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Why Anarchism is Dangerous

Dana Ward and Paul Messersmith-Glavin

September 30, 2020

Anarchists frighten privileged elites and their authoritarian followers not simply because the primary goals of the movement have been to abolish the sources of elite power – the state, patriarchy, and capitalism – but because anarchism offers a viable alternative form of social and political organization grounded in workplace collectives, neighborhood assemblies, bottom-up federations, child-centered free schools, and a variety of cultural organizations operating on the basis of cooperation, solidarity, mutual aid, and direct, participatory democracy. Opposed to all forms of hierarchy, domination, and exploitation, anarchists work to create a culture grounded in equal access to resources making the genuine exercise of freedom possible. Over the past century and a half, and particularly in the last two decades, the self-managing principles of anarchism have proliferated around the world and have also become part of the standard operating procedures of protest. Since elites would be rendered redundant in an anarchist egalitarian society, no wonder rulers tremble at the thought of anarchist jurisdictions.

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Retrieved on 2020-01-04 from

[https://www.anarchistagency.com/commentary/
why-anarchism-is-dangerous/](https://www.anarchistagency.com/commentary/why-anarchism-is-dangerous/)

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The grim realities of the climate crisis, the coronavirus pandemic, and ongoing police violence have laid bare the inadequacies of the current leadership and the existing governing system while also providing opportunities, like all crises, to create significant change. Whether or not we achieve a historical pivot to a fundamentally different society will depend in part upon maintaining militant and creative political pressure in the streets while simultaneously building forms of counter-power, counter-institutions, and organizations pre-figuring the anarchist vision of a free society.

This is a time of significant cultural upheaval in regards to issues revolving around race met by severe political reaction and the attempted retrenchment of white, patriarchal power. In contrast to the first Black Lives Matter movement several years ago in response to the murders of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown, white people's understanding of how historic forms of oppression continue to shape our lives is growing. Black Lives Matter may be the largest social protest movement in US history. In the first two months after police murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis, approximately 15 to 26 million people (up to 8 percent of the population) participated in a Black Lives Matter protest.

The President employs shop-worn stereotypes to delegitimize the movement in the streets by claiming anarchists and Antifa (antifascists) are sinister elements behind these protests, but the vast majority of participants are in fact poor and working-class people of color and their white allies. This is largely a spontaneous uprising. Anarchists are indeed on the streets in solidarity, demanding justice, just as they have been since anarchists first called for the abolition of capitalism and the state in the process of creating a mass working class movement in the 1860s, but the tactics used in the current uprising are a combination of historically proven methods honed over decades of struggle and new adaptations to the increasingly militarized, brutal police. Today's anarchists

continued murder of Black people by police, foreign military intervention, and a dangerously escalating climate crisis. They will not voluntarily give up power and share the wealth, as has been demonstrated throughout history. A social movement in the streets, workplaces, neighborhoods, and cities is essential. A militant movement brings everyday people into dialogue with elite decision makers. It makes us hard to ignore. As people achieve concrete victories, the movement continues and builds until a decisive moment when profound social, economic, and political change becomes possible. In this process, anarchists are motivated to empower people to share power collectively instead of allowing elites to hoard power for themselves.

Social movements also need a vision for the future. Anarchism points us in the direction of creating a free and equal world. Anarchism offers a society in which no one is left out, in which no basic need remains unmet and, most importantly, an egalitarian culture where no one stands above or below or in the way of the genuine exercise of freedom.

We share a desperate need for a fundamentally different society. One that does not wreak havoc on the environment in pursuit of profits, one where police no longer murder people of color to preserve white supremacy, one free of the exploitation of people's labor, and free of misogynist violence, a society where the people affected by political decisions are the ones making those decisions. A directly democratic society principally opposed to domination and exploitation is some of what anarchism offers and why it is so dangerous to the wielders of established power.

other protection for social movements is having the support of the population on the side of the protestors. We have made significant gains in the political fight for public opinion, which is why the attacks on Black Lives Matter, Antifa, and anarchism have dramatically increased. The right-wing is mobilizing to protect white, patriarchal, capitalist privilege and power. An important benefit of protest participation is a sense of belonging to a powerful vehicle for social change, and the knowledge that you are not alone in your outrage. The resulting sense of identity strengthens the will to resist in the moment and also prepares one for future battles.

No matter who is elected in November, this agitation and movement building must continue. Despite the current administration's demonization, today's anarchists work toward creating a free society not merely through militant street demonstrations, but by engaging in workplace organizing, mutual aid projects, and the creation of democratic organizations and counter-institutions. We'll need a proliferation of wildcat strikes, like those enacted by NBA players in support of Black lives, and the generalization of oppositional politics throughout society. Anarchists are creating a culture that models defiance of white supremacy, values Black lives, and defends those of us under attack because we are vulnerable, whether we are queer, trans, women, working class, or houseless. All of us.

