Anarchism's Promise for Anticapitalist Resistance

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2003 / 2010

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For many, a "new anarchism" seemed to have been birthed amid the cold rain and toxic fog that greeted the November 1999 World Trade Organization protest. Yet rather than the bastard child of an emergent social movement, this radical politics of resistance and reconstruction had been transforming itself for decades. Seattle's direct action only succeeded in making it visible again. Anarchism, for its part, supplied a compelling praxis for this historical moment. And in so doing, it not only helped shape the present anticapitalist movement; it also illuminated principles of freedom that could potentially displace the hegemony of representative democracy and capitalism.

From its nineteenth-century beginnings on, anarchism has always held out a set of ethical notions that it contends best approximates a free society. In the parlance of his period, Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta (1853–1932) long ago described anarchism as "a form of social life in which men live as brothers, where nobody is in a position to oppress or exploit anyone else, and in which all the means to achieve maximum moral and material development are available to everyone."[1] This pithy definition still captures anarchism's overarching aims. Nevertheless, this libertarian form of socialism may well have been ahead of its day in advocating a world of transnational and multidimensional identities, in struggling for a qualitative humanism based on cooperation and differentiation. It is only in the context of globalization that anarchism may finally be able to speak to the times and thus peoples' hopes. Whether it can fulfill its own aspirations remains to be seen.

The Vision Made Invisible

While the forms of organization and values advanced by anarchists can be found in embryo around the world in many different eras, anarchism's debut as a distinct philosophy was in mid-nineteenth-century Europe. The English "philosopher of freedom" William Godwin (1756–1836) was the first Enlightenment thinker to scribe a sustained theory of a society without states in his *An Inquiry concerning Political Justice* in 1793, but it wasn't until Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65) wrote "society seeks order in anarchy" in his *What Is Property?* in 1840, that the term "anarchism" slowly began to congeal over the next several decades around a recognizable core of principles.[2] Godwin's political theory didn't live up to the liberatory character of his cultural sentiments; and Proudhon should be roundly condemned on many fronts, from his failure to contend with capitalism's inherent logic to his patriarchal and anti-Semitic beliefs. It would in fact take others, from the Russian aristocrat Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) to the German Jewish intellectual Gustav Landauer (1870–1919) and many prominent as well as lesser-known radicals, to fill out a more pleasing portrait of classical anarchism: a utopian political philosophy decrying all forms of imposed authority or coercion.

As socialists, anarchists were particularly concerned with capitalism, which during the Industrial Revolution was causing suffering on a hitherto-unimaginable scale. Anarchists primarily pinned their hopes for transforming social relations on workers, utilizing economic categories ranging from class struggle to an end to private property. All those on the revolutionary Left

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[1] Errico Malatesta, *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas*, ed. Vernon Richards (London: Freedom Press, 1974); originally appeared in *Pensiero e Volontà*, September 1, 1925.

[2] William Godwin, *Enquiry concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Modern Happiness* (1793; repr., Bel Air, CA: Dodo Press, 2009); Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What Is Property?* (1840; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 209.

agreed that capitalism couldn't be reformed; it must instead be abolished. But unlike other socialists, anarchists felt that the state was just as complicit in enslaving humanity, and so one couldn't employ statecraft—even in a transitional manner—to move from capitalism to socialism. A classless yet still statist society, anarchists argued, would still constitute a world marked for most by domination. As anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker (1873–1958) proclaimed in 1938, "Socialism will be free, or it will not be at all."[3] For this reason and others, anarchism evolved out of socialism to indicate an opposition not just to capitalism but also to states and other compulsory, interlinked institutions, such as organized religion, mandatory schooling, militarism, and marriage. Thus it is said of anarchism in the most general sense that "all anarchists are socialists, but not all socialists are anarchists." Or as Joseph A. Labadie put it, "Anarchism is voluntary Socialism. There are two kinds of Socialism . . . authoritarian and libertarian, state and free."[4]

