Malatesta, Bonnano), others reject it altogether as ineffective and are committed pacifists (e.g. Ryner, Armand, Goodman, Comfort).¹⁰ It is true that feelings of rage, vengeance, and resentment lie at the root of many instances of insurrection and that anarchist propaganda is imbued with violent rhetoric. That said, even those who uphold various forms of violence as an essential part of the revolutionary process merely see it as unintended harm for their ultimate end, which is social harmony.^[11] As the revolutionary Errico Malatesta stated:

There can be no doubt that the Anarchist Idea, denying government, is by its very nature opposed to violence, which is the very essence of every authoritarian system ... Anarchy is freedom in solidarity. It is only through the harmonizing of interests, through voluntary co-operation, through love, respect, and reciprocal tolerance, by persuasion, by example, and by the contagion of benevolence, that it can and ought to triumph.¹¹

It should also be pointed out that pacifism was central to the development of anarchism in the twentieth century and that most anarchists today favour non-violent modes of action.¹² Suffice to say, violence is not an intrinsic feature of anarchism.¹³

The association of anarchy with social mayhem remains deeply embedded in both the popular and theoretical imagination. Indeed, the stereotypical image of the anarchist as a terrorist or a nihilist and that of the state of anarchy as a condition of disorder and anomia endure.¹⁴ Yet these biased stigmatisations are gradually being eroded. Anarchism has been gaining greater public visibility and intellectual recognition as a compelling political orientation as well as a cogent approach to the changing social realities of the twenty-first century.¹⁵

Prominent individuals, such as the American linguist Noam Chomsky, the former British diplomat Carne Ross,¹⁶ or the former French deputy Isabelle Attard, overtly defend the relevance and viability of the anarchist enterprise.¹⁷ High-profile novelists such as Ursula LeGuin in the USA and more recently Alain Damasio in France offer an insight into what an anarchist social order could look like. New, creative, and playful anarchist tactics and symbols are seeing the light of day. Colourful and cheerful insurrectionary festivals, ludic anti-capitalist carnivals with radical activists donning a red nose, or graffiti of an A in a heart, are giving anarchism a new face.¹⁸ Numerous affinity groups and collectives, albeit not avowedly anarchist, follow essentially libertarian modes of organisation, coordination, and action. It is not entirely accurate to talk about a *revival* of anarchism, for it would fail to do justice to the many advocates of anarchism throughout the twentieth century.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it is fair to say that there is a renewal of interest in the movement characterised, notably, by a wish to find commonalities with non-anarchist groups. Anarchism is gaining force, traction, and momentum worldwide and has promising prospects for further advancement. It may just be, as the anthropologist David Graeber claimed in 2004, the revolutionary movement of the twenty-first century.²⁰

The anarchist movement is complex, diverse, and constantly evolving. In essence, anarchists oppose all forms of illegitimate authority and promote individual freedom. From the Greek *an archos*, an-archy literally means “without a ruler” or more broadly “without authority”. Negatively, anarchism is synonymous with anti-authoritarianism. ‘On devient anarchiste par sentiment et par raisonnement’, claimed the feminist individualist anarchist Sophie Zaïkowska, ‘Le raison-

nement est ... le même pour tous les anarchistes, il se base sur l'observation des faits qui montre que sous le joug de l'autorité ... l'individu ne vit pas heureux'.²¹ The authority in question is primarily understood as domination, that is, fixed, unconsented, unquestionable, and coercive relations of power. It can come from gods, legislators, political leaders, bosses, priests, police, teachers, judges, husbands, parents, or traditions and social conventions. In short, it is anything that compels the individual to think and act in a particular way. More broadly, anarchists oppose systems of domination and exploitation. Historically, the state, alongside the Church and the capitalist system, were often viewed as the fountainhead of exclusion and oppression. They are institutional loci of violence, externally imposed rules, and hierarchical class divisions.

Anarchists do not refuse order as such, but the established social order – an order that is regarded as fundamentally unjust, exploitative, anomic, morally debilitating, and self-alienating. It breeds conformity, indifference, and hypocrisy, and creates docile, dependent, and psychologically repressed automatons. Challenging the status quo more than any other political movement, anarchism is a 'passion for destruction', as Mikhail Bakunin – the leader of the anti-authoritarian faction of the First International – once described it, insofar as it seeks to eradicate all authoritarian and dehumanising regimes.²² Anarchists are anti-authoritarian iconoclasts, defiant dissidents, subversive rebels, incorrigible agonists, irreverent insurgents, but they are also – perhaps first and foremost – ordinary, indignant individuals who fight against injustice and yearn for greater freedom. The struggle for freedom starts with disobedience. Revolt against oppression is justice in motion.

