The Anarchist Tradition of Political Thought

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Contents

This article considers the defining aspects of nineteenth-century European anarchist theory — the values nineteenth-century anarchist thinkers held in common. While this discussion is occasioned by the recent revival of interest in anarchism, it purposely focuses on the classical anarchist tradition from the nineteenth century. In that period, anarchism reached a level of articulation that distinguished it as a serious political theory.

The following analysis results from a substantial exploration of primary and secondary sources.[1] It attempts to generate an interpretation and synthesis of nineteenth-century anarchist theorizing in the body of the text, while the footnotes allude to the specific evidence. The study is deliberately circumscribed in four ways: it is restricted in time, location, theorists, and goals. It does not encompass all anarchists of the past. It certainly does not venture into the disappointing world of contemporary anarchists.[2] Nor does this article range over all countries in the nineteenth century. It discusses only European anarchist thinking. The focus is limited to a sensible range of seven anarchist theorists: Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), William Godwin (1756–1836), Alexander Herzen (1812–1870), Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), Max Stirner (1806–1856), and Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910). Together these men represent the several faces of European anarchist thought in the last century; yet they are a restricted universe. An essay which does not concentrate on these renowned anarchists could scarcely claim to speak authoritatively of nineteenth-century anarchist thought. An attempt to cover others, including the anarcho-syndicalists, would be too general. Finally, this article seeks to delineate what perspectives the traditional anarchists shared, to the exclusion of numerous other goals which might well have been pursued. No consideration is devoted to the history of anarchism; none is given to the relation of historical to contemporary anarchist theory. There is no stress on the enduring anarchist message for us, nor is there a normative argument on the validity of anarchist propositions about the world. All of these are worthy of study, and there certainly is a need for much more serious writing about the anarchist outlook.

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[1] Some works in English used in this study with which a serious examination of nineteenth century anarchist thought might begin: W. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1946); M. Stirner, *The Ego and His Own* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1912); P. Proudhon, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Freedom House, n.d.) and S. Edwards, ed., *Selected Writings of Pierre Joseph Proudhon* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969) ; A. Herzen, *From the Other Shore* (New York: George Braziller, 1966) ; G. P. Maximoff, ed., *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* (New York: Free Press, 1964); L. Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (Noonday, 1966); P. Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1899), *Mutual Aid* (New York: McClure, 1907), and *Conquest of Bread* (New York: Putnam, 1907) ; also see M. Miller, ed., *P. Kropotkin, Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1970). Some general secondary sources include G. Woodcock, *Anarchism* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962); J. Joll, *The Anarchists* (New York: Universal Publishing Co., 1966); I. L. Horowitz, ed., *The Anarchists* (New York: Dell, 1964); A. Carter, *The Political Theory of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) ; A. Ritter, "Anarchism and Liberal Theory in the Nineteenth Century," paper delivered at the 1970 meeting of the American Political Science Association. More specific secondary sources worth examining include: P. Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); E. H. Carr, *The Romantic Exiles* (New York: F. A. Stokes, 1933); G. Woodcock and I. Avakumovic. *The Anarchist Prince* (New York: Schoken Books, 1971); M. Nomad, *Apostles of Revolution* (New York: Collier Books, 1962); I. Kramnick, "On Anarchism and the Real World," *American Political Science Review*, 66 (March 1972), 114–28; A. Ritter, *The Political Thought of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1969). But all these are only the beginning of a vast literature. These works will be cited hereafter only by author's name, with brief title where necessary.

[2] Paul Goodman may be an exception, but his anarchism, if it is that, is gentler than many current versions. D. Cohn-Bendit has received some publicity, but M. Bookchin is far more enlightening. D. Guerin's *Anarchism* (New York: Montly Review Press, 1970) is a serious work, sympathetic to historical anarchism and enthusiastic about the present. For a survey see D. Apter and J. Joll, *Anarchism Today* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972).

But to accomplish the substantial task of isolating the essence of nineteenth-century, European anarchist thought in the pages that follow is sufficiently difficult, without complicating the enterprise with additional objectives.

I

Our central question is: what was the core of the anarchist tradition in nineteenth-century political thought? This essay argues that nineteenth-century anarchist theorists agreed on (1) a nearly total rejection of the familiar norms and structures, especially the political ones, of their age, and (2) a quest for an existence in a harmonious, "natural" world in which government was a remote memory. But it contends as well that this or any common perspective in anarchist writing is difficult to discern. This is especially true if one undertakes to approach anarchist theory as a coherent, uniform set of concepts and ideals. The main reason that no obvious pattern emerges at first glance is frustratingly simple. Traditional anarchist thinking seems to sweep across so long a spectrum that unities are understandably hard to uncover. Stirner's consuming egoism, Herzen's elegant ambiguities, and Kropotkin's breathless positivism apparently lie far apart. It would not be a facile conclusion to suggest that there was no single anarchist tradition in the last century.

