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Contemporary perspectives on anarchism

Ideology and intellectual history

John-Erik Hansson

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John-Erik Hansson is a Co-Editor of Ideology Theory Practice. *In this essay, he reviews three recent books on anarchist ideology: Carl Levy and Matthew S. Adams (eds.),* The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism *(Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Benjamin Franks, Nathan Jun, and Leonard A. Williams (eds.),* Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach *(Routledge, 2018); and Matthew S. Adams,* Kropotkin, Read and the Intellectual History of British Anarchism *(Palgrave, 2015).*

The pages of the *Journal of Political Ideologies* testify to the resurgence of interest in anarchism in the last couple of decades. The number of articles on anarchism in the journal has increased rapidly in recent years; the last five years alone has seen articles covering everything from punk collectives and non-domination to anarchist hybridisation with other ideologies. This suggests that there is more work to be done to

reconsider anarchism as a dynamic ideology concerned with contemporary political problems.

Three recent works on anarchism, the *Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism* (2019), *Anarchism: A Conceptual History* (2018) and *Kropotkin, Read and the Intellectual History of British Anarchism* (2015), show how the field of anarchist studies has benefited from engaging with Michael Freeden's morphological approach to the study of ideologies. They have done so in two ways. Firstly, from the perspective of political theory, these works—and especially the first two—have helped clarify the conceptual constellations of anarchism. This is useful for rethinking what contemporary anarchism is, even if the precise morphological structure of anarchism may still be up for debate. Secondly, from a more historical perspective, these works—and especially the first and third—have foregrounded the dynamic process of the constestation and decontestation of concepts. This helps us understand the agency of anarchist thinkers and activists in their geographical and chronological contexts and offers fresh and much needed perspectives on the intellectual history of anarchism. Beyond anarchism, this latter point hints at the potential rewards of a closer collaboration between historians of political thought and scholars in ideology studies.

The *Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism*, edited by Carl Levy and Matthew Adams, is an essential resource for anyone interested in contemporary developments in anarchist studies. Its four parts provide a masterful overview of the theory, history, and practice of anarchism from a global perspective. Eschewing the well-trodden path of reconstructing anarchism and anarchist political theory on the basis of a set of canonical thinkers, the first part of the handbook introduces the subject through nine chapters dedicated to what the editors consider to be the "core problems / *problématiques*" of anarchism. This provides a solid base for understanding anarchism in the variety of traditions, historical circumstances, and applications

presented in the rest of the work. The second, "core traditions", outlines the diversity of intellectual and political tendencies in anarchism, from mutualism to anarcha-feminism, green anarchism, and post-anarchism. Part III of the handbook then deals with the history of the anarchist movement through a set of "key events" and moments from the late 18th to the 21st centuries; from the revolutions that form the historical perspective of early anarchism to the alterglobalisation movement. The last part explores the applications and limits of anarchist theories and perspectives. It explores the breadth of anarchist studies and suggests possible trajectories for the development of the field. Issues broached include, for example, anarchism's relation to post-colonialism, indigeneity, food security, and digital society. As a whole, the handbook successfully delivers what the editors wanted: a "rich *tour d'horizon*" of anarchism and anarchist studies.

Although the editors do not frame it this way, the first part provides one plausible way of considering the morphological structure of anarchism. It even might be seen as progressing from core to peripheral concepts. In this reading, the state, the individual, the community, and freedom stand at the core (chapters 2, 3, and 4). They constitute the basis of the identity of anarchism throughout its history and remain stable components of anarchism today, regardless of internal divisions between, for instance, anarcho-syndicalists, mutualists, and anarcho-communists. Political economy, social change, revolution, and organisation (chapters 5 and 6) can then be seen as adjacent concepts that help understand the grounds for internal divisions within anarchism. The emergence of different perspectives and arguments on the desirability and viability of an anarchist market society, for instance, explain the split between mutualists and anarcho-communists. Finally, cosmopolitanism, anti-imperialism, religion, and science appear as peripheral concepts (chapters 7–10). These are concepts that became part of anarchism's morphology in

more specific circumstances and that informed political action and fostered dialogue with other ideologies and intellectual traditions.