Despite its epistemology and reputation, anarchism is not an exclusively negative enterprise. It should not be described solely in terms of opposition. It is a simultaneously destructive and a constructive endeavour: 'destruam et aedificabo', I destroy in order to build, stated Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the first self-proclaimed anarchist.²³ Anarchism does not merely defend negative freedom (freedom *from*), it also promotes positive freedom (freedom *to* or *for*).²⁴ Differently put, anarchism rejects coercive forms of power (*potestas*, power *over*) but embraces constructive power (*potentia*, power *to*). What, then, is this 'positive anarchy'?²⁵ The answer to this question differs greatly across factions of anarchism. As the individualist Robert Collino (aka Ixigrec) pointed out, 'Le rejet de l'autorité est une négation, la vie est une affirmation. On peut s'accorder sur un plan négatif et ne pouvoir le faire sur le plan affirmatif.'²⁶

At the most basic level, anarchists aspire to create a just social order that fosters self-realization. First, equality is regarded as a prerequisite for personal freedom. The interdependence of equality and liberty is a core tenant of anarchism. As Bakunin wrote: 'I am only free when all humans beings surrounding me ... are equally free'. Second, anarchists are committed to autonomy in the sense of self-mastery, self-affirmation, and self-creation. They envision a society wherein individuals determine their own affairs and subject their decisions to their own rational judgment. In other words, they wish to cultivate their intellectual integrity and moral responsibility. Additionally, they wish that each person be able to explore, exercise, and develop their personal capacities, their unique personality, their creativity, and their originality. As Bakunin wrote:

I am a fanatic lover of liberty ... the only kind of liberty that is worth the name, liberty that consists in the full development of all the material, intellectual, and moral powers that are latent in each person; liberty recognizes no restrictions other than those determined by the laws of our own individual nature.²⁷

Finally, anarchists promote unity within this diversity through voluntary cooperation and association with other individuals. The libertarian society is one wherein collective action is based upon altruism, solidarity, and mutual aid. As Malatesta wrote:

Out of the free collaboration of everyone, thanks to the spontaneous combination of men in accordance with their needs and sympathies, from the bottom up, from the simple to the complex, starting from the most immediate interests and working towards the most general, there will arise a social organization, the goal of which will be the greatest well-being and fullest freedom of all ... Such a society of free human beings, such a society of friends, is Anarchy.²⁸

Signac's divisionist painting *Au temps d'harmonie* illustrates the vision of a unified whole that respects the autonomy of each element.²⁹ As lovers of liberty and equality, anarchists are existential utopians. They want to be autonomous moral agents, loyal comrades, critical thinkers, self-affirming free spirits, and creative and original individuals. It should thus not come as a surprise that anarchists sought to revolutionise all domains of life, ranging from education to sexuality, including diet and the place of women in society, thereby pioneering what many of us now consider social advances (e.g. free union, birth control, gender equality). In summation, positive anarchism is a form of autarchism based upon a commitment to equality, justice, and solidarity; upon intellectual and moral self-government; as well as upon authentic self-expression and creative experimentation. Anarchism is freedom in action, and anarchy is harmony.

Anarchism may be understood as being more than a political ideology, social movement, or radical doctrine; it may be regarded as an existential orientation. In this sense, the anarchist attitude predates the anarchist movement. In fact, most people turn to anarchism not because of an intellectual conversion, but from an inner drive – an instinct to freedom that the sociologist Alain Pessin calls 'la rêverie libertaire' (*ed: this is a good Gallicism, and works in English as a French word, but it means something like something 'the anarchist imagination' or more simply 'the dream of freedom'*).

In any adherence to anarchism, theoretical agreement is entirely secondary. What comes first is the meeting of one desire with other desires... it is a tapestry of dreams that first seduces, dreams that do not take the form of socio-political elaborations... but rather that of a gradient of the mind, a pull of vitality toward what one wants to be.³⁰

As early as 1895, Augustin Hamon conducted a survey amongst anarchists of various countries to determine the most common libertarian psychological traits, which he concluded were: 'l'esprit de révolte, l'amour de la liberté, l'amour du moi, l'amour d'autrui, le sentiment de justice, le sens de la logique, la curiosité de connaître, l'esprit de prosélytisme'. (*Ed: something like: "The spirit of revolt, the love of freedom, the love of self, the love of others, the sense of justice, a taste for logic, the curiosity to know, the missionary spirit."*)³¹

Anarchism fosters moral indignation and social hope, promotes resistance and solidarity, negates domination, and affirms freedom. The basic anarchist premise is that human flourishing is best achieved by free individuals who consensually collaborate in a non-authoritarian society. Anarchists strive to emancipate themselves from social orders that are not in accord with this goal. Most people agree that actively working towards this objective is a necessary condition for a person to be an anarchist, but not all regard this twofold undertaking as constituting a sufficient condition.³² This is why the question of the roots of anarchism is a moot point, which depends upon how inclusive a view of anarchy one adopts.