Most commentators, however, have agreed that there was a lowest common denominator in the anti-state impulse of classic anarchism. This view has also been acknowledged by anarchist theoreticians. Godwin and Tolstoy, among others, often identified anarchism as the view which opposed all government.[3] There is, in fact, no question that anarchists did share a general antipathy to what they termed "government," but it is not clear what they meant by that crucial concept. Kropotkin was a pointed exception in his earnest efforts to define his understanding of government carefully, but the general ambiguities in nineteenth-century anarchists' writings about the state do not make it obvious that they all sought to abolish government as we might understand it today. For example, did Godwin really urge people to give up all coercive institutions concerned with regulating public behavior? He and others said they were against "government,"[4] but it may be that the intensely communitarian societies they designed would have performed functions frequently associated with "governments." The question is whether or not the anarchist opposition to "government" amounted to anything particularly significant.

Anarchist writers from Godwin to Bakunin revile the "state" and "government" principally because they see the political world linked with coercions directed against both nature and the will of individual people.[5] These theorists' characteristic image of government was that of a policeman forcing people to violate their natural consciences. Yet many of these same thinkers intended to use concerted social pressure to maintain peaceful solidarity within the anarchist community. The "government" policeman was to disappear, but every individual would become a functional policeman both for himself and others. Kings would be dethroned and their thrones become relics of the past. National Assemblies would be dissolved, and their halls transformed into warehouses. Yet a central function would persist, since intense pressures for "order" would

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[3] There are many examples of this to be found in the anarchist writings cited in note 1, supra; for example, Bakunin, Part II; chaps. 7–9; Tolstoy, chap. 7; Godwin, Book 1, chap. 2: Kropotkin, *Memoirs*, p. 148; and Stirner, pp. 242–75 and 128–52.

[4] Godwin, Book 8, chap. 8, and Book 5, chap. 24.

[5] Exemplified throughout both Godwin and Bakunin.

continue. It may be that most nineteenth-century anarchist theorists, in short, intended social pressure to play a role that turned out to be little different from what government was to classical liberals. It would preserve order. Proudhon for one explicitly advocated "an imposed coercive force." Godwin wanted each citizen to monitor others to see if they were living correctly. Tolstoy publicly indicated his willingness to rely on social pressure; so did Bakunin.[6]

It is true that the anarchists were confident that the realm of free choice would expand exponentially when their ideal societies came into existence. They also did not see how social pressure and community sentiment could ever be confused with the coercive state. For them, formal, political rules were quite different from informal, often spontaneous controls. But the question remains. Did they escape the detested policeman? The concrete experiences of the classic anarchists have never provided us with an answer, since their ideals were never really translated into practice. All we have is their thought, which we know does not adequately answer our query. This lack of substantiation in practice or agreement in theory on the meaning of the elimination of "government" justifies doubting the utility of characterizing anarchism as movement united by its opposition to the state and political coercion. Such a definition is technically descriptive, and it does highlight the anarchist wish to escape the political world of formalized rules and governmental edicts? but it does not enlighten us much further about traditional anarchists.

While some thinkers did not seem to appreciate fully the policing power they sanctioned, this lack of awareness was not universal. Stirner in particular was alert to the possibility of the replacement of government by its functional equivalents. He was steadfast in his insistence that the only governing to be condoned was self-governing. It is only fair to note also that nineteenth-century anarchists from Proudhon and his mutualism to Bakunin in his collective, aspired to social arrangements in which each individual would be a self-regulator within his community. Then he would not need external policing. While this would represent a dramatic break with traditional political categories, it is not clear that this goal would yield meaningful autonomy, rather than a false individualism built upon actual social conformity. Yet their aspirations for autonomy should not be denigrated.[7]

Skepticism about the usefulness of the ordinary definition of historic anarchism does not deny that knowledge of its fierce antagonism to "government" is illuminating about anarchist inclinations in two ways. It is revealing, first, because it dramatizes their radical hostility to the political status quo, an animosity that explodes out of the writings of Stirner and Kropotkin, Bakunin and Tolstoy. It tells us, secondly, that anarchists recoiled from the entire concept of the political. Government was hated because of what it did in its coercive, oppressive manner. But it was loathed as well for what it was, a set of formalized, general rules and regulations imposed on social order. A central anarchist goal was always to escape government and to escape the grip of the political. Anarchist life would abolish them.[8]

The fact remains, however, that even the most mundane definition of the anarchism of the past century may be challenged. There is a legitimate problem concerning the character of the

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[6] Carter, p. 86; Ritter, "Anarchism and Liberal Theory," pp. 11 and 15–16; Ritter, *Proudhon*, chap. 3; Kramnick, p. 118; Tolstoy, pp. 256–60; Bakunin, Part III, chaps. 9, 12, and 13.

[7] Bakunin, Part III, chaps. 13 and 9; Part IV, chaps. 4 and 5; Godwin, Book 8, chap. 8; Tolstoy, pp. 256–60; Woodcock, *Anarchism*, pp. 84–85; Stirner, pp. 275–425; on long-run goal see Herzen, pp. 12, 128, and 135; Proudhon, *General Idea*, pp. 240–47; Tolstoy. pp. 227–28; Bakunin, Part III, chap. 12.