This sentiment could also be seen as relating to questions of strategy. Many socialists, at least the radical ones, were not adverse to the "withering away" of the state, it was just a matter of when and how. For anarchists, a "dictatorship of the proletariat" steering the state until it withered couldn't be counted on to actually push that process along. Instead of top-down social organization, anarchists championed various types of horizontal models that could prefigure the good society in the present. That is, anarchists maintained that people could attempt to build the new world in the shell of the old through self-organization rather than passively waiting until some postrevolutionary period. Hence anarchism's emphasis on praxis. Anarchist alternatives were grounded in such key concepts as voluntary association, personal and social freedom, confederated yet decentralized communities, equality of conditions, human solidarity, and spontaneity. As the European invention known as anarchism traveled via intellectual and agitator circuits to everywhere from the United States and China to Latin America and Africa, anarchists experimented with everything from communal living, federations, and free schools to workers' councils, local currencies, and mutual aid societies.

Anarchism was part of a fairly large internationalist Left from the 1880s through the Red Scare of the 1920s and the Spanish Revolution of the 1930s. Then, discredited, disenchanted, or killed, anarchists seemed to disappear, and with them, the philosophy itself. After World War II and the defeat of Nazism, it appeared the two political choices were "democracy" (free market capitalism) or "communism" (state capitalism). Lost in this equation, among other things, was the questioning of authority and concurrent assertion of utopia posed by anarchism.

Reemergence as Convergence

The distant nineteenth-century is, of course, formative for anarchism's reinvention. But the dilemmas and openings of that time—for instance, the rise of liberalism, colonialism, and industrial production—are far removed from those of the twenty-first century. Beyond this, classical anarchism leaves a lot to be desired: its naivete concerning human nature as basically good, say, or its aversion to any political replacement for statist governments. When anarchism began to be rediscovered in the 1950s by leftists searching for an alternative to orthodox Marxism, it therefore tried hard to remake itself. Anarchist thinkers grappled with new concerns from conspicuous consumption to urbanization; new possibilities such as feminism and cultural liberation; and

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[3] Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (1937; repr., Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2004), 14.
[4] Joseph A. Labadie, "Anarchism: What It Is and What It Is Not," *dandelion* 3, no 12 (Winter 1979).

old ghosts of its own from a workerist orientation to authoritarian, even terroristic tactics. The renewed anarchism that finally emerged was, in fact, a convergence of various postwar antiauthoritarian impulses. Though the libertarian sensibility of the 1960s and New Left is foundational, five phenomena are especially crucial to the praxis made (in)famous in Seattle.

First, there is the Situationist International (1962–72), a small group of intellectuals and avantgarde artists that attempted to describe a changing capitalism. According to the Situationists, the alienation basic to capitalist production that Karl Marx had observed now filled every crevice; people were alienated not only from the goods they produced but also their own lives, their own desires. The commodity form had colonized the previously separate sphere of daily life. As Guy Debord (1931–94) of the Situationist International quipped, modern capitalism forged "a society of the spectacle" or consumer society that promised satisfaction yet never delivered, with us as passive spectators.[v] The Situationists advocated playful disruptions of the everyday, from media to cityscapes, in order to shatter the spectacle via imagination and replace drudgery with pleasure. During the May 1968 near-revolution in Paris, Situationist International slogans were ubiquitous as graffiti such as "Live without dead time! Enjoy without restraint." Ironically, even though the Situationists were critical of anarchists, anarchists lifted from the Situationists' critique, especially the preoccupation with cultural alterations.

From the 1970s on, the interdisciplinary works of theorist Murray Bookchin (1921–2006) also helped transform anarchism into a modern political philosophy. Bridging the Old and New Left, Bookchin did more than anyone to widen anarchism's anticapitalism/antistatism to a critique of hierarchy per se. He also brought ecology as a concern to anarchism by connecting it to domination. In a nutshell, to paraphrase him, the ecological crisis is a social crisis. Bookchin emphasized the possibility nascent in the present of an ecological and postscarcity society, in which the "rational" use of technology, to use his language, could free humanity to fulfill its potentiality in harmony with the natural world. Most significantly, he drew out the institutional replacement for the state hinted at in nineteenth-century anarchism: directly democratic self-government, or as he phrased it, "libertarian municipalism." Bookchin's writings pointed to the city or neighborhood as the site of struggle, radicalization, dual power, and finally revolution, with confederations of free citizens' assemblies replacing state and capital. They also inspired a radical ecology movement, experiments in anarchist federations such as the Youth Greens, and a new generation of anarchist intellectuals.