One driving force of history is the direct action of social movements from below. Major changes in Western democracies happen when legislation tries to catch up to and respond to pressure from social movements, such as the riots and civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. Today's world is far from anarchist ideals and will require fundamental social changes in all areas of life, from how we organize ourselves economically to how we decide social and political priorities. Existing political elites and the ruling classes have a vested interest in keeping things as they are, even if that means the

are neither leading nor instigating the current protests. The anarchist role in the actions, however, goes far beyond being in the streets with protestors. Since anarchism's reemergence in the 1990s, when anarchist organizing principles were used to shut down the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle, anarchism has permeated contemporary oppositional movements. The anarchist emphasis on direct action and street militance help define today's movements, as do the use of affinity groups and black bloc tactics. Militant horizontalism is today's protest standard.

The significance of the sustained protests against police violence is that the key ingredient for successful change is the militant disruption of everyday life, like we have seen in Portland, Louisville, Rochester and many other communities across the country. We know from studies of 323 violent and nonviolent movements around the world, protests that mobilize at least 3.5 percent of the population can produce regime change. While today's protests are not about regime change, but about social and political change, there is reason for hope that today's protests will create an historical inflection that will be far more significant than merely changing the occupant of the Oval Office. As our society and its political establishment continue to be mired in chaos, anarchism offers a viable way out, a way to organize ourselves in a free and cooperative fashion outside the electoral process. Partly for this reason, elites vilify anarchists.

Grotesque caricatures of anarchism have always been used by politicians to frighten citizens and justify the murder, beating, deportation, and jailing of anarchists, many of them recent immigrants, whose only crime was belief in the possibility of a better world. How ironic, then, that it is anarchists who are perceived as violent, when in fact the vast majority of violence has been perpetrated by those working for capitalists and the state. Nevertheless, anarchists have made major contributions to our history by creating space for new possibilities in the pro-

cess of “demanding the impossible.” Anarchism today is much changed from its 19th century origins, but the core principles remain the same and can be seen in action on the streets and in work going on in the neighborhoods of cities and towns large and small.

Over a hundred years ago, in his book, “Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolutionism,” anarchist Peter Kropotkin argued against Herbert Spencer’s interpretation of Charles Darwin, pointing out that evolution is not driven by competition within species, but rather between species and those species that cooperate most are best suited for survival. Social cooperation allows humans to care for each other and work together to overcome adversity. This is exactly how people have responded to the coronavirus pandemic. As Jia Tolentino observed in “The New Yorker”: “Informal child-care collectives, transgender support groups, and other ad-hoc organizations operate without the top-down leadership or philanthropic funding that most charities depend on. There is no comprehensive directory of such groups, most of which do not seek or receive much attention. But, suddenly, they seemed to be everywhere.”

People are responding with care, cooperation and mutual aid amidst the calamity of the coronavirus pandemic, the frenzy of police brutality and the recent devastating forest fires on the US West Coast. In Portland, Oregon, people have been in the streets protesting in support of Black lives and against the police for over one hundred consecutive days, only taking a short break during the forest fires. Countless collectives, organizations, affinity groups, and blocs have formed. As Roger Peet, of the Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative, observes, “There has been a vast blossoming of small nuclei providing an eclectic variety of services to the protesting population: snacks, eye-wash, helmets, carefully built shields, wound care, pamphlets, water, communication, and more. These mutual aid networks and small structures provide an ameliorative infrastructure to the nightly context of protest, but they also provide a coherent

thing for a participant to do, outside of the nominally vague goal of simply protesting.” Pop-up clinics have been organized to provide for protestors’ aftercare, to help with the physical and emotional effects of blunt force trauma and exposure to the chemical warfare used by police. And with West Coast air quality recently the worst in the world due to massive forest fires, the militants switched for a time to provide disaster relief. From street medics on the front lines of protests and disaster relief to organizers in Brooklyn bringing people groceries during the pandemic, direct action and initiative by everyday people is making a material difference in people’s everyday lives.

There is also widespread recognition in the US of the failure of the state as a viable means of social organization. Starting decades ago, with disillusionment over the US war in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, and revelations about the role of the FBI in suppressing social movements, the inadequacy of the state is currently illustrated by the inept federal response to the coronavirus pandemic, a torn social safety net that protects very few, an environment in collapse, and systemic racism enforced by militarized police. It is increasingly clear that the government cannot solve these multiple crises. Anarchists present fundamental and urgent alternatives to hierarchical power and to a society based upon exploitation and domination.

Disruption in the streets changes the political conversation. Just as the Occupy Wall Street movement changed the political conversation to focus on economic inequality, today’s protests have changed the conversation to focus on systemic racism. As the conversation changes, values change, priorities are altered, new alliances emerge, and possibilities previously inconceivable become attainable. We also know there will be an inevitable backlash. The most important factor limiting the backlash will be the strength of the communities of resistance that emerge as a result of people seeing themselves in the movement. People need to stay in the streets, agitating, keeping the pressure on to maintain focus on addressing these issues. An-