Is anarchism a timeless human propensity towards freedom, or is it a historically situated socio-political tradition? Taking anarchy as a suprahistorical human ethos or as a fundamental

anti-authoritarian instinct, some find proto-libertarian elements in ancient schools of thought such as Greek and Chinese philosophy (especially Cynicism and Daoism) or early Christianity.³³ Drawing upon anthropological studies, others find anarchist models in stateless, preliterate societies such as the !Kung of South Africa or the Mbuti of Congo.³⁴ Anarchist tendencies can also be found in medieval times, notably in the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381; during the Renaissance in the writings of such authors as Rabelais or de la Boétie; during the Enlightenment in the works of Diderot or Rousseau; amongst the *Enragés* of the French Revolution of 1789, as well as during the nineteenth century in the writings of Godwin and Fourier.

The list of forebearers of anarchism could easily go on and includes numerous Christian and other radical religious sects.³⁵ This may lead to a confusing and overly broad account of anarchism. The urge to revolt against domination and the struggle for individual freedom is probably as old as the existence of authoritarian institutions, if not as old as humanity itself, insofar as human relationships are relations of power.³⁶

That said, when regarded as an historically situated ethos, theoretical framework, social ideology and movement, most consider anarchism to have sprung from the European workers' movements in the second half of the nineteenth century, along with the main political ideologies of modern society. Though not an anarchist event per se, many viewed the Paris Commune of 1871 – the first successful spontaneous working-class insurrection – as the first attempt at creating an anarchist society.³⁷ On this account, anarchism is originally a Western phenomenon that emerged in opposition to centralised states and industrial capitalism. It was shaped by the industrial and scientific revolutions as well as by the Enlightenment and by Romanticism.

Let us recall that the Industrial Revolution led millions of people to emigrate from the countryside to work in urban factories. Workers' existence was deplorable: degrading labour and squalid living conditions reduced them to a state of servitude and misery. Extreme poverty, malnutrition, and disease were rife and only added to the ordeal of their twelve-hour workday. They had no rest day, no health care, and no retirement. In the mid-nineteenth century workers' average life expectancy was little more than 30 years old, and half of their children died before reaching the age of six. 'The great thought in all men's minds [was] the emancipation and regeneration of those who toil'.³⁸

Along with Marxian and other socialists, anarchists were the main revolutionary forces opposing industrial society and the capitalist order. They shared the same hope for and vision of a communist society. Socialists at the time were divided into two main groups: followers of Marx known as centralists, and followers of Bakunin known as collectivists or federalists (later to be known, respectively, as authoritarians or communists and non-authoritarians or libertarians).³⁹ Their divergence was primarily tactical: the latter did not believe that a revolutionary government – a dictatorship of the proletariat – could secure socialist change and lead to the definite eradication of all state apparatuses. Power, in their view, was inherently and necessarily corrupting. As Bakunin wrote in 1873:

As soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people [former workers] will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the whole workers' world from the height of the state. They will no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people. Anyone who doubts this is not at all familiar with human nature.⁴⁰

In addition, they believed that the root of social ills lay in authority, not merely private property: 'Le principe d'Autorité, voilà le Mal. Le principe de liberté, voilà le remède!' wrote Sébastien Faure (Ed: 'The principle of authority is the ailment; the principle of liberty is the cure').⁴¹ Non-

authoritarian revolutionaries were disparagingly labelled “anarchists” by other socialists – an epithet that they ended up provocatively embracing.⁴² Expelled from the First International in 1872,⁴³ Bakunin and his followers – amongst them Peter Kropotkin, Élisée Reclus, and Errico Malatesta – gathered in Saint-Imier, Switzerland, where they founded the first anarchist organisation – the Anti-Authoritarian International – whose primary aim was the destruction of all political power.⁴⁴ The scission between the authoritarian and non-authoritarian factions of the First International is usually considered to mark the birth of anarchism as an independent political movement. Anarchism grew out of, alongside, but also in opposition to socialism. Until the 1917 Russian Revolution, anarchism was the leading radical political movement worldwide. Since the Second World War, during which all ideologies opposed to capitalism were squashed, the influence and diversity of anarchism have been largely underplayed.

