

# Some misconceptions of Anarchism

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Anarchism can be divided into three categories: the revolutionary school of Bakunin and Kropotkin, known as communist anarchism; the ethical or philosophical anarchism of Godwin, Proudhon, and Tucker; and, finally, the religious anarchism of Tolstoy.

Therefore, when speaking of the misconceptions that some people have of anarchism, it must be remembered that not only is each of the tendencies misinterpreted, but also that the confusion results from the very existence of the said tendencies, which are necessarily antagonistic in some extremes.

In the same way, those who express or form false ideas about anarchism constitute quite distinct categories. In order to facilitate our demonstrations, we shall classify them into three different types: conservatives, who hate and fear any radical proposal for social renovation; socialists and other reformists, who cannot bear to pursue any objective other than the one they propose; and, finally, the anarchists themselves, who believe that they have a monopoly on the truth.

These misconceptions are many and varied, but it is not necessary to examine them all here. I shall therefore confine my observations to a few of them, and particularly to those which relate to the revolutionary school, as the one which makes the most noise, raises the most reprobation, and is the least understood.

The first and most important misconception of anarchism, held in good faith or by design by friends and foes alike, is that Anarchy, Communism and Revolution constitute an indissociable trinity, so that the former is often pictured as holding bloody revolution in one hand and evangelical communism in the other. Revolution appears inevitably bloody and communism as an inescapable economic necessity.

That the formation of such errors was partly caused by the very teachings of some of the propagandists of anarchy cannot be denied. Like all generalisations not derived from inductions, the conception of anarchism was bold but vague. Moreover, it could not, like many other ideas, escape the influence of neighbouring ideas at the beginning.

The birth of anarchism coincided with the revolutionary period of 1848–71. The traditions of the great French revolution persisted, still fresh, in the popular mind; the environment was imbued with the desire for political and social change and the aspirations of men rose to the boldest conceptions. The construction of barricades was still a flourishing industry. It was at a time when paper constitutions and social systems were being made that the anti-authoritarian system emerged.

The strongest criticism of the tyranny of the state could not fail to meet with the approval of the most impatient and persecuted revolutionaries of the time. The ideal of a society without authority, an anarchist society, inspired in them the stubborn will to act against the constituted powers, and their nascent love of Humanity could only be satisfied by the highest expression of human brotherhood, by the realisation of fraternal communism.

But while it is historically certain that the first anarchists were primarily revolutionary communists, it does not necessarily follow that anarchism is impossible outside the economic principles of communism and without recourse to violent revolution. Theoretically there is no essential link between the three concepts, although many people believe firmly in this trinity as a whole. Those who do not believe in the need for government may or may not be supporters of revolution and violent propaganda in fact; they may or may not advocate communism.

The guarantee of freedom, in social relations, of the principle of voluntary assistance or the right of secession from the social organisation, presupposes, as I shall explain later in greater detail, only one fundamental economic condition, namely equality of means to achieve economic independence. On the other hand, on the ground of fact, American anarchism, as expounded by its founder Josiah Warren<sup>1</sup> as well as most expressively by Thoreau, is entirely independent of both communist and revolutionary tactics. The anarchism of Benjamin Tucker<sup>2</sup>, generally the most logical and consistent, is decidedly opposed to the communist system and extremely peaceful in its means. Proudhon himself tried to establish anarchy by means of a People's Bank and Labour Exchange.

It is thus obvious that to identify anarchism with communism and revolution is a false conception of its theory and contrary to the manifestations of its history. Nevertheless, we always hear this repeated, in good faith by sympathisers, who should know better, and intentionally by reactionaries and socialist politicians who have everything to gain by maintaining these errors discrediting anarchists in the eyes of the People.

As an example of this wilful ignorance of anarchism, I quote from a book published a few months ago and praised by the American socialist press as "a remarkable book by a remarkable man". On page 332 of the *History of Socialism in the United States*, the following can be read:

"Anarchists, by refusing to recognise the organic character of human society, deny the gradual and logical course of its evolution. The world would at all times be arranged according to the will of the most radical revolutionaries, and what is needed to establish well-being is a *coup de force* of men determined and capable of risking their lives for the emancipation of the oppressed people.

"Consistent with their view, anarchists reject political action as a harmful farce and scorn the efforts of workers' associations and the socialist movement to improve the conditions of the working class as reactionary means designed to delay the revolution by suppressing the workers' discontent with their present condition. The efforts of the anarchists consist in sowing revolt among the poor and in waging a personal war with those whom they regard as responsible for all social injustice, the great and powerful of all nations. Their weapons are propaganda, by word and deed."

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<sup>1</sup> Josiah Warren (1798–1874) was the first to spread anarchist ideas in the United States. His conception is based on the "sovereignty of the individual."

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Tucker (1854–1939) was one of the leading exponents of anarchist thought in the United States. He was the editor of the periodical *Liberty* (1881–1908) to which he contributed with many of his writings.