[8] For example, Kropotkin, *Memoirs*, p. 146; Stirner, pp. 127–90; Tolstoy, pp. 124–37; Bakunin, Part II, chaps. 8–9. The antipolitical point is well made by Krammick, passim.

notions of nineteenth-century anarchists. Was their questionable belief that they were united in striving to end "governments" all that demarcated them as unique? Was there nothing else, nothing more profound? We should be hesitant before we conclude that the leading anarchist theorists were merely a diverse group of nineteenth-century Europeans who shared little but a hatred of government as they knew it. This interpretation is possible but perhaps presumptuous even in this revisionist age. Surely there must be more basic reasons for the congregation of men as divergent as the timid Godwin and the revolutionary Bakunin under the label of anarchism.

II

Many other attempts to grasp the essence of the classic anarchist purpose deserve examination. Some have suggested that anarchism is really about anti-authoritarianism. Others have stressed individual autonomy in anarchism, while still others especially note a rejection of coercion. Yet each of these definitions has serious limits, even though each helps to elucidate traditional anarchism.

First, it is sometimes argued that the distinguishing feature of anarchism was an intense distaste for any form of authority.[9] This may describe the general style of both contemporary and past anarchists; but the actual views of the major anarchist theoreticians do not provide evidence for this claim, even apart from arguments about the potentially authoritarian nature of some anarchist ideas about community. The fact is that anarchist thinkers were not against all authority so much as they were against the authority of the state, or political authority. Authority, defined as that to which one owes moral obedience, was never rejected in principle, even when political obligation was. For example, a religious anarchist like Tolstoy believed in the authority of the divine vested in man's conscience. This was a new authority with which he wished to replace the state. Moreover, apart from religious exceptions, other classic anarchists sanctioned the authority of nature, which might take the form of Max S timer's ego or of Peter Kropotkin's instinct for mutual aid; but in every case, it was followed without question.[10]

The anarchists were commonly ethical naturalists who often portrayed themselves, as did Proudhon, as scientific investigators of nature, trying to understand its myriad patterns. Usually, they studied nature in the nineteenth-century positivistic style of science, hopeful that it would yield moral as well as empirical truth. Not one European anarchist felt he searched in vain. Their models of harmony generated by nature differed, but there was always an image that transcended the government-wracked society of the nineteenth century which Tolstoy in Russia or Herzen in France so detested. It is no accident that Kropotkin wrote *Mutual Aid* in answer to Huxley's portrayal of nature as "red in tooth and claw." Nature contained a standard which prescribed what was good. It was neither a standard without value nor one that was hopelessly evil and deeply conflict-ridden.[11]

The classic anarchist ideal, then, did not banish authority. While anarchists undertook to destroy political authority of men over other men, ordinarily they were anxious to establish

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[9] For example, Miller in his introduction to *Kropotkin, Selected Writings*.

[10] Tolstoy, chaps. 1–4; Bakunin, p. 264; Stirner, pp. 482–91; Godwin, Book 1, chap. 5; Herzen, e.g., pp. 69 and 139; Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, chap. 1 and conclusion.

[11] Edwards, ed., *Proudhon, Selected Writings*, pp. 18 and 233; Woodcock, *Anarchist Prince*, pp. 334 and 421; Garter, p. 78.

natural authority.[12] This proper authority was to maintain its proper final dominance solely by individual self-regulation, though we know that the concrete proposals of thinkers like Bakunin sometimes contradicted their ideal.

This emphasis on nature has been bypassed in all the famous stress on self-regulation and on the evil of the "state" in anarchist studies. When one combines these several themes, the resulting picture is a traditional European anarchism which favored a natural authority not created by individual men, while insisting that this authority was to be invoked spontaneously by each person in the utopian society.

One must be careful, however, not to slip immediately into the view that anarchists shared a belief in the possibility or the attractiveness of complete individual autonomy. Nor did they employ a model of isolated, natural man similar to Hobbes' state of nature. Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin in particular vigorously protested that full autonomy for people literally made no sense. There was no such thing as total independence nor had there ever been. Men and women were always interdependent with their fellows, since they were all inescapably social beings. In fact, not one important nineteenth-century anarchist theorist viewed man outside of a nexus of contact with other men; certainly dedicated communitarians like Herzen and Tolstoy never believed this end was either possible or desirable. Even Max Stirner, the famous individualist, was not wedded to a style of life that was devoid of necessary human contacts. Thus, the celebrated division in the history of nineteenth-century European anarchism between the collectivist/communitarian and the individualist anarchists, may be misleading.[13]

Secondary treatments, which inevitably use the common distinction, painting some anarchists like Kropotkin as devoted to group life and identifying others like Stirner with the individual, misdirect us in two ways. First, while the interpretation implies that some anarchists like Godwin and Bakunin were social and others like Stirner or possibly Proudhon were not, in fact all important European anarchist theoreticians were socially oriented. There were not two separate types; there was a spectrum of degrees of social orientation among anarchists. Second, no anarchists, including even the most communitarian, such as Tolstoy, were antagonistic to individual self-direction. Again, it was a matter of emphasis.