Anarchism Today

Anarchism is taking centre stage amongst the new social movements of the twenty-first century. It is, as Graeber puts it, ‘the source of most of what’s new and hopeful about it’.⁴⁵ In the face of the failure of state socialism, historian of communism David Priestland boldly writes that ‘anarchism could help save the world’.⁴⁶ In 2007, political theorist Uri Gordon stated that ‘the past ten years have seen the full-blown revival of anarchism, as a global movement and coherent set of political discourses, on a scale and to levels of unity and diversity unseen since the 1930s’.⁴⁷ Indeed, it is anarchist modes of action and organisation that predominate today: ‘from anti-capitalist social centres and eco-feminist communities to raucous street parties and blockades of international summits, anarchist forms of resistance and organising have been at the heart of the “alternative globalisation” movement’.⁴⁸ The position of Marxism as the left-wing political ideology par excellence is gradually being eroded and replaced by anarchist-inspired alter-globalisation movements. It is now widely accepted that (left) libertarian ideas, values, and practices are thriving today.⁴⁹ Since the late 1990s, anarchism has been driving the radical socio-political movement against neoliberal globalisation.

Contemporary expressions of anarchism are found mainly outside official anarchist federations and unions.⁵⁰ Anarchism today is in many ways more akin to the radical social movements of the 1960s than to those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Anarchism took a new turn after the fall of the USSR within the alter-globalisation movements.⁵¹ Events such as the Seattle protest, Occupy Wall Street, the 15M in Spain, Nuit debout and the ZADs in France, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas and the Rojava Revolution in North Syria may not be anarchist per se, but they do incorporate important libertarian elements. Numerous commentators have noted that it is anarchism – more than any other socio-political movement – that animates the visions and tactics of the new social movements against neoliberalism.⁵²

The alter-globalisation movement is composed of collectives and affinity groups⁵³ that are outside traditional political organisations and adopt anti-authoritarian, anti-hierarchical, anti-centralising, and anti-representational modes of action and decision-making. They promote autonomous, egalitarian, and consensual organisational methods that strongly echo or parallel anarchist *modus operandi*. Direct action, which seeks to achieve political goals without mediators or intermediaries, is their favoured mode of action.⁵⁴ It is thus clear that libertarian ideas and practices now transcend the anarchist movement *sensu stricto*.⁵⁵ They are found, notably, within eco-

logical, antifascist, feminist, anti-war, antinuclear, vegan groups as well as various other militant organisations such as Earth Liberation Front in the USA or the CNT in France and Spain. As Tan-crède Ramonet, producer of the Arte documentary *Ni Dieu ni maître, une histoire de l'anarchisme*, puts it: “Today ... anarchism tends no longer to speak its name. We are indeed in the presence of very significant libertarian or anti-authoritarian movements, but they do not call themselves anarchist”.⁵⁶

Academics have taken a long time to consider anarchism a serious subject of scholarly research. Compared to liberalism, Marxism, or Frankfurt school critical theory, anarchism has hitherto had a minor, not to say negligible, presence in academia. Its radical ideology was found theoretically lacking or incoherent, if not altogether inane.⁵⁷ Anarchism was treated as an otiose political eccentricity and, as such, was a source of mockery and antipathy. Although it is still dismissed out of hand by some academics today, this trend is gradually changing. The revitalisation of anarchism in the late 1990s and early 2000s stimulated scholarly interest in the movement. This new enthusiasm for anarchist thought can be illustrated, *inter alia*, by the creation of the Institute for Anarchist Studies as early as 1996, of the Anarchist Studies Network in 2005, and of the North American Anarchist Studies Network in 2009.

In 2011, a conference entitled “The Anarchist Turn” took place at the New School for Social Research in New York.⁵⁸ The first handbook on anarchism was published in 2012, and a second one in 2019.⁵⁹ Several academics worldwide now specialise in anarchist studies, and the past twenty years have witnessed an unprecedented burgeoning of publications on anarchism.⁶⁰ The number of PhD theses on the topic has been increasing steadily since the early 2000s. Examinations of anarchism are conducted across an astonishingly broad range of academic disciplines, principally within the social sciences.^[62] These include history, political theory, and anthropology,⁶¹ but also geography, education, gender studies, and sociology. Anarchism is thus gaining ever more prominence as a multidisciplinary subject in academia. Indeed, the scope and depth of research on anarchism has never been as wide as it is today. Anarchist studies have undoubtedly become a vibrant field of inquiry...

“(This kind of person) is a criminal, a philosopher, an anarchist! (They) will make everyone unhappy with his utopias; (he) is an enemy of the people.”

Dans toute adhésion à l'anarchisme, la coïncidence théorique est tout à fait seconde. Il y a d'abord la rencontre d'un désir avec des désirs ... c'est une trame de rêves qui d'abord séduit, qui n'ont pas la forme d'élaborations socio-politiques ... mais celle d'une pente de l'esprit, d'un entraînement vital vers ce que l'on veut être.

A. Pessin, Problématique de la culture libertaire, *La culture libertaire*, Lyon, Atelier de création libertaire, 1997, p. 11. Note that Pessin links this to a specific libertarian culture. It has also been argued that individuals of a certain psychological type are drawn to anarchism.

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