Bookchin's unearthing of the affinity group model in his research on the Spanish anarchists, sketched in his *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, was influential to the antinuclear movement of the 1970s and 1980s in the United States.[5] Emerging from the rural counterculture in New England and then on the West Coast—a counterculture that included radical pacifists of both anarchist and religious persuasions—the antinuke movement used civil disobedience, but infused it with an anarchist and feminist sensibility: a rejection of all hierarchy, a preference for directly democratic process, a stress on spontaneity and creativity. Varying levels of nonviolent confrontation at nuclear power plants, from blockades to occupations, along with the use of pageantry, puppets, and jail solidarity, were decided on in affinity groups and spokescouncils. Quaker activists, not anarchists, added consensus to the blend, with mixed results (false unity, for instance). Notwithstanding the difficulty of moving beyond a single issue and what had become an insular community, the

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[5] Murray Bookchin, "Note on Affinity Groups," in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1970; repr., Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2004), 144–46.

tactics and organizational form of the U.S. as well as international antinuclear movement were soon picked up by the peace, women's, gay and lesbian, radical ecology, and anti-intervention movements.

Beginning in the 1980s, the West German Autonomen made a mark on anarchism too. Viewing European New Leftists as discredited, though affected by their critique of authoritarianism on the Left (Soviet-style "communism") and the Right ("democratic" capitalism), the Autonomen rejected everything from the existing system to ideological labels, including that of anarchism. As a spontaneous, decentralized network of antiauthoritarian revolutionaries, they were autonomous from political parties and trade unions; they also attempted to be autonomous from structures and attitudes imposed from "outside." This entailed a twofold strategy. First, to create liberated, communal free spaces such as squats in which to make their own lives. And second, to utilize militant confrontation both to defend their counterculture and take the offensive against what they saw as repressive, even fascistic elements. The deployment of a masked black bloc—for one, at a demonstration in Berlin in 1988 during an International Monetary Fund/World Bank meeting— autonomous neighborhoods and "info-stores," and street battles with police and neo-Nazis became emblematic of the Autonomen. Anarchists felt an affinity and imported the trappings of autonomous politics into their own, thereby linking and modifying the two in the process.

Last but not least, the dramatic January 1, 1994, appearance of the Zapatistas on the world stage to contest the North American Free Trade Agreement keyed anarchists into the importance of globalization as a contemporary concern of often life-and-death proportions. A decade in the making through the grassroots efforts of some thirty indigenous communities in southern Mexico, and intentionally tied to struggles elsewhere, the uprising illustrated the power of solidarity. The Zapatistas' bold takeover of villages in Chiapas also reignited the notion that resistance was possible, in poor and rich regions alike. "If you ask us what we want, we will unashamedly answer: 'To open a crack in history,'" Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos declared. "We'll build another world. . . . Democracy! Freedom! Justice!"[6] For anarchists, the Zapatistas' inventive, blended usage of high-tech such as the Internet and low-tech such as jungle encuentros, principled communiqués and practical gains, and the attempt to reclaim popular power through autonomous municipalities was especially electrifying—the concurrent appeals to the Mexican state less so. Still, anarchists flocked to Chiapas to support this rebellion, carrying home lessons to apply to a global anticapitalist movement that a refashioned anarchism would shortly help initiate.