My point is that the usual two-fold division obscures as well as enlightens. It is probably overused in part because it has been a convenient device for some commentators on anarchism who wished to emphasize the "truth" of one side or another, something that is less easy to do when the viability of the basic division is dubious. One position isolates the individualist camp as essential anarchism and excludes other dispositions. The other school does the reverse, since it contends that community-minded anarchism is the true distillation of nineteenth-century anarchism. For instance, George Woodcock chooses to separate out individual anarchism and to praise it, while Irving Louis Horowitz lauds the communication/collectivist anarchists and attacks individualist claims to anarchism.[14]

While the conventional two-part categorization of European anarchists is limited, there is no need to abandon it altogether. There are marked divergences among classic anarchist thinkers about the individual, society, and community, even if they do lie along a single spectrum. While Stirner could visualize no human life outside of a societal context, his central concern did remain

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[12] Kropotkin, e.g., *Memoirs*, p. 308; Godwin, Book 7, chap. 8; Tolstoy, chap. 12; Bakunin Part 2, chap. 13.

[13] Bakunin, Part 1, chaps. 17–18; Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, chap. 8; Woodcock, *Anarchism* p. 13; Tolstoy, pp. 379–80; Herzen, pp. 139–40; Godwin, Book 7, chap. 5.

[14] Woodcock, *Anarchism*, chap. 15 and Horowitz, pp. 47–52.

with "the ego" rather than with any collectivity. His writing describes a massive tension between each individual and the society in which he is ensnared. He diagnoses this as a permanent malady. The cessation of this kind of conflict, however, is exactly the Utopia expected by the so-called social anarchists, including Bakunin and Kropotkin. Bakunin's collectives and Kropotkin's societies of mutual aid were specifically designed to transcend disharmony.[15]

In short, anarchist thinkers recognized that the free individual could appear only in a definitely social environment. Yet some dispute occurred over whether society was to be the individual's necessary ally or whether it was to be at best a problematic force. The common distinction rightly points out that Kropotkin and Stirner held views of society which were hardly congruent. But it is wrong if it leads us to conclude that any anarchist was either asocial or anti-individualist.

An examination of nineteenth-century anarchist thought on the subject of coercion reveals more complexity. Some anarchists were genuinely opposed to all forms of coercion, defined as forcing people to act in ways that were not self-willed. Tolstoy's pacifism is justly famous and Godwin filled many pages with his gradualist ethic and his deprecation of anything revolutionary.[16] But this constituted a minority impulse. Many anarchists, including most of our sample, were revolutionaries, and some were distinctly violent revolutionaries. Most acknowledged that force would be used and some wills denied. Bakunin was the most aggressively revolutionary, and he clearly accepted the coercion of violence. Even the skeptical Herzen, however, was reluctantly prepared to resort to revolution. At the same time, it was characteristic of European anarchists to hope for a minimization in the amount of coercion involved in social change. This hope stemmed from their intense commitment to the reduction of restraints on human action. Bakunin hoped that popular, mass revolutions would gradually dissolve coercion; Peter Kropotkin hoped that a natural growing cooperativeness among men would have the same effect. Yet the point remains that they were ready to sanction coercion, particularly on the way to utopia.[17]

The result is more subtle than may be indicated by the apparent paradox of the typical anarchist stance of enthusiasm for an end of strife, juxtaposed with frequent use of violence. There was no blatant contradiction in their thought, or even a confused analysis of the relation between means and ends. The problem had much more to do with anarchist ambivalence. Kropotkin's thought probably reflected the dilemma best. The Russian anarchist was widely renowned for his hatred of force. When "Propagandists of the Deed" began their murderous assassination efforts in the late nineteenth century, however, Kropotkin was unable to condemn the militants. He could appreciate the doctrinal difficulty violence produced for an ideology devoted to free choice. He could also see the tactical error of this particular kind of violence. Yet Kropotkin understood the urges of the men of "the Deed," and felt the lust for the revenge of violent "justice." He was profoundly ambivalent about violence. Violence was evil, but it was often understandable and sometimes necessary. Prince Kropotkin's view was similar to that of much of traditional anarchist theory.[18]

One should also note that many anarchists' decision to sanction coercion meant accepting something different for them than force as it was understood in political societies. Coercion for anarchist purposes was not instituted by impersonal leaders or remote bureaucrats applying formal laws or regulations. It came from people acting as conscious agents of their own choices,

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[15] Stirner. pp. 275–425; Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*.

[16] Tolstoy, chaps. 1–2; Kramnick, pp. 121–23.

[17] Kropotkin, *Memoirs*, pp. 190–91; Bakunin, his approach as he saw it, pp. 374–75, 377, and 379.

[18] Miller in his introduction to Kropotkin, *Selected Writings*, pp. 22–24; Woodcock, *Anarchist Prince*, pp. 375ff.

acting as free and responsible persons. This fact made coercion more palatable for men like Bakunin and Kropotkin. It humanized it.

It is also true that it was a treasured tenet in the anarchist creed that the realization of their utopias would eliminate coercion in human relations. Kropotkin was representative of most anarchist thinkers in his belief that the achievement of the ideal order would constitute the final liberation from coercion. There were exceptions, however, including Stirner and Bakunin. Max Stirner was prepared to employ coercion whenever his vision was violated, no matter how perfect the society. He spurned all notions that suggested compromise of his own individual truth or "ego," even if that meant forcing those who thought differently. Stirner did not evade the costs to others of his devotion to himself. Bakunin was another example, a communitarian anarchist who accepted coercion as well as social pressure in his plans for the best society. If there were persons who would not work or would not get proper education, then Bakunin urged that all steps necessary be taken to ensure compliance. He did not want to jeopardize Utopia because of the recalcitrance of a few.[19]

III

Does our exploration of nineteenth-century anarchist thinking about individualism and coercion direct us to a single, defining pattern? The answer must be that what emerges is a mood permeated by the desire to make every person as free to do as he truly wished, within the constraints of social life and the requirements of nature. This mood suggests that anarchism might be best understood in relation to nineteenth-century laissez-faire liberalism. The enthusiasm of both outlooks for maximum negative liberty and individual development is unmistakable. Perhaps laissez-faire liberal theorists differed only in advocating the preservation of a little "government" because they were a shade less confident of humanity.

