

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Anarchism

Geoffrey Ostergaard

1983

Geoffrey Ostergaard

Anarchism

1983

Published in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, pp. 21–23.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

The doctrine and movement which rejects the principle of political authority and maintains that social order is possible and desirable without such authority. Its central negative thrust is directed against the core elements that make up the modern state: its territoriality with the accompanying notion of frontiers; its sovereignty, implying exclusive jurisdiction over all people and property within its frontiers; its monopoly of the major means of physical coercion by which it seeks to uphold that sovereignty, both internally and externally; its system of positive law which claims to override all other laws and customs; and the idea of the nation as the paramount political community. The positive thrust of anarchism is directed towards the vindication of ‘natural society’, i.e. a self-regulated society of individuals and freelyformed groups.

Although anarchism rests on liberal intellectual foundations, notably the distinction between state and society, the protean character of the doctrine makes it difficult to distinguish clearly different schools of anarchist thought. But one important distinction is between individualist anarchism and socialist anarchism. The former emphasizes individual liberty, the sovereignty of the individual, the importance of private property or possession, and the ineq-

uity of all monopolies. It may be seen as liberalism taken to an extreme conclusion. 'Anarcho-capitalism' is a contemporary variant of this school (see Pennock and Chapman 1978, chs. 12–14). Socialist anarchism, in contrast, rejects private property along with the state as a major source of social inequality. Insisting on social equality as a necessary condition for the maximum individual liberty of all, its ideal may be characterized as 'individuality in community'. It represents a fusion of liberalism with socialism: libertarian socialism.

The first systematic exposition of anarchism was made by William Godwin (1756–1836), some of whose ideas may have influenced the Owenite cooperative socialists. However, classical anarchism as an integral, albeit contentious, part of the wider socialist movement was originally inspired by the mutualist and federalist ideas of PROUDHON. Proudhon adopted an essentially cooperative approach to socialism, but he insisted that the power of capital and the power of the state were synonymous and that the proletariat could not emancipate itself through the use of state power. The latter ideas were vigorously propagated by BAKUNIN under whose leadership anarchism developed in the late 1860s as the most serious rival of Marxist socialism at the international level. Unlike Proudhon, however, Bakunin advocated the violent and revolutionary expropriation of capitalist and landed property, leading to a form of collectivism. Bakunin's successor, Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), emphasized the importance of mutual aid as a factor in social evolution; he was mainly responsible for developing the theory of anarchist communism, according to which 'everything belongs to everyone' and distribution is based exclusively on needs; and in his essay, 'The State: its historic role', he provided a perceptive analysis of the anarchists' *bete noire*.

Bakunin's strategy envisaged spontaneous uprisings of the oppressed classes, peasants as well as industrial workers, in widespread insurrections in the course of which the state would be abolished and replaced by autonomous communes, federally

linked at regional, national and international levels. The PARIS COMMUNE of 1871 – hailed by Bakunin as 'a bold and outspoken negation of the state' – approximated to this anarchist model of revolution. In the period following its crushing – a consequence, in Engels's view, of its lack of centralization and authority and the failure to use its coercive authority freely enough – the tendency towards state socialism of both the Marxist and reformist varieties gained ground. Some anarchists then adopted the tactic of 'propaganda by the deed' – acts of assassination of political leaders and terrorism of the bourgeoisie – intended to encourage popular insurrections. The consequent repression of the movement led other anarchists to develop an alternative strategy associated with SYNDICALISM. The idea was to turn labour unions into revolutionary instruments of the proletariat in its struggle against the bourgeoisie, and to make unions, rather than communes, the basic units of a socialist order. The revolution, it was envisaged, would take the form of a General Strike in the course of which the workers would take over the means of production, distribution and exchange, and abolish the state. It was through syndicalism that anarchism in the period 1895–1920 exercised its greatest influence on labour and socialist movements. The influence lasted longer in Spain where, during the Civil War (1936–39), the anarcho-syndicalists attempted to carry through their conception of revolution. Since the decline of syndicalism, anarchism has exercised only a limited influence on socialist movements, but there was a notable revival of anarchist ideas and tendencies (not always recognized as such) in the New Left movements of the 1960s. Currently, anarcho-pacifism, drawing on a tradition of Christian anarchism but inspired more by the non-violent direct action techniques popularized by M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948), is a significant tendency within Western peace movements.

Both individualist and socialist anarchism, as expressed by Max Stirner (1805–56), Proudhon and Bakunin, were deemed sufficiently important to merit the extensive criticisms of Marx

and Engels (see Thomas 1980). In general, they saw anarchism as a petty bourgeois phenomenon, allied, in Bakunin's case, with the adventurism and revolutionary phrase-mongering characteristic of de-classed intellectuals and the LUMPENPROLETARIAT. As an out-moded 'sectarian' tendency within the socialist movement, it reflected the protest of the petty bourgeoisie against the development of large-scale capitalism and of the centralizing state which safeguards the interests of the bourgeoisie. The protest took the form of a denial, not of any actual state but of 'an abstract State, the State as such, a State that nowhere exists' (*The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men's Association*, 1873, s. II). More importantly, anarchism denied what was essential in the struggle for the emancipation of the working class: political action by an independent working-class party leading to the conquest, not the immediate destruction, of political power. 'For communists', as Engels explained, 'abolition of the state makes sense only as the necessary result of the abolition of classes, with whose disappearance the need for organized power of one class for the purpose of holding down the other classes will automatically disappear' (Marx, Engels, Lenin 1972, p. 27).

Anarchism survived such criticisms and remains a major source for the critique of Marxist theory and, particularly, of Marxist practice. The commonly-held view that Marxists and anarchist communists agree about the end (a classless, stateless society) but differ about the means to that end appears to be inadequate. At a deeper level, the disagreement is about the nature of the state, its relationship to society and to capital and how politics as a form of alienation may be transcended.

Reading

Apter, David and Joll, James eds. 1971: *Anarchism Today*.
Corder, Alan B. 1988: *Marx: A Radical Critique*.
Guerin, Daniel 1970: *Anarchism*

Kropotkin, P. A. 1970: *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*.
Marx, Engels, Lenin 1972: *Anarchism and Anarcho-syndicalism*.
Miller, David 1984: *Anarchism*.
Pennock J. R. and Chapman, J. W. eds. 1978: *Anarchism*.
Thomas, Paul 1980: *Karl Marx and the Anarchists*.
Woodcock, George 1986: *Anarchism*. 2nd edn.