More Than the Sum of Its Parts

Such strands of resistance, themselves pulling from earlier moments, interwove into the fabric of contemporary anarchism. From the Situationists, anarchism embraced the critique of alienation and consumer society, and faith in imagination; from Bookchin, the connection between anticapitalism, direct democracy, ecology, and postscarcity; from the antinuke movement, the stress on with affinity groups and spokescouncils as well as nonviolent direct action; from the Autonomen, militant confrontation, the black bloc strategy, and an expansive do-it-yourself emphasis; and from the Zapatistas, the power of the Internet, cross-cultural solidarity, and "glob-

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[6] *Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, Our Word Is Our Weapon: Selected Writings*, ed. Juana Ponce de Leon (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 216, 190–91.

alization" for transnational resistance. But the anarchism that received notoriety in November 1999 is more than the sum of these parts. It is the only political philosophy today aspiring to balance a variety of social change agents and strategies—or ultimately, a diversity of tactics, visions, and people—with universalistic notions of participatory freedom outside all imposed institutions and behaviors.

For months before Seattle, anarchists worked diligently behind the scenes to set the tenor of the direct action that would stun the world. As the key initiators and organizers, even if not recognized as such, anarchists had been able to structure the demonstration along libertarian principles. Like numerous other direct actions shaped largely by anarchists, such as the antinuke protests of the 1970s and the Wall Street action of 1990, Seattle's too would have gone unremarked if not for its success in shutting down the World Trade Organization in tandem with a vicious police response. Anarchists and anarchism were suddenly thrust into the limelight. What had always been a minoritarian voice of conscience within the Left suddenly got a majoritarian public hearing. In turn, anarchism's philosophy became both cutting edge and normative for a powerful new global social movement.

This is not to say that anarchism or anarchists alone are responsible for the movement(s) contesting globalization's brutal side, that such a movement(s) started in Seattle, or even that the goal is to turn everyone into anarchists. Like the Zapatistas, anarchists humbly understand themselves (at least in theory) as acting in concert with the multiple struggles for freedom waged over time by a variety of antiauthoritarians. Nonetheless, perhaps because they did it on the dominant superpower's own turf, anarchists were able to firmly establish a form of resistance that actually prefigures a joyful politics of, by, and for all the people of a globalizing humanity. And as such, to lay down the flexible contours of an empowering movement, while unexpectedly elevating anarchism to its avant-garde.

This means that anarchism's principles along with its culture and forms of organization are, for the first time, at the forefront rather than the margins of a transnational social movement. In the broadest sense, anarchism has brought a unique, inseparable bundle of qualities to this movement: an openly revolutionary stance, colored by an eminently ethical orientation, made out-of-the-ordinary by a playful though directly democratic utopianism.

The Anarchist Moment

But still, why anarchism?

Because anarchism has set the terms of the debate. Its emphasis on social revolution coupled with transparency has meant that anarchists haven't been afraid to name the concrete reality masked by the term globalization: that is, capitalist society. Once Seattle's type of direct action became a benchmark, though, anarchists received a tacit green light from most other activists to design similar protests, and so carnivals against capitalism became commonplace. For example, when people converged together at mass actions, they now did so under an anticapitalist banner—one held up by anarchists, who compellingly carried it to the symbolic heart of each contestation.[7] Since this made tangible what was most disturbing to many about globalization, numerous people were radicalized by or at least became sympathetic to a focus on the market

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[7] The same was true at the recent G-20 protests in Pittsburgh in September 2009, where anarchists displayed such banners as "No Hope in Capitalism" and "No Bailout, No Capitalism."

economy. While still considered subversive, it has thus become more acceptable to speak of capitalism and even explicitly identify as an anticapitalist.[8] Anticapitalism, however, now frequently implies an antiauthoritarian perspective. And vice versa, an anarchistic outlook now permeates anticapitalist work.

But still, why now?

Because globalization makes anarchism's aspirations increasingly apropos. Far from being anti-globalization per se, anarchists have long dreamed of the world without borders made potentially feasible by the transformations now under way. Indeed, the means utilized by globalization are quite amenable to anarchist values, such as decentralization and interconnectedness, elastic identities and the shattering of binaries, creative borrowings, cooperation, and openness. Most strikingly, globalization is structurally undermining of the centrality of states.

