Anarkhia — What did the Greeks actually say?

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Abstract

This article examines a range of uses to which the word ‘anarchy’ and its derivations were put in ancient Greek sources. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of instances indicate that the negative application of the word as a synonym for confusion and disorder was prevalent from ancient times. However, there are also several eminently political uses, which are quite telling in their prefiguration of contemporary anarchist values — namely the Athenians’ reference to 404 BC as the ‘year of anarchy’; the uses of the word by Plato and Aristotle in their critiques of democracy; and the association of anarchy with the defiant actions of Antigone in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

Anarkhia — What did the Greeks actually say?

The ancient Greek origin of the word ‘anarchy’ is a matter of common knowledge, and it has become a predictable convention to mention it at the outset of almost any discussion of anarchism as a political movement in the modern era. At the same time, as far as I am aware, no one has ever looked at the actual functioning of the word in classical sources. Instead, anarchist and non-anarchist commentators alike have inevitably satisfied themselves with second-hand exercises in Greek etymology, removing the word from its discursive context and ignoring the complex array of meanings it had for ancient writers. What I propose here, then, is to give attention to the actual uses to which the word was put in classical Greek. As I think will become immediately clear, such an exercise is of more than a merely historical interest.

Greek political culture revolved around citizenship in the *polis*, the city-state form that dominated political organization in the Hellenic world form the archaic period (c.800 BC) to the strong-armed unification of Greece under Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). Due in part to the peninsula’s geographic conditions, which meant that many settlement-clusters developed in relative isolation, *poleis* bringing together hundreds of farming households were largely self-sufficient and enjoyed economic and political autonomy for centuries. The typical Greek *polis* was a complex hierarchical society, with chattel slavery in agricultural households serving as its economic base. Sharply separated from domestic life was the citizen body, in which a certain rough equality obtained among male property owners. Citizenship was not necessarily ‘democratic’ — in Sparta, all soldiers/citizens belonged to an assembly that elected a ruling council, which had legislative authority and advised the King. But in whatever form, the ideal of citizenship in a united political community seems to have been universally accepted by all literate classes. The *polis* itself was a matter for collective pride and was valued beyond question as the hallmark of the superiority of Greek civilization to the lifestyles of surrounding ‘barbarian’ tribes. (See the bibliography for some further reading on the history and character of Greek political societies.)

Given the pervasive currency of this worldview, it is perhaps not surprising that, as T. A. Sinclair notes, ‘there was no philosophy of anarchy in Greek political theory’.[1] There are some possible exceptions to this observation: there were Cynics such as Antisthenes (a pupil of Socrates, c.444–365 BC) and his own pupil Diogenes of Sinope (412–323 BC), who looked with disdain on conventional values, wealth and social status, and who would have seen government as opposed to a life in full accordance with nature. Unfortunately only small fragments of Cynic writings

[1] Sinclair (1951:83).

have survived, but their ideas are thought to have later influenced Zeno of Citium (333–264 BC), founder of Stoicism, 'who distinctly opposed his conception of a free community without government to the state-utopia of Plato … repudiated the omnipotence of the state, its intervention and regimentation, and proclaimed the sovereignty of the moral law of the individual'.[2] However, the Cynics' purism drove them to oppose any organised intervention in politics, making their 'anarchism' philosophical at best. While the ease with which later developments in Stoicism were appropriated for the peace of mind of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 AD) shows that its anarchist resonances were neither obvious nor perennial. Finally, neither Cynics nor Stoics are known to have used the actual concept 'anarchy'.

Surprisingly, the entire corpus of electronically surveyable literature in ancient Greek contains only 47 instances of the word '*anarkhia*' or its derivations.[3] Compared to 549 instances of '*demokratia*' and 422 of '*oligarkhia*' in the same database, the word does not seem to have occupied a significant place in the literary vocabulary of the time. Among these 47 instances, moreover, the majority of cases employ the word just as many non-anarchists might do today — as a catch-all synonym for confusion, disorder, tumult and license. Thus in the play *Hecuba* by Euripides (c.480–406 BC), the heroine, fearing for her daughter's body, says that 'the mob knows no restraint, and the unruliness [*anarkhia*] of sailors exceeds that of fire'.[4] Another playwright, Aeschylus (c.525–456 BC), has his Clytaemnestra (wife of king Agamemnon, who fought against Troy) recalling the warning that 'the mob's anarchic will [*dêmothrous anarkhia*] might overturn the Council'.[5] While the historian Thucydides (c.460–395 BC) attributes the military failures of the Syracusans in part to 'the troops' disorder [*asyntakton anarkhian*]'.[6] The same type of usage is also found in the historical work of Herodotus (c.484–430 BC), as well as with later Greek-writing historians such as Diodorus Siculus (fl.50 AD) and Flavius Josephus (c.37–100 AD). We can thus see that, far from being a subsequent 'corruption', the negative and condemnatory connotations of the word anarchy have burdened it from earliest times.