The idea that anarchism and classic liberalism were doctrinal cousins has been recognized before and it is under challenge today. One claim is that traditional anarchists and liberals had little in common because anarchists were not convinced of the value primacy of negative freedom and individualism. To give two illustrations, commentators have asserted that negative liberty was not central to Godwin nor to Proudhon. The suggestion is that their goals were centered on more interpersonal, communitarian objectives. Godwin certainly did not have much affection for an individualism that was self-centered, or a freedom that was not in concert with what he considered rational. But his attack in the name of liberty on government, punishment, marriage, and even some forms of cooperation shows his libertarian side. Nor does a study of the maze of Proudhon's sometimes contradictory writings demonstrate conclusively that his main interest was not liberty, while the evidence is good that freedom was a crucial objective of other anarchist theorists, including Bakunin and Kropotkin.[20]

Yet anarchists like Kropotkin were antagonistic to negative conceptions of freedom that gave liberty an antisocial cast. He assailed the American laissez-faire "anarchist," Benjamin Tucker, on precisely this ground. This is why the sounder point may be an insistence that the illuminating

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[19] This acceptance of coercion was definitional for Stirner, since his vision is thoroughly Hobbesian; Bakunin, Part 3, chap. 12.

[20] Ritter, "Anarchism and Liberal Theory," pp. 3–4; Kramnick, passim; Edwards, ed., *Selected Writings of Proudhon*, chap. 6; Miller, ed., *Kropotkin, Selected Writings*, pp. 235 and 262.

division between nineteenth-century liberalism and anarchism was not over vague goals like freedom and individual development, but about the proper context in which these common, if murky, norms could be accomplished.

Anarchists tended to argue that liberty and individualism could be found only in the environment of an equalitarian, non-political community. Nineteenth-century liberals, such as John Bright and Herbert Spencer, were highly skeptical. (1) They did not see the necessity of such a community framework for the maximization of these values. While even the most zealous, Spencerian laissez-faire liberals recognized a social context, they just did not agree that participation in an active community life was mandatory for their goals. Even John Stuart Mill, who believed in the active citizen, expressed the fear in *On Liberty*, for many non-laissez-faire liberals, that free development and many forms of social life were dangerously incompatible. (2) Just as community was not intimately connected with real freedom for many committed liberals of the age, neither was its perfection in equality a necessity for moral autonomy. Some British liberals like Bright could accept political equality, but generally all forms of substantive equality were viewed with suspicion. They could endanger both liberty and individual opportunity. (3) Finally, there was of course no unity on the political realm. For liberals like Mill and Spencer, liberty was highly political and could only occur under law. Anarchists disagreed.[21]

The distaste of anarchist thinkers for laissez-faire liberalism tended to increase over the century, especially because they felt it did not promise "true" freedom. Yet it is misleading to accent this point while ignoring anarchist theoreticians' unity with classic liberals in a desire for negative liberty. Anarchist sympathy for negative freedom was enormous; their writings resound with their demand for it. Max Stirner's radical desire for negative freedom was not a lonely position. Perhaps Alexander Herzen spoke most eloquently for the anarchists in their unceasing quest, but they all expressed their yearnings for freedom from one conventional institution after another. Their complaint was against the "government," the court, the church, and the army. From Godwin in Britain to Bakunin on the continent, they lauded negative liberty over and over. On this matter, their reputation is accurate.[22]

Their search for negative liberty was most extensive in undertaking to place freedom outside of any political context. This goal promised to expand liberty qualitatively. Normal liberty was shielded and limited by political constraints and formal rules. In anarchist society these would be gone, and human beings infinitely freer. But this liberation could occur only in the context of the achievement of their other objective, community. The two goals did not so much conflict as complement each other.

The point was that liberation was a goal which first required freedom from political and other traditions of the past and present; but individual liberation could never take place without a community life of shared purpose. Anarchists denied that community endangered, or was the opposite of, negative liberty. Community and liberation went together, abolishing the old distinction between genuine individualism and vibrant community.

Out of this union would come a new order, in which a person could achieve a heightened liberty, a positive freedom, beyond contemporary human experience. This explains why study of classic anarchist writings does not sustain the claim that no matter how crucial community

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[21] H. Ausubel, *John Bright, Victorian Reformer* (New York: Wiley, 1966) ; H. Spencer, *The Man vs. The State* (London: Watts & Co., 1940); Bakunin, pp. 270–71 and Tolstoy, passim; J. S. Mill, "On Liberty," in *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government* (New York: Dutton, 1951).