Whether this is the best or most accurate conceptual characterisation of anarchism may be a matter of legitimate debate. As we will see with *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach*, others exist. Still, it is a reasonable morphology. It accounts for the diversity of anarchist traditions and the distinctiveness of anarchism. To do so, it highlights many of the fault lines within anarchism and between anarchism and other major ideologies—such as liberalism or socialism—that have emerged over the last century and a half. The authors thus show that anarchism has been and remains a dynamic ideology, developed by a diverse set of actors in a variety of political and intellectual contexts. Moreover, chapters in this section are both analytical and programmatic. In his chapter on "Freedom" (chapter 4), Alex Prichard suggests that seeing anarchist freedom as a (radicalised) version of freedom as non-domination helps make sense of and overcome debates on the nature of liberty in anarchism. Contributors to the handbook not only track the different ways of thinking about the central concepts of anarchism, they also offer new perspectives on these concepts, thus feeding the process of (de)contestation.

In that sense, part I of the *Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism* both describes anarchism as an ideology but also intervenes in contemporary debates about its nature and identity. In Freeden's terms, the handbook is at once interpretative and prescriptive; that is one of its strengths.[1] Although the editors of the handbook do not frame it as such, the perspective that emerges may usefully be seen as a historically inclined response to a slightly earlier volume: *Anarchism:*

[1] Michael Freeden, "Interpretative Realism and Prescriptive Realism", *Journal of Political Ideologies* 17(1) (2012), 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2012.651883.

with Freeden's approach to ideologies. Conversely, the field of ideology studies would likely also benefit from greater engagement with more historical approaches, from contextualism to *Begriffsgeschichte*. Further embracing interdisciplinarity and such methodological combinations can only sharpen our understanding of the political ideologies and traditions that structured and continue to structure our worldviews.

Kropotkin and Read reformulated their commitments to "the rejection of authority encapsulated in the modern state, trust in the constructive abilities of free individuals, faith in the unitary potential of communalist ethics, and belief in the equity of communised distribution" to respond to locally specific circumstances and political languages. The consequence was that, while such core claims remained, new adjacent and peripheral claims were made. As Read contributed to the re-circulation of Kropotkin's thought, he developed anarchist theory in directions which would either not have been available to or contextually strategic for Kropotkin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

For instance, although Adams considers that Herbert Read developed a more systematic anarchism than is often recognised, he also demonstrates that the language and concepts of nineteenth-century sociology, so useful to Kropotkin, "could be an impediment" to the further circulation of his philosophy, which emphasised culture, art and aesthetics. Reviving Kropotkin's ideas in the mid-twentieth century led Read to reformulate them and bring them in relation to new concepts in a new context, in which "systematic ambitions were unfashionable and brought to mind a particularly uninspiring form of Marxism". The relative stability of the core claims of anarchism from Kropotkin to Read is then best understood as an agent-driven reconstruction of anarchism's conceptual constellations, its morphological structure, given new political, social, and cultural contexts.

The key to Adams's insights into the intellectual history of (British) anarchism is methodological. His work testifies to the fruitfulness of the combination of a contextualist approach to the history of political thought and a morphological approach to the study of ideologies. The history of anarchism has benefited from this methodological insight, but other ideologies should as well. The field of the history of political thought as a whole would benefit from greater engagement

A Conceptual Approach, edited by Benjamin Franks, Nathan Jun, and Leonard Williams. Whereas the *Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism* is a wide-ranging overview of the field of anarchist studies, the explicit purpose of this latter volume is to present anarchism's morphological structure of core, adjacent, and peripheral concepts. Among the core concepts are to be found what the editors identify as anarchism's "basic values"—anti-hierarchy, freedom, and prefiguration (chapters 1–3), and the concepts that ground what anarchists *do*—agency, direct action, and revolution (chapters 4–6).[2] Adjacent concepts—horizontalism, organisation, micropolitics. and economy (chapters 7–10)—complement the core and provide a more nuanced understanding of how anarchists think and act politically together. Finally, the peripheral concepts—intersectionality, reform, work, DIY [Do It Yourself], and ecocentrism (chapters 11–15)—relate the conceptual core of the ideology to more concrete forms of political actions given contemporary political concerns.

