

Enemies of the State

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Unknown (Between 1997 and 2001)

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The thoughtful student of history learns to take nothing for granted. Received “wisdom” is there to be questioned. Much of what has passed for “history” concerns the activities of kings and lords, and, later, those of professional politicians; much of what has passed for “history” is about the ruling class — about “statesmen”. Much history is about states ; and the more that we learn about the history of states, the less loveable the state as an institution seems. There have been many statesmen/politicians who claimed to want to minimise the state. But has there been a historical movement which has sought the complete abolition of all states, both existing and potential, everywhere ? Has there been more than one such movement? Whether singular or plural, how should we describe such a phenomenon? Finally, does such a movement have a future? The intention of this essay is to seek to show that there has indeed been such a movement; that there still is such a movement; that “movement” — singular, not plural — is the appropriate way to describe this phenomenon; that those who are actively involved in this movement refer to it as “the anarchist movement”; and that the confidence with which this movement regards its future is not totally without foundation.

You can find movements with anti-state aspects to them in many different periods of history and in many different cultures: for instance, in ancient Greece, in Taoism, in the history of Buddhism, in early Christianity and in Christian “heresies” of the Middle Ages and ‘The English Revolution’; but fully fledged anarchism as a thorough-going alternative world view involving complete rejection of all existing and all possible states first appears in the Nineteenth Century, and has a continuing existence from then on.

The English philosopher William Godwin put forward an anarchist viewpoint in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (1793) but in Godwin’s day the word “anarchist” only had a pejorative meaning. Godwin’s son-in-law, the poet Shelley, also advanced what would now be considered anarchistic views, yet shied away from the self-description “anarchist”. “The word anarchy comes from the Greek and its literal meaning is without government : the condition of a people who live without a constituted authority, without government.”¹ In the time of Godwin and of Shelley, it was assumed that such a “condition” would automatically be equivalent to chaos. The first person who actually said “I am an anarchist” was the Frenchman Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in 1840. “ ‘I understand, you are being satirical at the expense of government.’ Not in the least. I have just given you my considered and serious profession of faith. Although I am a strong supporter of order, I am in the fullest sense of the term an anarchist.”² In a great tirade expressing the anarchist attitude towards the state, Proudhon fumed

To be governed means that at every move, operation or transaction one is noted, registered, entered in a census, taxed, stamped, priced, assessed, patented, licensed, authorised, recommended, admonished, reformed....exploited, monopolised, extorted, pressured, mystified, robbed; all in the name of public utility and the general good.³

As well as being against the state in all its forms, Proudhon was (like all anarchists) against capitalism. His most famous saying was “property is theft”. By this Proudhon meant property

¹ Errico Malatesta, *Anarchy*, (London : Freedom Press, 1974), p. 11.

² Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Stewart Edwards (ed.), translation Elizabeth Fraser, *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, (London : Macmillan, 1969), p. 88.

³ Daniel Guerin (quoting from Proudhon’s “*Idée Générale de la Révolution au 19ième Siècle*”) *Anarchism : From Theory to Practice*, (New York : Monthly Review Press, 1970), pp. 15–16.

in a capitalistic sense. Like most anarchists, he did not oppose all private possessions, but only those which were necessarily exploitative of other people. It was okay to own a plough; but to own the factory which produces ploughs was to be a capitalist. To begin with, Karl Marx was a fan of Proudhon, hailing him as “the proletariat become conscious of itself”; but later they quarrelled, and Marx called Proudhon “petit bourgeois”. This curious change from “proletarian” to “petit bourgeois” had nothing to do with class analysis, and everything to do with the fact that Proudhon opposed Marx on the question of the state !

The communists in general are under a strange illusion: fanatics of state power, they claim that they can use the state authority to ensure, by methods of restitution, the well being of the workers who created the collective wealth. As if the individual came into existence after society, and not society after the individual.⁴

Once Proudhon had breached the taboo on the word “anarchist”, many other libertarian-minded people in and around the fledgling socialist and working class movements also started to describe themselves as such. These people were not just philosophers, but men (and women) of action. Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, and many thousands of less well-known anarchists would all see the insides of various states’ jails.