[22] Godwin, passim; Bakunin, as an example; Herzen, pp. 4, 11, 127–28, and 132.

was, it was more significant than the liberty anarchists sought. A vigorous case has been made that Proudhon placed community respect over individual liberty, but the evidence to sustain this thesis is mixed. Moreover, no one seems to doubt that, except for Proudhon, the mainstream of anarchism, including Herzen and Kropotkin, wanted to maximize the realm of choice under nature.[23] Liberty is the core anarchist theme.

A fruitful explanation of why anarchism is quite distinct from nineteenth-century liberalism may lie in the fact that anarchists' faith in man's potentiality was more profound than that of even radical liberal democrats, such as Paine or Jefferson. Nineteenth-century anarchist thinkers like Kropotkin are often treated as touchingly (or infuriatingly) naive in this day of cynicism about human behavior. Their affirmations of human potentiality have subjected them to that most dreaded charge of our "practical" age: lack of realism.[24]

While this complaint often serves as no more than a rhetorical cliche for anarchism's opponents, anarchists often did maintain a breathtaking belief in the possibilities of the free individual in an anarchist community. They had a serene assurance about the human personality, liberated from artifices unsanctioned by nature, including most of liberal, nineteenth-century Europe. Separated at last from artificial liberalism, with its legalism, capitalism, and representative government, mankind would reach a life of natural liberty. The enemy was convention, especially political convention. Proudhon's hate for it came out of France of the 1840s, while Kropotkin's is later and more gentle. But the revolt is always there. The alternative promise for man was genuine freedom and fulfillment in cooperation with others. The capacity was present, only real liberty under nature was lacking.[25]

IV

Part of the answer to the question of what distinguished anarchist thinkers, is their revolt against convention, especially political convention. It united them more than opposition to governments, rejection of all authority, resistance to coercion, or agreement about community.

Did their revolt against convention extend beyond present societies to become a protest against any conceivable society? There is, in fact, more than a fragment of such an impulse in the mood of Max Stirner. The nihilist is close to the surface in his case.[26] Yet even he did not choose this path, since he did not suppose society could disappear. Moreover we know already that other anarchists from Godwin to Herzen never dreamt of transcending society. It was necessary and good as long as it was not coterminous with political institutions, laws, and norms which commonly bound people together against the self-conscious will of each person. Nineteenth-century anarchism did not reject society as the basic category in human living, but challenged us instead to contemplate an unconventional society, one of group interaction under individually chosen, shared norms in which man was freely at peace with his fellows under the benevolence of nature.

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[23] Woodcock, *Anarchist Prince*, pp. 280–81 and 216 − 17; Ritter, *The Political Thought*, chaps. 7 and 5; Edwards, ed., *Proudhon, Selected Writings*, pp. 62–63.

[24] Miller, introduction to Kropotkin, *Selected Writings*, p. 43; B. Barber, *Superman and Common Man: Freedom, Anarchy and the Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1971), pp. 21 and 22.

[25] Proudhon, *General Idea*, pp. 13–39 and 100–169; Kropotkin's *Conquest of Bread* outlines how radical his revolt was.

[26] Stirner, pp. 275ff.

The demand for a sweeping metamorphosis from the conventional world went far among anarchist theoreticians. They wanted radical, profound change. Proudhon sought a society of free individuals respecting each other, Tolstoy desired a committed religious community, and Stirner wanted a place for his egoism to roam unfettered. They had diverse goals, but they had a common understanding of the necessity of a radical leap. They were prepared and even eager to undertake a venture that left known human experience behind. Herzen's famous phrase sums up their radical purpose: they wanted to leap to "the other shore."[27]

On the other shore was nature. The classic anarchists accepted nothing they could not call natural, though they saw little around them that was natural. The trouble was not only conventional "governments" or politics; it lay also in a broader variety of existing, authority-bearing institutions, which were not the result of human effort in the cooperative spirit of nature. Their condemnations extended to organized religions, especially by the spiritual anarchist, Leo Tolstoy. They included an assault on schools and social customs of the age exemplified by Godwin in his sometimes savage pages of *The Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. They touched much else as well. But the general point is what is crucial here. Anarchism was a dismissal of ordinary nineteenth-century existence and a yearning for an entirely new order, in which man was naturally free, unlike the tired and repressive world they perceived surrounding them.[28]

The heart of the gap between what they beheld in the present and what the future promised was their vision of the rule of nature. The rediscovery of nature might be immensely difficult to accomplish, but they refused to waver in their hopes, and they constructed their faith on three propositions about nature: the possibility of discerning its truths; that nature was good; and that eventually every soul could know and follow nature.

Anarchists' conviction that nature was largely knowable was the most vital assumption in the writings of Godwin and those of Kropotkin. Everything they aspired to was constructed on this epistemological optimism. That nature was also good was another elemental conviction. They assumed that if something was "natural," it contained virtue. For anarchists, as for so many nineteenth-century thinkers, the "is" of nature was directly translatable into "ought." Neither Bakunin nor Stirner ever questioned nature as the criterion of virtue. They took this principle for granted, and they were not alone. One searches in vain, for example, in Kropotkin to uncover his doubts about nature as a guide. His works overflow with celebrations of nature, oblivious to the possibility of doubt.[29]

To be sure, anarchists did not always define nature in a uniform manner, though they did converge in one negative sense. They insisted that nature could never be confused with pathetic, conventional nineteenth-century Europe. Yet, such a pervasive negation fell short of a positive definition, and beyond the negatives, unity eluded their grasp. Bakunin's vague, cosmic nature and Tolstoy's nature of peasants and soil were hardly identical. Kropotkin and Stirner had even more directly opposed conceptions in mind in egoism and cooperation.[30]

Nor did agreement exist on how to discover natural truth. From Godwin to Prince Kropotkin, there was an endless incantation of reason or empirical science as the method. Yet there were

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[27] Herzen, p. 3; Stirner, pp. 54–85; Tolstoy, chap. 12; Proudhon, *General Idea*, pp. 5–19 and 288–301.