In his day, Karl Marx (1818–83) foresaw the rising hegemony of capitalism and its cancerous ability to (re)structure all social relations in its own contorted image. Yet for Marx, this also hailed a certain promise. Freedom and domination were both bound up in the developmental logic that was and unfortunately still is capitalism. It was up to the right social actors, given the right conditions, to "make history"—that is, to make revolution and achieve communism in its best, most general sense. Much of what Marx unmasked holds true to the present; much more has become evident, sadly so, to the point where there is almost no outside anymore to the capitalism that manufactures society as well as self. The heroic project of Marx and multiple socialistic others to abolish capitalism remains more poignant than ever, as does the need for a revolutionary movement to do so. Hence, the power of "anticapitalism."

Anarchism has traditionally foreseen another potentially hegemonic development that Marx ignored: statecraft. But unlike capitalism, it took statism many more decades to gain the same naturalistic status as the market economy, and so anarchism's critique, while correct, held less of an imperative for most radicals. In an ironic twist for statists and anarchists alike, just as U.S.-style representative democracy has finally achieved hegemony as the singular "legitimate" form of governance, globalization has begun its work of lessening the power of states in certain ways—ways that may afford openings for horizontal forms of politics instead.[9] Thinking outside the statist box now both makes increasing sense to many people and is fast becoming a reality, potentially offering anarchism the relevance it has long desired. As national economies give way to global ones, for example, states are less able to (allegedly) provide their citizenry any sort of

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[8] After the economic upheaval of the late 2000s, there is now an ever-greater suspicion of capitalism—as those in power use this "crisis" to further consolidate wealth at the expense of impoverishing more and more people. At the same time, social democratic and progressive types are increasingly attempting to dampen the revolutionary potential of this suspicion, basically arguing that capitalism can be made less corrupt; witness Michael Moore's recent documentary *Capitalism: A Love Story*. More than ever, it's up to anarchists and like-minded radical others to explain that capitalism can't be reformed while also offering alternatives to it. A glimmer of hope in this regard is the current contestation around access to education and knowledge—crucial in this information age. Around the globe, through university occupations but also the establishment of counterinstitutions of learning, there is a push to de-commodify education, to make it free for everyone as well as self-managed and cooperative. See the EduFactory listserv, reporting on "conflicts and transformations of the university" around the world, available at http://listcultures.org/mailman/listinfo/edufactory_listcultures.org.

[9] Of course, as states lose some of their powers, other actors besides anarchists and grassroots social movements will step into the breach as well—unsavory ones, from neoconservatives and neofascists to various politicized religious fundamentalists. Nation-states, too, will struggle to gain different powers as they lose old ones—say, rather than being able to supply economic protectionism and social welfare as part of their justification for existence, they seem to be increasingly turning toward policing writ large as one of their raisons d'être.

social safety net; as more of humanity is forced into refugee status, states are less able to (allegedly) supply legal protections and human rights. Of necessity, people are compelled to turn elsewhere—often to a variety of "self-help" approaches. The relatively widespread embrace, in and outside antiauthoritarian Left circles, of anarchistic experiments in directly democratic organization, confederation, and mutual aid, among others, evidences how fitting such forms are to today's decreasingly statist, increasingly interdependent world. They tentatively prefigure the self-governance institutions that anarchism envisions under a humane version of the present social transformation.

In this globalizing world, though, "nonstatist" can mean everything from supranational institutions governed by business elites and international nongovernmental organizations to world courts and regional trade zones to networks of free-floating individuals willing to employ terror tactics. Globalization within a capitalistic framework is just as likely to birth new hierarchies and deepen alienation, shaping all in its own image—the state, but also anarchism included. If anything, the changing social landscape and its many new dangers compel anarchists to take themselves and their ideas more seriously, particularly given anarchism's avant-garde role in the anticapitalist movement of movements. So, on the one hand, as state-based geopolitics loses ground to a more diffuse though cruel nonstatist one, anarchism's critique of the state could quickly become irrelevant. On the other hand, just as Marxism had to be rethought in the mid-twentieth century in light of state socialism's failure to achieve human emancipation—resulting, for one, in the Frankfurt school's uncovering of new forms of domination[10]—anarchism needs to be retheorized in response to the shift toward nonstatism that bodes both scary and multicultural reconfigurations of political monopolies as well as possible fissures for an ethical alternative. The highly participatory practices of today's anarchism have to be continually reimagined both to keep three steps ahead of those that would contain or co-opt it, and to be up to the task of remaking society. This entails understanding the specific forms that contemporary governance is taking, in order to ensure that anarchism is reaching the right mark in its ongoing effort to dismantle the state. Both theory and practice thus need to catch up to the present if an anarchist politics is to become more than a historical footnote about a missed moment.