Proudhon expressed some unpleasant prejudices which would be unacceptable today; so did Bakunin. But then, Karl Marx’s son-in-law Paul Lafargue, who was one-sixteenth Afro-Cuban, had to put up with constantly being called “nigger” and “gorilla” by Marx.⁵ When Lafargue showed some interest in Proudhon’s, rather than Marx’s, ideas, Marx commented on the need to “beat some sense into that thick Creole skull of his”.⁶ To anarchists, the failings of supposedly “great” anarchists are merely a source of amusement; while to Marxists, criticism of the great prophets can undermine faith in their religion! Like everyone else, anarchists are the imperfect products of this society; however, as Martha Ackelsberg points out : “Along with contemporary feminists, anarchists insist that those who are defined by others have great difficulty defining themselves”.⁷

One of the most misunderstood of anarchist writers is the arch-individualist Max Stirner. Here is Max Nettlau on Stirner :

I have elsewhere published some notes to support my judgement of Max Stirner (in *Vorfrühling der Anarchie* pp. 169–173). His thinking, in substance, was eminently socialist. He wanted the social revolution, but, since he was sincerely anarchist, his so-called ‘egoism’ represented the protection, the defence which he considered it was necessary to adopt against authoritarian socialism and any statism that the authoritarians might infuse into socialism. His ‘egoism’ is individual initiative. His ‘Verein’ is the free association which accomplishes a purpose but which is not converted into an organisation or society. His method is eminently disobedience, the individual and

⁴ Edward Hyams, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon : His Revolutionary Life, Mind and Works*, (London : John Murray, 1979), pp. 85–86.

⁵ Robert Payne, *Marx*, (London : W.H. Allen, 1968), p. 391.

⁶ Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx : The Story of His Life*, (London : Allen and Unwin, 1951), p. 345.

⁷ Martha Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain : Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*, (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 20.

collective negation of authority, and a voluntary association according to what a situation may need. It is the free life as against the life which is controlled and ordered by the usurpers of property and authority.⁸

Stirner's "The Ego and Its Own" is an anarchist classic, but Stirner himself, while certainly part of the movement, was not a central player. In contrast, Mikhail Bakunin became a formidable opponent both of all existing states and of the Marxist alternative to them. He led the opposition to Karl Marx in the International Working Men's Association, and, with the other anarchists, was expelled from the International as a result. Very much the man of action, Bakunin only wrote in response to things that other people said, and he wrote articles or pamphlets, not books; yet long after his death, Bakunin's writings would influence the development of the anarchist movements in Spain and South America; and during the resurgence of interest in anarchism of the 1960s, Bakunin was the most influential thinker. However, we must again stress that anarchists are not Bakuninists (as we can be sure Bakunin would have been the first to agree).

Bakunin's attitude towards the state was :

The State denotes violence, oppression, exploitation, and injustice raised into a system and made into the cornerstone of the existence of any society. The State never had and never will have any morality. Its morality and only justice is the supreme interest of self-preservation and almighty power — an interest before which all humanity has to kneel in worship. The State is the complete negation of humanity, a double negation: the opposite of human freedom and justice, and the violent breach of the universal solidarity of the human race.⁹

Bakunin's alternative to the state was libertarian socialism, which for him was synonymous with anarchy : "Freedom without Socialism is privilege and injustice, and Socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality".¹⁰

Another Russian who had considerable influence on the anarchist movement was Pyotr Kropotkin. As well as being a revolutionary anarchist, Kropotkin was a geographer/environmental scientist.

It was Darwin himself, said Kropotkin, who had shown that 'sociability' conferred an important evolutionary advantage. Therefore Thomas Huxley's insistence that mankind must struggle against a harsh, competitive 'law of nature' was unnecessary. To Kropotkin, it was social co-operation that gave a species its competitive edge. As he grew older, Kropotkin became an anarchist-nihilist, doing everything he could to undermine a social system he saw as unjust, inhumane and 'unnatural'.¹¹

After spells in Russian and French prisons, Kropotkin moved to London in 1886, where he helped set up the Freedom Press Group, which still exists today. A century after being set up by Kropotkin, Freedom Press republished his essay on The State , which concludes :

⁸ Max Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism*, (London : Freedom Press, 1996), pp. 54–55.

⁹ Michael Bakunin (ed. G.P. Maximoff), *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin : Scientific Anarchism*, (New York : Free Press, 1953), p. 224.

¹⁰ Michael Bakunin (ed. G.P. Maximoff), *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin : Scientific Anarchism*, (New York : Free Press, 1953), pp. 373, 269.

¹¹ Richard Milner, *The Encyclopaedia of Evolution : Humanity's Search for its Origins*, (New York , Oxford : Facts on File, 1990), p. 259.