[28] Horowitz, pp. 17–18; Woodcock, p. 228; Bakunin, p. 263; Tolstoy, chap. 3; Godwin, Book 6.

[29] Bakunin, p. 265; Stirner, for whom human nature was nature, pp. 482–90; Godwin, Book 1, chap. 5; Kropotkin, *Memoirs*, chap. 1.

[30] Bakunin, p. 264; the point about Tolstoy is from Woodcock, p. 229. The titles of Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* and Stirner's *The Ego and His Own* tell the story.

also those like Tolstoy who were sure that a nonrational process was the only sufficient guide.[31] Finally, the anarchist thinkers did not agree about whether nature's truth was open to every person immediately. For example, Tolstoy argued that divine nature was still closed to many in his age, though it would not always be so. Kropotkin inclined to the view that nature was a perpetually open book to all who would seriously examine it. Bakunin tended, on the other hand, to share Tolstoy's view.[32] The important insight here is that they were confident that knowledge of nature was attainable in time by all mankind. When humanity grasped nature's wisdom and when they followed it, the good community would have arrived.

All their perspectives on nature included the claim that nature was orderly and the gate to freedom. Kropotkin and even the militant later Bakunin resented the public image of anarchism in the middle and later nineteenth century. They considered this picture of anarchists as wild-eyed men, hating order and loving chaos, completely inaccurate. They appreciated that the image was the inevitable result of the activities of the minority "Propagandists of the Deed," a hostile or frightened public press, and malicious left-wingers of other factions. Of course, this image continues in our time, still serving the cause of rhetoricians of the right and left who ought to know better, even though it has always missed the central thrust of traditional anarchism.[33] Anarchists, in fact, insisted they were completely sympathetic to the objective of orderly social arrangements. In their view, their ideals were more orderly than present, conventional societies replete with crime and strife. Kropotkin wondered how statists could dare to talk self-righteously about order while employing so many laws, punishments, and policemen. These were the outward signs of the absence of order. Godwin and Bakunin especially asked what order could be higher than the order of nature? What society was further from chaos than one based firmly on nature?[34]

Nature guaranteed freedom as well as order. We know anarchist thinking contained considerable sympathy for negative freedom, which it felt would be fully realized within a communitarian framework. These views, however, referred to kinds of liberty short of the highest anarchist ideal of freedom. This purer, ultimate form had a different definition. Anarchists contended that perfect liberty was "absolute submission to the omnipotence of Nature," as Bakunin summed up the common opinion.[35] Positive liberty was the accomplishment of personal union with nature. What Godwin called nature might be separable from Kropotkin's natural laws, but both theorists were inseparable in making man's harmonious union with nature their perpetual objective.[36] Thus perfect freedom for most traditional anarchists was *not merely the absence of statutory law or political authority but unity with the true law and authority of nature.*

We might be tempted to say, consequently, that while anarchists protested against conventional institutional limits on men, they did so more because the limits were not natural than because they restricted free choice. This conclusion that anarchists never meant to assail the principle of limitation itself, while true, misses the anarchists' point. Life in alliance with nature was not a restriction to their freedom, or a denial of their deepest choices. It was, on the con-

[31] Godwin, Book 3, chap. 5; Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*; Tolstoy, pp. 252–60; Bakunin, p. 265 and Part 1, chaps. 3–4.
[32] Tolstoy, pp. 256–58; Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*; Bakunin, pp. 265–66.
[33] Barber, pp. 20 and 29.
[34] Bakunin, Part 3, chap. 1; Godwin, Book 4, chap. 2 and Book 7, chap. 5.
[35] Bakunin, p. 96.
[36] Godwin, Book 1, chap. 5 and Book 6, chap 1; Kropotki*n,* Mutual Aid*, chap. 1.*

trary, an enormously liberating existence. It was the situation of perfect freedom. For liberty and allegiance to the demands of nature were identical.

Our analysis of how great anarchist thinkers like Herzen and Kropotkin represented that anarchist notion of ultimate freedom leads to the curious result that most proponents of classic European anarchism were not philosophical anarchists at all. Modern adherents of philosophical anarchism like Robert Paul Wolff define it as the moral position which maintains that the individual must be his own legislator as well as the sole determiner of his obligations.[37] This program is not congruent with the historical anarchists, for reasons that are both normative and empirical. Herzen, for example, disputed philosophical anarchist propositions as non-empirical. They were not part of the real world of commanding nature. No charge could have been more fatal for philosophical anarchism, given that nature in nineteenth-century anarchist theory was morally and actually sovereign. Kropotkin among others admonished everyone to be her loyal subjects, while classical anarchists as far apart as Stirner and Bakunin had only contempt for the will outside of nature's paths.