This remarkable man appears not to have read even a single anarchist pamphlet. Every statement in these passages is an absurd interpretation of phrases plucked from the impassioned speeches which the veteran revolutionary John Most<sup>3</sup> made some fifteen years ago. Anarchist theory is unfortunately so little understood, that such a welter of nonsense easily finds credence even among writers, not to speak of pious readers who are seized with a sincere horror for “the dangerous theories of those terrible fools who call themselves anarchists.”

Another of the most important of the misconceptions about anarchism, which it is necessary to mention because it affects its fundamental principle, is that which relates to the conception of individual freedom.

This expression is much abused. In the name of liberty, the satisfied bourgeois come to defend even the slavery of our times; and for their successors, for the socialists who aspire to political power, liberty is perfectly compatible with future slavery. Anarchism is hated because it is supposed to be an advocate of unrestrained freedom, of gross licence, which could only destroy all social life, although the anarchists themselves do not agree on the definition of the word. The philosophical school conforms to the Spencerian formula of equal freedom, i.e. that everyone should be free to do as he pleases as long as he does not infringe on the freedom of others. However, the problem is not solved in this way, it only moves forward one step, because the formula does not contain the definition of its limiting clause. What indeed constitutes an encroachment on the freedom of others? The question recurs further and appears to be fundamental, for it is not the principle of freedom that serves as a guideline, but rather the limits of freedom, which brings us back to the very conception of freedom guaranteed by the laws that govern our old bourgeois society.

The ‘non-philosophical’ anarchist school rejects such a formula. For its proponents, freedom implies nothing less than that idyllic state of affairs, where everyone would be free not only to do, but also to enjoy everything. They trust, anti-philosophically to be sure, in the inherent goodness of human nature, and refuse to limit freedom in any way. It is this aspiration of the communist anarchists towards the perfect idyllic freedom, which prompts the benevolent, but cautious reformers to express the sympathetic opinion, namely: “Anarchism is certainly a beautiful ideal, but... how impracticable!”

Thus we have anarchism, abhorred, on the one hand, as an infernal theory of misfortune and disorder, and idealised, on the other, as a magnificent but unattainable dream.

The freedom advocated by anarchists is neither so terrible as to produce chaos, nor so miraculous as to make its realisation impossible. It has simply been misunderstood. We always speak of freedom as if it were a positive force, a weapon, something that individuals could use for good or ill. We often hear it said: “Give a man liberty and he will abuse it to harm his neighbour”; or, on the contrary: “Give a man liberty and he will be benevolent and considerate of others.” But freedom is not something that is given. It is not a title deed or a letter of seal with which we can do as we please. Essentially freedom is a mere relationship, a negative condition, the absence of something positive in its manifestations, that is, the absence of submission.

Thus freedom is a social relation, not an individual faculty. Outside of society we cannot in any way imagine freedom. We can do absolutely anything we want without this involving the

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<sup>3</sup> John Most (1846–1906) was initially a socialist, deputy of the German Social Democratic Party, and later joined the anarcho-communist current. He was, in the last period of his life, one of the most virulent and dogmatic exponents of anarchism as an ideology that he intended to spread, if not impose, on the whole of society through the use of violence (the so-called ‘propaganda of the fact’ i.e. the bloody attack on all opponents).

question of freedom. Our actions have meaning only when they affect others, when they have a definite relation to the actions of others, i.e. when they constitute social actions. By speaking of freedom we are not only characterising the relationship of our actions to the actions of others, but also showing that our activity must not affect the activity of anyone else. In man-to-man relations, being free does not mean being invested with the power to direct others; it means increasing the advantages that result from the negative condition of not being directed by them.

It is often said: "It is all very well to speak of perfect liberty in the future, when altruistic feelings shall have developed and replaced selfish ones, and when the interest of men shall consist chiefly, as Spencer says, in being mutual helpers. But with the present conditions of mankind and the complicated relations of conflicting interests, it is necessary that restraint, rather than freedom, should continue to be the chief guide to social organisation."

All the fallacy in these words is due, too, to a mistaken conception of freedom. It is not about making a sacrifice for the benefit of others. It is not about altruism, the idea of mutual support. No imperative, duty to others, etc., but pure egoism, tending to the emancipation of the individual.

The definition of individual freedom is not that each person does what he likes, on the condition, expressed or tacit, that he does not hinder his neighbour, but that each person can refrain from doing what he does not like, without conditions of any kind.

If individual freedom is incompatible with social organisation, so much the worse for the latter.

Leave the individual alone: do not force him, in the name of society, to do what he does not feel the need to do, and you will not be obliged to compel him to do what he needs to do. The purpose of society is the development of the individual and not vice versa. Social organisation is important only in so far as it facilitates the manifestation of individual initiatives: the more complete personal freedom is, the better for reaching its goal.