Either the State for ever, crushing individual and local life, taking over in all fields of human activity, bringing with it its wars and its domestic struggles for power, its palace revolutions which only replace one tyrant by another, and inevitably at the end of this development there is....death! Or the destruction of States, and new life starting again in thousands of centres on the principle of the lively initiative of the individual and groups and that of free agreement. The choice lies with you !¹²

Despite having seen that the State was the bringer of war, Kropotkin was disastrously wrong about the First World War, in effect supporting the allies against Germany, and allowing the nationalistic press in both Britain and France to crow “even the anarchists say our cause is just”. Yet in fact the vast majority of anarchists disagreed with Kropotkin and opposed the war. Prominent amongst opponents of the war was Errico Malatesta, the great Italian anarchist. Having fled South America with most of the governments of that continent pursuing him, Malatesta spent some years in London, where he met Kropotkin. During sixty years as an active anarchist, Malatesta wrote many articles and pamphlets. Unlike Kropotkin, between earning his living as an electrician and being involved in revolutionary activity, Malatesta never had time to write a book; yet nobody has ever had more influence on the international anarchist movement. “Uniting his theory and action with rare consistency, he combined idealism with common sense, philosophical rigour with practical experience.”¹³

Since we are still living in a world of states, by definition, there has never been a successful anarchist revolution. But four years after Malatesta’s death came one of the closest things to it, the Catalan Revolution of 1936. Here is George Orwell’s ‘Homage to Catalonia’ :

I had come to Spain with some notion of writing newspaper articles, but I had joined the militia almost immediately, because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do. The Anarchists were still in virtual control of Catalonia and the revolution was in full swing.¹⁴

Spain is one of a handful of countries (so far) where anarchism achieved the status of a mass movement, through the FAI (Federación Anarquista Ibérica) and the anarcho-syndicalist union CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo). Here is a report of the CNT congress of 1936 :

Tolerance of diversity was one of the keynotes of the Congress. Every attempt was made to incorporate the many shades of anarchist opinion, from the collectivist to the individualist. It was recognised that the communes would take on many different forms, and opponents of industrial technology and advocates of nudism would be free to create their own¹⁵

This spirit of tolerance of diversity amongst anarchists continues to this day, as those of us who attended the Glasgow Anarchist Summer Schools of 1993 and 1996 can testify.

While most emphatically not claiming any anarchist equivalent of “apostolic succession”, it is a fact that this writer first came in contact with active anarchists in 1963, and came to know such

¹² Peter Kropotkin, *The State : Its Historic Role*, (London : Freedom Press, 1987), p. 56.

¹³ Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible : A History of Anarchism*, (London : Fontana Press, 1993), p. 361.

¹⁴ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, (London : Secker & Warburg, 1967), p. 2.

¹⁵ Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible : A History of Anarchism*, (London : Fontana Press, 1993), p. 460.

veterans as Tom Brown and Albert Meltzer quite well; they knew Emma Goldman, Emma knew Malatesta, Malatesta knew Kropotkin, Kropotkin knew Bakunin, and Bakunin knew Proudhon; so the historical continuity of the anarchist movement is complete. Some of those who organised the campaign of non-payment of the poll tax, and who rioted against Margaret Thatcher's "flagship policy" in 1990, were not a "new" anarchist movement; they were the same one ! Of course, anarchist groups and organisations come and go; but the movement has a continuing existence.

A libertarian organisation is not some tool acting in obedience to orders emanating from on high or from some central point, but rather a theater for the implementation of mutual aid and a way of blending individual endeavours, so as to bestow upon them, in so doing, greater social impact. Should that organisation be permanent, ad hoc, specific or broadly-based ? Let us answer with a statement of the obvious : it all depends on the aim.¹⁶

The anarchist movement in Scotland dates back to around 1880, when some French refugees from the post-Paris Commune repression settled in Glasgow, and one Frenchman set up home with a Scottish woman with the surname MacTavish, and their flat in London Road became the focus of the first Glasgow Anarchist Group. While we can speak of "the anarchist movement in Scotland" or "the anarchist movement in Argentina", the movement has from its very beginnings always been consciously and deliberately internationalist. Sometimes communication has been difficult, but at all times anarchists have seen themselves as being part of one movement. Today, anarchists are organising internationally via the internet, through various groupings such as the Anarchy-List (open to absolutely anyone) and the Organise-List (not quite so open). The 1997 speaking tour of many European cities (including Dundee), by the black American revolutionary anarchist Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, was arranged through the Organise-List.

Recently, there has been some discussion on "History of Anarchism" on the Anarchy-List. There was general agreement that Peter Marshall's *Demanding the Impossible* is the best history of anarchism — "far better than Woodcock's *Anarchism*, and better referenced, too"; and more up to date than, and certainly easier to read than, Max Nettlau's monumental 9-volume *History of Anarchism* ! Marshall's book is "an excellent resource — until such time as activists can write their own history — which may be easier with the net".¹⁷

Another recent discussion on the Anarchy-List, involving people from many countries, has concerned the American anarcho-socialist Noam Chomsky's ideas on "expanding the floor of the cage".¹⁸ We know the welfare state is a cage; but removing the bars while we are weak just invites the capitalist wolves to dinner. We should make living space for ourselves by "expanding the floor of the cage", until such time as we are strong enough to tear down the bars and deal with the wolves. Some anarchists agree with Chomsky; many disagree; and some just dislike Chomsky because he has become too prominent.