Let us look, however, at other cases from ancient Greece in which the word anarchy is used in a more distinctly political sense. There is, for instance, the single occasion when a Hellenic population appears to have matter-of-factly used the word to refer to its own situation: the Athenian 'year of anarchy', 404 BC. This is something of a curiosity, since the circumstances of that year were anything but anarchic. As a matter of fact, Athens was at the time under the very strong rule of an oligarchy — The Thirty — installed by the Spartans following their victory in the second Peloponesian war of that same year. Moreover, there was literally an *Archon* in place, installed by the oligarchs, in the person of Pythodorus. However, according to the historian Xenophon (c.430–355 BC), the Athenians refused to apply here their custom of calling the year by that archon's name, since he was elected during the oligarchy, and 'preferred to speak of it as the "year of anarchy"'.[7] Despite its counter-intuitive appearance, this first popular application of the word anarchy is very telling. It resonates with a mass symbolic defiance, refusing the recognition that a ruler was supposed to receive in everyday language. It was this defiance which led to the restoration of democracy in Athens the following year.

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[2] Kropotkin (1910), Marshall (1992:68–71).

[3] The figures here are taken from the comprehensive database of the *Perseus Digital Library* at Tufts University.

[4] Euripides, *Hecuba* II.606–8.

[5] Thucydides, *The Peloponesian War*, bk.6 ch.7 §4.

[6] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, II.883–4.

[7] Xenophon, *Hellenica*, bk.2 ch.3 §1.

Democracy, of course, was far from a positive ideal for the great political theorists of ancient Greece, Plato and Aristotle. And it was always in the context of discussing democracy that they made their rare uses of the word anarchy — making for the close association between the two concepts which would prevail well into the modern era.[8] The two philosophers' famous mistrust of democracy, rooted in their contempt for popular power of any kind, was expressed in their arguments for democracy's inherent vulnerability and its preponderance to deteriorate into tyranny. However, it should be noticed that what enabled Plato to present such arguments in the *Republic* was the complete detachment of his account of democracy from the realities of such systems of government, in Athens and elsewhere. Nowhere does his description reflect the constitution that sentenced his mentor Socrates to death, the structured, lawful and impeccably stratified Hellenic democracy. Instead, we find an account that comes very close to what we might intuitively call anarchy, though for Plato this is an entirely negative affair. In democracy, he says, there is no enforceable political authority or stability of the state, 'no necessity … for you to govern … even if you have the capacity, or to be governed, unless you like, or to go to war when the rest go to war, or to be at peace when others are at peace, unless you are so disposed'.[9] This portrayal is what sets the ground for Plato's account of such a state's subsequent deterioration into tyranny. Democracy in his view makes for far too much equality. It loosens what Plato considered to be the natural hierarchy and authority obtaining between slave and master, man and woman, parent and child. His allegorical youngster's soul, divided between an oligarchical self and a democratic self, is besieged by the corrupting and evil influence of the latter. Democracy causes the soul to 'drink too deeply from the strong wine of freedom', breeding desires whose false councils introduce 'insolence and anarchy and waste and impudence hymning their praises and calling them by sweet names; insolence they term breeding, and anarchy liberty [*anarkhian de eleutherian*], and waste magnificence, and impudence courage'. So pervasive is the corruption that 'anarchy finds a way into the private houses, and ends by getting among the animals and infecting them'.[10] In order to avoid the dangers of anarchy, Plato concludes that habits of dominance and obedience must be instilled deeply into the soul of the individual. 'This task of ruling, and being ruled by, others must be practised in peace from earliest childhood; but anarchy must be utterly removed from the lives of all mankind, and of the beasts also that are subject to man'.[11]

It is important to note that, for Plato, anarchy is never a distinct class of political association. Since the concept is entirely subsumed into his discussion of democracy, it is not understood as requiring a separate theoretical category alongside oligarchy, tyranny, democracy, etc. Nevertheless, Plato's account does supply us with an important understanding about anarchy that remains intact regardless of his crusade against it. This is that anarchy represents not merely the lack of government conceived as statelessness, but also the thorough erosion of rank in non-governmental spheres — between classes, age-groups and genders.

Aristotle's association of anarchy with democracy is essentially identical to although his depiction thereof is never as colourful. The concept appears again as a form of democratic deterio-

[8] Before Pierre Joseph Proudhon became the first to use the word in a positive sense in 1840, 'anarchists' was a widespread pejorative for 'democrats'. See Williams (1976:37–8).

[9] Plato, *Republic*, bk.8.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Plato, *Laws* §942c. Note that here as in the previous citation, Plato seems to be hinting at a continuity between hierarchy among humans and the domesticated state of non-human animals, with anarchy corrupting both. One wonders whether our contemporary anarcho-primitivists would appreciate such a strange bedfellow …

ration, but in keeping with Aristotle's method it is appropriately situated in empirical observations rather than in metaphorical speculation. In democracies such as Thebes and Syracuse, we are told, the upper classes were motivated to stage a coup by their contempt for the prevailing 'disorder and anarchy [*ataxias kai anarkhias*]' in the affairs of the state.[12] Also, in many cases the nobles will form factions with one another, and create them among the masses, 'and so bring about a suspension of government [*anarkhian*]'.[13] Alternately, in a tyranny Aristotle sees 'democratic' features, namely 'license among slaves' [*anarkhia te doulôn*] as well as among women and children. 'A constitution of this sort', he concludes, 'will have a large number of supporters, as disorderly living [*zên ataktôs*] is pleasanter to the masses than sober living'.[14] Aristotle, like Plato, was not interested in delineating anarchy as a separate political form. However, unlike Plato, he is able to see anarchy as more than an abstractly corrupting influence, since its connection with democracy portrays it as desirable by the masses, and even as an implicit goal of popular insurrection.