Anarchism is the negation of authoritarian organisation, but obviously not of all organisation. It does not ignore the organic character of society, nor the gradual course of its development. However, while recognising the organic character of society, it does not follow that it is seen as an organism in the absolute sense of the word, i.e. an organism in which all the component organs obey, as slaves, the will of a central authority, as the supreme brain. The political organisation of society is an entirely different conception from the biological organisation. Society is an organisation without special organs and is founded solely by virtue of the mutual relations between individuals. What is the character of these mutual relations? It is up to political science to answer. What should be, or rather, what will be the character of these mutual relations in the future? Anarchism teaches that it will be libertarian, that these mutual relations, i.e., that the social organisation must be voluntary and not authoritarian.

The individual does not owe obedience and loyalty to any person or group of persons. He is free, perfectly free, to join his efforts with those of his fellows, and for the ends and by the means which best please him, or to remain isolated and not to participate in the work and, consequently, in the benefits of any social enterprise. The principle of individual liberty is the right to secession, the right to separate oneself at any time from the constituted political organisation; the right not to do what one does not feel the need to do, the right not to conform to the decisions of the majority; it is, in short, the right to the absolute possession of one's own personality.

The idea of archism, of the state, in all its manifestations and forms, is based on the theory that a portion of society — a minority in the oligarchic form of the state, a majority in the democratic form — has the right to compel all the rest to fulfil its wishes. All forms of state organisation

deny in principle the right of their constituent members to secede, individually or in groups, from such organisation. No state accepts, within its jurisdiction, the existence of any other political organisation, independent of its authority. For the supporters of government, there is nothing more dangerous than a “state within a state”. Anarchism holds a view diametrically opposed to that of the oppressive state. It advocates individual election, instead of the law of majorities; freedom from the orders of authority, in short, voluntary organisation instead of authoritarian organisation.

Anarchism wants all this, but nothing more. And I come to consider another misconception about anarchism.

It is invariably thought, or at least asserted, that anarchism presupposes a particular economic system without which it would not be possible or could not flourish. I am not speaking against those anarchists who prefer communism, private property, or any other system as a desirable economic condition in itself; I am simply speaking against those who see in one or other of these systems an indispensable condition for the development of the anarchist organisation, thus denying any possibility of anarchism unaccompanied by another “ism”. In this respect, both communists and individualists are mistaken.

The argument of the communist is that the human being will only be perfectly free if he can dispose of everything he needs, both the resources of the earth and his share in production. And, furthermore, that the equivalence of fortunes is an absolute necessity for the safeguarding of the institution of freedom.

The argument of the individualists, the advocates of private property, is that the community is essentially an organisation for the exploitation of the strong by the weak, which, in the first place, frustrates the progress of the race, and, in general, alienates the freedom of the strong for the benefit of the weak.

To the arguments of the Communists I would reply: You can certainly not be sufficiently and perfectly free in this world, for even in Communism you would not see yourselves free from disease, infirmity, or inevitable death, from the innumerable evils and pains affecting the human body and mind. It is highly doubtful that even a communist has a “free will” over himself.

I do not mean to say that it is not desirable to obtain all these liberties, but I categorically deny that without them we could not enjoy the freedom advocated by anarchism. Let it be remembered that the freedom aimed at by anarchism is the freedom not to do socially what one does not need; the freedom for each person not to be compelled by any organisation to any course of action which he has not chosen himself. This is the whole of anarchist freedom, so to speak, and it is also the whole of anarchism; the rest is a matter of convenience and voluntary and circumstantial agreements.

All that the human being needs to guarantee himself a freedom not subject to anyone’s authority is, apart from mental health, the economic independence made possible by equal conditions for using the land and the spontaneous gifts of nature. Once this is established by means of mutual agreements in a voluntary organisation, the human being can live freely and happily.

It is not by equality of wealth, but by equality of means, added to freedom, that fraternity will be established. How can the strongest and most frugal oppress the weakest and those with the least of restrictions, when the weak and disable would be strong enough and have enough resources, in the presence of the equality of means, to be autonomous and free.

On the other hand, the fears expressed by individualists about voluntarily organised and mutually agreed communism are unfounded. Mutualism does not involve exploitation. No human

being who is not obliged to accept certain conditions, can be exploited: and certainly no anarchist has ever thought of forcing anyone into communism. As for the progress of humanity, the idea that mutual support increases it much more than anything else has been gaining ground for some time; it is therefore useless for us to insist on it.

Moreover, this competition for the universal establishment of a special economic system must be regarded as the product of a lamentable and false conception of the very nature of social progress. Things will in future follow the line of least resistance as they have in the past; but who can point out the line which the manifold human necessities will take to obtain adequate satisfaction?

Space is more than enough for the activity of communists and individualists: such is anarchy.

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Retrieved on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2023 from [panarchy.org](http://panarchy.org)  
This text has been repeatedly attributed to the historian and theorist of anarchy Max Nettlau.  
As clarified by Nettlau himself in his *History of Anarchy*, it is a lecture held in New York in  
January 1904 by Dr. M-n (Dr. J. A. Maryson)

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