¹⁶ Alexandre Skirda, *Autonomie Individuelle et Force Collective : Les Anarchistes et L'Organisation de Proudhon a Nos Jours* (Paris : Skirda, 1987) Chapter 20. N.B. — The quotation as given here is from the English translation by Paul Sharkey, due to be published by A.K. Press of Boston, Massachusetts in August 1998. Various contributors to discussion on "History of Anarchism", Anarchy-List Archives <<http://www.cwi.nl/htbin/jack/mailfetch.py>> December 1997.

¹⁷ David Barsamian, "Expanding the Floor of the Cage : An Interview with Noam Chomsky" from the pages of *Z magazine*, available on-line at: <http://www.lol.shareworld.com/zmag/articles/mar97barchom.htm>

¹⁸ Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible : A History of Anarchism*, (London : Fontana Press, 1993) 565.

But, it may be objected, so far we have only considered “left-wing” or socialistic anarchists. Even arch-individualists like Stirner turn out to be in favour of solidarity and mutual aid. What about other forms of anarchism ?

What other forms of anarchism ? Oh, there are many variations, but, essentially, we have now described the historical anarchist movement — rebels who are opposed to the state and to all forms of authority, including the authority of the capitalist boss.

What, it may be objected, about “anarcho-capitalists” like David Friedman and Murray Rothbard ? The answer is that they are not anarchists. Their ideas are really those of the so-called minimal state — a state which always turns out, on closer examination, to be not-so-minimal-after-all . Peter Marshall says “Anarcho-capitalism overlooks the egalitarian implications of traditional individualist anarchists like Spooner and Tucker. In fact, few anarchists would accept the ‘anarcho-capitalists’ into the anarchist camp.” It should be added that anarchists throughout the world, whether they call themselves individualist-anarchists, anarchist-communists, anarcho-syndicalists, or just plain anarchists, are virtually unanimous in regarding the so-called anarcho-capitalists, not as friend or allies, not as fellow travellers along the road to anarchy, but as capitalists first, foremost, and always, and therefore as the sworn enemies of anarchy. The “anarcho”-capitalists’ obsession with protection of property rights means that they are prepared to defend the legalistic “rights” of the rich, so they have to think in terms of “law and order”; they have to come up with some means of defending the indefensible, and essentially that means the state. Their “minimal state” would lock up the true anarchists who would be seeking to take the opportunity of a weak state to expropriate the capitalistic property of the rich. The so-called “anarcho”-capitalists are latter-day frauds and charlatans who pretend to some spurious connection with historical anarchism in order to give a false impression of being libertarians who oppose the state. Financially, the “anarcho”-capitalists are quite rich, especially in the USA, and can well afford to spread their misrepresentations ; but in terms of numbers, they are insignificant. The anarchist movement has historically shown itself capable of becoming, in some countries, during favourable circumstances, a mass movement; that could never be said about the “anarcho”-capitalists.

This brief look at the history of anarchism shows that a movement of principled opposition to the State — to all states, and to all possible states — first appeared in the Nineteenth Century. Though there were many religious and other movements with anti-state aspects to them in earlier centuries, these can be seen as preludes to anarchism. Since its beginning, the anarchist movement has been, as well as anti-State, also anti-capitalist ; indeed , anti- all forms of authority ; and since its beginning the movement has been internationalist.

There are many different groups and factions within the anarchist movement — sometimes it can seem there are as many anarchisms as there are anarchists — but they all consider themselves to be part of one movement. “Movement” is also the correct term for non-anarchists to use, because, even if there might appear to be little actual “motion” for considerable periods of time, nevertheless, the word fits better than any other. The anarchist movement is not just a “school” of philosophical or political thought, but the sum of all those who actively seek, individually and collectively, to put that thought into practice. Nor is the anarchist movement a political “party” in the sense that the SNP or the Liberal Democrats are parties, because it does not seek governmental power, it does not have leaders, and it does not have a manifesto.

As to the future, with the failure of Marxist communism (as predicted by Bakunin as long ago as 1870), the greatest challenge to the untrammelled power of the capitalistic states comes from the anarchist movement. Anarchists are constantly adapting to changing circumstances, have established a formidable intellectual and organisational presence on the internet, and are the fiercest opponents of all attempts to control the net. The new International which is evolving consists not just of talk, but of action too, for it consists of activists involved in a wide variety of struggles. While a census is of course quite impossible (one hundred per cent non-co-operation guaranteed) there are probably more anarchists world-wide today than at any previous time in history. In short, people in the anarchist movement feel that they have some reasons for looking to the future with a certain amount of confidence. Anarchists are proud of the fact that, at all times, in all countries, they are “enemies of the state” . So far as they are concerned , history most definitely remains (to quote the title of a 1990s Class War pamphlet) “Unfinished Business” .

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