As is to be expected, there is much overlap between the two morphologies. However, one of the central differences between may be the absence of a chapter entirely dedicated to the State in *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach.* Other differences of note regard what I have identified as the peripheral concepts of the *Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism*'s morphology. In *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach*, they include notions such as intersectionality (chapter 11), DIY (chapter 14), and ecocentrism (chapter 15). By contrast, peripheral concepts of the handbook include, for example, religion and science (chapters 9 and 10). This suggests important differences of ideological commitments within anarchism—and there are—but there is another explanation for such variation.

[2] Benjamin Franks, Nathan J. Jun, and Leonard A. Williams (eds.), "Introduction", in *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 8.

In my view, this has to do with the different intellectual projects related to anarchism that these two works pursue. The *Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism* seems to me to be more concerned with anarchism's history than *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach*. While the former volume builds a morphology that is perhaps more appropriate to understanding anarchism in the *longue durée*, the latter provides a morphology that is especially appropriate for both interpreting 21st century anarchism and defining possible political strategies for anarchists. By proposing a more systematic analysis of key concepts in anarchism, *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach* suggests a definition of anarchism as a political ideology deeply embedded in contemporary politics. This proposed morphological structure, the editors hope, can then be used to spark further discussions in the field as well as suggest "the possibilities for developing solidarities based on shared norms and practices".[3] However, this does not mean that the morphological structure proposed in *The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism* is solely historical and interpretative. While it recasts anarchism in its conceptual history, it suggests new paths to explore for contemporary scholars of anarchism and for anarchists alike. If Prichard's account of anarchist freedom is correct, then new "solidarities" and discussions could emerge between contemporary anarchists and republicans and anarchists might be encouraged to rethink their approach to rulemaking in relation to those of other activists.

Taken together, then, *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach* and the first part of the *Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism* offer two distinct perspectives on anarchism as a political ideology, by considering its relationship to different if broadly overlapping concepts. In and of itself, this is a valuable addition to discussions of contemporary anarchist political theory. What it also provides is a framework for recasting the intellectual history of anarchism. The development of anarchist ideology can

[3] Franks, Jun, and Williams, 10.

be understood in terms of two intertwined dynamics: (1) that of the contestation and decontestation of concepts (including their adoption and abandonment), and (2) that of the ordering of concepts as core, adjacent, or peripheral. Late nineteenth-century debates in the First International, which led to clearer distinctions within socialism between Marxists and anarchists, are classic instances of particularly intense processes of ideological contestation and decontestation. Matthew Adams, in his chapter on "Anarchism and the First World War" in Part III of the *Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism* (chapter 23), makes the case that the diversity of anarchist responses to the First World War also constitutes a peculiarly intense moment of ideological contestation. He demonstrates how the disagreement on the war between Pëtr Kropotkin and his supporters (who supported the Entente) and Errico Malatesta and his supporters (who opposed the war altogether) was not so much a betrayal of anarchist ideas and ideals as a reconfiguration based on local circumstances.

What makes Adams's chapter particularly compelling, however, is what the framework of ideology studies lacks from theoretical perspective: an understanding and account of context. Against what social, cultural, political, and intellectual backdrop do the morphological structures of ideologies change? What local problems were thinkers and activists trying to solve? Combining the study of ideology and a broadly contextualist approach to intellectual history gives us the tools to rethink the development of traditions of thought as they become essential parts of political ideologies.

Matthew Adams's *Kropotkin, Read, and the Intellectual History of British Anarchism*, is a prime example of such a successful combination. It is an attempt to shed new light on and account for the development of (British) anarchism through the sustained contextualisation of the Pëtr Kropotkin's and Herbert Read's anarchist theories. It shows both continuities and discontinuities in the British anarchist tradition.