Still, as the only political tradition that has consistently grappled with the tension between the individual and society, contemporary anarchism has valiantly tried to meld the universalistic aims of the Left and its expansive understanding of freedom with the particularistic goals of the new social movements in areas such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and ableism. The extraordinary human mix that appeared on the streets of Seattle could find unity in diversity precisely because anarchists attempted to put this theoretical merger into practice. The affinity group and spokescouncil model, for instance, allowed hundreds of disparate concerns to also find an intimate connectivity. Globalization has facilitated this by making the world smaller every day, bringing the macro and micro into closer contact. Under capitalism, homogeneity and heterogenity will always be linked at the expensive of both the community and self. The substantive inclusiveness tenuously achieved by anarchistic organizing suggests a structural framework that could serve first as a revolutionary dual power, then later as the basis for "a world where many

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[10] See, for example, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944; repr., Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

worlds fit," as the Zapatistas demand.[11] Hence, the power of "anarchism" for anticapitalist resistance.

We may not win this time around; everything from the rise of a politicized fundamentalism and the post–September 11 "war on terrorism" to seemingly insolvable tragedies like the Middle East to the increased suffering caused by the "crisis" of capitalism all indicate the gravity and near impossibility of our task. Everyone from global policing agencies to the authoritarian Left to those who pin their hopes on a Barack Obama will try to thwart our efforts. But the project of the present anticapitalist movement, and anarchism's strong suit in general, is to provide a guiding light, even if we aren't the ones to finally bask in it.

In 1919, anarchists held power in Munich for one week during the course of the German Revolution and hurriedly initiated all sorts of imaginative projects to empower society at large. Yet Landauer knew that the best they could do was to construct a model for future generations: "Though it is possible that the council republic will only be short, I have the desire—and so do all my comrades—that we leave behind lasting effects in Bavaria, so that we may hope, when an idle government returns (which has to be expected), wise circles will say that we did not make a bad beginning, and that it would not have been a bad thing if we had been permitted to continue our work."[12] Landauer was trampled to death in a wave of right-wing reaction soon after this, and fourteen years later the Nazis came to power. Still, the grand experiments of the past aimed at a free and self-governing society have not been extinguished—they have reemerged in the anarchistic strains charted here and, most promisingly, the current contest against capitalism fought along antiauthoritarian lines.

Not a bad beginning to the twenty-first century.

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[11] Marcos, *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, 169.

[12] Gustav Landauer, in a meeting of the Bavarian Council's Republic Central Revolutionary Council on April 12, 1919, according to the report "Die politische, militärische und wirtschaftliche Lage der Räterepublik / Sitzung des Revolutionären Zentralrats am 12. April 1919" [The Political, Military, and Economic Situation of the Council Republic / Meeting of the Central Revolutionary Council, April 12, 1919], in Ulrich Linse, ed., *Gustav Landauer und die Revolutionszeit 1918/19. Die politischen Reden, Schriften, Erlasse und Briefe Landauers aus der Novemberrevolution 1918/19* [*Gustav Landauer and the German Revolution, 1918–19: Gustav Landauer's Political Speeches, Writings, Proclamations, and Letters in the November Revolution, 1918–19*] (Berlin: Karin Kramer Verlag, 1974), 230. My heartfelt thanks to Sven-Oliver Buchwald, of Berlin's Library of the Free, who diligently searched for this quote in its original German, and Gabriel Kuhn, who then meticulously translated the quotation into English. Gabriel notes that "an idle government" could also be translated literally as "a government that doesn't do anything."

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