The explicit connection of anarchy with a conscious human will appears only twice in classical Greek literature. This is perhaps the most intriguing example since, although penned by two different authors over a gap of several decades, they both refer to the same act by the same person. If we are looking for the first-ever anarchist, here she is:

> **Antigone**: I at least will say something to the rulers of the Cadmeans: even if no one else is willing to share in burying him I will bury him alone and risk the peril of burying my own brother. Nor am I ashamed to act in defiant opposition [*apiston tênd'anarkhian*] to the rulers of the city. A thing to be held in awe is the common womb from which we were born, of a wretched mother and unfortunate father. Therefore, my soul, willingly share his evils, even though they are unwilling, and live in kindred spirit with the dead. No hollow-bellied wolves will tear his flesh, let no one 'decree' that! Even though I am a woman, I will myself find the means to give him burial and a grave, carrying the earth in the fold of my linen robe. With my own hands I will cover him over — let no one 'decree' it otherwise. Take heart, I will have the means to do it.[15]

In the person of Antigone, a long-standing inspiration to feminists, we also find a clear prefiguration of two of the most important concepts attached to anarchist practice in its contemporary idiom: disobedience and direct action. First, Antigone openly refuses to abide by the rulers' decree to leave her brother Polyneices' body unburied, as punishment for his participation in the attack on Thebes. She asserts that the bond of siblings born of a common womb stands above the authority of political powers, and rejects the legitimacy of any decree that transgresses this bond. While her appeal to values that stand above the law as a justification for her actions is by no means an exclusively anarchist refrain, and while on some interpretations these values are themselves grounded in a form of authority — the higher authority of the gods — it is the disobedient and insubordinate character of her action that she, in her own words, associates with

[12] Aristotle, *Politics*, bk.5 ch.3.

[13] op.cit., bk.2 Ch.10.

[14] op.cit., bk.6 ch.4.

[15] Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*, II.1032–1045. Dated at 467 BC, this also happens to be the earliest recorded use of the a-word.

anarchy. It should also be remembered that it was only in recent decades that the notion of justified, 'civil' disobedience to the law acquired popular moral legitimacy. In earlier times, including those of the anarchist movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the distinction between contingent and wholesale (i.e. anarchist) rejection of political authority was not as clear as it is today.

Second, we find in Antigone's speech a striking example of the concept of direct action. She has no intention of appealing to the authorities in order to convince them of the immorality or illegitimacy of their decree, but rather takes that illegitimacy as her starting point, and sets about to take matters into her own hands and create by herself the alternate reality that she desires. Aeschylus, we may also note, has his chorus openly endorse Antigone's defiance at the close of the play. Whatever action the authorities might take against her, they say, 'We, at all events, will go and bury him with her, following the funeral procession. For this grief is shared by all our race, and the city approves, as just, different things at different times'.[16]

Picking up the narrative in *Antigone*, Sophocles has the autocrat Creon warn his son Heimon (who is also Antigone's lover) of the dangers of her intended action:

> **Creon**: There is no evil worse than disobedience [*anarkhias de meizon ouk estin kakon*]. This destroys cities; this overturns homes; this breaks the ranks of allied spears into headlong rout. But the lives of men who prosper upright, of these obedience has saved the greatest part. Therefore we must defend those who respect order, and in no way can we let a woman defeat us.[17]

Again the translator has well chosen to reflect the disobedient core of anarchy, whereas Sophocles himself cleverly exposes here the ambiguity and half-heartedenss of all rulers' moralistic declamations in defence of obedience and authority. Is the issue here really the potential damage to the collectivity of such an act of disobedience going unpunished? Or is it rather the danger that such an example of defiance would posit to the stability of power itself and, even more poignantly, to the principle of male supremacy?

To be sure, neither the classical Greek nor any other historical antecedents of the uses of the word anarchy should have any deciding influence on how we might understand the concept today. However, the foregoing analysis of the ancient literature does lead to two significant conclusions about the discourse surrounding the word. First, we can see that the negative connotations of anarchy with disorder and confusion have been widespread from the very beginning, as evident in the first citations I offered. This shows how deep-seated are the preconceptions which anarchists have had to deal with when re-articulating the word as a positive ideal. Second, we can see that despite these widespread connotations, some writers *were* capable of understanding anarchy as an eminently political concept— even if it had an entirely negative role in their writing. Moreover, these political formulations of anarchy already contain, in their most ancient form, the notions of social equality, popular resistance and disobedience to power which anarchists associate with their project to this day.

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[16] Ibid., II.1074–1077.

[17] Sophocles, *Antigone*, II.672–678.

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