Anarchists like Kropotkin argued that philosophical anarchism was also not part of the real world of society. The general norm was that cooperation in society was natural and moral, even at the expense of utter freedom of the will. It followed that the individualistic spontaneity of a completely free self-legislator was not what the majority of anarchist theoreticians endorsed as their prime value. Max Stirner was the exception. But Proudhon shuddered at the error of spontaneity and the timid Godwin had even less enthusiasm.[38]

It is no wonder mainstream anarchists would not have understood critics who portrayed them as contradictory thinkers because they visualized a utopia in which there was to be structure, or favored an anarchist movement that was unmistakably organized. Cooperation, organization, and even some structure were social necessities as well as natural. As long as they were natural and were not pressed down upon the many by a few, they were entirely appropriate. They carried moral import just as individualism did. Theorists like Bakunin and Herzen never gave much thought to any other perspective. When they did, they suggested that structure and organization in an equalitarian mode were entirely consistent with an anarchism sympathetic to community. While philosophical anarchists like Wolff are not automatically antagonistic to community, in the final analysis philosophical anarchism supports absolute freedom for individual decision-making. Traditional anarchist discourse was much more ambivalent. While there are problems with each view, they were not identical, nor should each have to suffer for the alleged fallacies of the other.[39]

Of course, European anarchist theoreticians of the last century with few exceptions did not worry about reconciling their concerns with negative liberty, organized community, and freedom through community life, because they thought that under natural conditions these values would dovetail. Generally, they assumed that community would enhance the reach of individual choice, and they asserted that more and more choice was the only road to the highest moral freedom. As Bakunin put it? men had to choose of their own free will to ascend to the arena of ultimate freedom. Since they could do so, one day they would — an assumption that was a fundamental

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[37] R. P. Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

[38] Bakuin, Part 1, chap. 18 and p. 255; Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, chap. 11; Proudhon, *General Idea*, pp. 215–24; Godwin, Book 2, chap. 2; Tolstoy, e.g., pp. 376 and 117.

[39] As a student of mine, Janet Swislow, pointed out to me.

underpinning of anarchism.[40] It is in this sense that the nineteenth-century anarchists from Godwin to Prince Kropotkin were confident of every person.

There would be obstacles in the future. "Governments" were the most alarming, immediate ones, but they would be overturned. The rest of conventional society, from customs like deference to institutions like the church, would have to be abolished, but anarchists agreed with a surprising confidence that indeed they would be. Proudhon had his doubts and Godwin's enthusiasm waned, but generally they sustained their hopes that they, or men after them, would get to Alexander Herzen's other shore. Nature would not fail them.[41]

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One can see, therefore, that nineteenth-century anarchist theorists did have common perspectives. What joined them together, above all, was a merciless dismissal of the ordinary values and institutions of their epochs, and a yearning for a life of harmony with "nature," in which government would be only an artifact of the past. The sharp contrast of nature and the conventional was their particular theme, and escape from the kingdom of the political to the utopia of communitarian autonomy their special hope.

This perspective on classic anarchism has emerged as a result of a concerted attempt to consider its thought seriously, and to delineate its master aspects. What is needed in a time of revived interest in anarchism is much more analytical and normative assessment of the nineteenth-century legacy. Professor Alan Ritter, who has contributed to the analytical component of this task, has observed correctly that normative and empirical evaluation of nineteenth-century anarchist ends requires attention, particularly the dimensions and effects of social pressure, community, and liberty in an intensely social milieu.[42]

Certainly another area of their thought that needs substantially more investigation is the enduring reliance on nature. At least three questions occur.

1. Is it really possible, or justifiable, for anarchists to collapse the traditional distinction between nature and the specific individual. It may seem doubtful whether this is a satisfactory solution to the enduring intellectual problem in political theory of the relationship between man and nature.

2. It is appropriate to question whether there was any substance to the anarchists' central distinction between nature and convention. One might well explore whether what they damned as conventional was not what is natural to mankind. Despite anarchist expectations, many aspects of society which they identified as merely conventional have survived in robust form.

3. Perhaps more fundamentally, we may wonder whether nineteenth century anarchist thinking, by basing itself on something called nature, built on a foundation that presently may seem much much less likely to warrant epistemological and ontological optimism.

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[40] Bakunin, pp. 156 and 264–66.

[41] Godwin, "Reflections"; Proudhon, *General Idea*, pp. 288–301,

[42] Ritter, "Anarchism and Liberal Theory," p. 20.

In any case, these kinds of queries are more cogent today than many of the ordinary, contemporary polemical assertions made regarding traditional anarchist theory. Denunciations of specific anarchists, implausible assertions that anarchists were more interested in "poetry" than change, blanket claims that anarchists were fifth-rate thinkers, or declarations that these profoundly equalitarian men were aristocrats, are not enlightening, and only divert attention from serious intellectual study.[43] There is no substitute for determined analytical consideration of historical anarchism. It offers the student enormous fascination in return.

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[43] Miller, ed., *Kropotkin, Selected Writings*, pp. 72–73; Barber, pp. 15–16, 35–36, and 25; even Kramnick, op. cit. does not miss an opportunity or two.