

A Schematic Anarchism (Introduction)

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Contents

Archy	6
Anarchy	6
Anarchist	7
Anarchisms	8

The sort of *anarchist synthesis* that I have been exploring entails both more-or-less *individual* engagement with anarchist ideas — the “making anarchism our own” / “making our own anarchism” of the “Constructing Anarchisms” project — and a *social* component, involving encounters between individual constructions, accommodations with anarchist tradition, etc. Had we been able to pursue “Constructing Anarchisms” to its conclusion, we would undoubtedly have had to come to terms with how well- or ill-prepared we are for those sorts of encounters. As it was, we were instead treated to the spectacle of me struggling with a historical version of the same difficulty in “Margins and Problems.”

As long as we are constructing anarchisms for our own use, we can pretty much do what we want with terminology, provided that the uses we make are clarifying for us, in the context of our own specific contexts and commitments. When we turn to the comparison of anarchisms and the translation between them, the demands are obviously different. Our individual anarchisms may exhibit small inconsistencies or they may be almost wholly incommensurable — and our lack of not just a well-developed common language, but often even any kind of *lingua franca*, can make it hard to judge the extent to which they can be brought into conversation with one another. We struggle with this in internal debates and in our attempts to defend anarchism in general against entryism, appropriation and recuperation. It also plays a role in our attempts to determine the limits of the anarchist tradition historically.

There is no question of really simplifying the tasks we face. They are not simple tasks. The diversity of anarchisms is real and, to some extent, irreducible. The establishment of a bridging language would simply provide us with one means of more easily addressing that diversity. Any new account of anarchism constructed for this purpose would have to take its place in the ranks alongside the others.

There are also a variety of reasons why anarchists might not embrace the search for commonalities. Anything resembling a *definitive* account of anarchist ideas seems at odds with the anarchist embrace of pluralism —

“Revolution in perpetuity!—That is our answer to the demand for the Definitive.” —
Proudhon

— and certainly *anarchy* seems to imply some form of *plurality*, perhaps even of *anarchies*. Any *specialized* account raises concerns about elitism — and further complicates the already complicated process of introducing anarchism to the uninitiated.

There are a variety of other practical concerns. Becoming an anarchist is difficult in quite a remarkable number of ways, even if we are just considering the conceptual difficulties of making a good start. I have been struck, however, by how similar the difficulties I still have navigating anarchist ideas, after decades of study, practice and reflection, are to those I faced when I was first exploring. There was perhaps a phase in the middle of my anarchist career when the sorts of distinctions we make among tendencies seemed to provide a sufficient framework for making generalizations about anarchists and forms of anarchism, but very few generalizations of that sort have survived the ongoing process.

Perhaps, however, the similarities in the difficulties we face at quite different stages of engagement with anarchist ideas provide a clue to how we might address this problem of bridging various expressions of anarchism. If, for example, it was possible to point to some set of comparatively naive expectations suggested by the language of *anarchy* and *anarchism*, which also

served the purposes — or could be fairly simply modified to suit the purposes — of explorations informed by much longer and more extensive exposures to anarchist ideas and literature, then we might well have a promising set of tools on our hands. I don't have a lot of sympathy for "plain language" arguments, but what if the simplest, *plainest* approach really could provide us with a shareable understanding of the most basic anarchist ideas, suitable for their comparison and analysis?

That possibility has led me in search of what I have called, in past writings a "plain anarchism." Admittedly, my first attempts to identify such a thing, whatever their conceptual elegance, were not exactly simple. The heart of my in-progress synthetic account of the anarchist tradition, *Our Lost Continent and the Journey Back*, is the idea that largely forgotten elements from early anarchists, chief among them Proudhon's sociology, provide a comparatively *adjectiveless* basis for enriching and connecting all of the various anarchist tendencies. Those elements, however, are indeed still largely forgotten, and are certainly not themselves simple, so the difficulty in introducing anarchism seems destined to persist, however promising this approach seems to be in the long run.

Still, it was one of those largely forgotten elements that ultimately put me on my present course. One of the difficulties of connecting the Proudhonian sociology to the range of existing and possible anarchisms is the fact that Proudhon produced his anarchistic works in a period where the word "anarchism" was virtually unknown. Clearly, *anarchy* was important to him, leading him to declare himself an *anarchist*, "in the strongest sense" or "full force" of the term. "Archy or anarchy," he wrote in 1858, "no middle ground." But readers of his work will quickly notice that he used the language of *anarchy* much more broadly than we might expect from an anarchist. John Beverley Robinson, translator of *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, was apparently so worried about the potential for misunderstanding that he "corrected" Proudhon's use of the term in some places — obscuring, in the process, some potentially important clarifications about the relationship between the various uses of the word.

As clarifications go, of course, Proudhon's remarks about *anarchy* in that text were at least provocative. At one point he referred to "Anarchy, understood in all the senses" — placing that composite at the other end of a series beginning with absolutism — and in another he allowed that "readers may give this word" — *anarchy* — "any meaning they choose." This isn't the place to pursue the analysis of that text too far, but I have to acknowledge that it was the problem posed there — one of conceptualizing *anarchy* in such a way that *any likely meaning* would presumably fill the bill — that put me on the track of the *schematic anarchism* I'm introducing here.

One way to get at what is constant in the widest senses of *anarchy* and *anarchism* is to begin with what is least contestable about the elements of those terms. Etymology is certainly no definitive source of meaning — and few things are more tiresome than the attempt to resolve ideological debates with dictionaries — but if we are going to take inspiration from the interpretive freedom extended by Proudhon to his readers, we don't really have much but the words themselves as references.

For several months now, I have been working back and forth between an "exploded view" of the word *anarchism* and its possible application in a variety of practical contexts, looking for ways in which similarities might be noted between the most naive approaches to the topic and an approach involving as many eclectic details as my own attempt at synthesis, without, in the process, running afoul of the common objections we see expressed by the anarchist partisans of pluralism, plain speech, etc. I've been pleasantly surprised to find that a variety of approaches

seem possible. I have written several different versions of this introductory piece, before settling on what seems like the very simplest form for my *schematic anarchism*.

The most recent and complex version of my “exploded view” is this:

anarchism ↔ ((an + arche)ist)ism)

There’s a lot going on there, but it’s easy enough to break down. All of the affixes involved — *an*, *ist*, *ism* — have a limited number of senses and, in the spirit of pluralism, we’ll find the means to incorporate most of the possibilities.

I am going to continue to limit my analysis to an *anarchy-centered anarchism*, so we could begin to break down the term as *anarchy-ism* — where *-ism* designates an expression or manifestation of that central anarchy. Alternately, we could recognize *anarch-ism* as an action-noun derived from the verb *anarchize*. The two approaches are hardly mutually exclusive. They do, of course, give us a notion of *anarchism* that may seem broad by current standards, but breadth is one of the things that we’ll strive for in constructing this particular account. Prior to the 1870s and the widespread adoption of *anarchism* as a name for movements and ideologies, terms like *mutualism* and *anarchism* were often hard to distinguish from *mutuality* and *anarchy*, so our “plain” account needs at least that much breadth. Having embraced the notion of plural anarchisms, however, and attempting to build from something like first impressions as well, we can probably accommodate most of the senses that the suffix might be expected to express. As I said in a “Constructing Anarchisms” post:

Running down the list of meanings for that suffix *-ism*, we can imagine anarchisms that are characteristic quirks or structural changes, anarchisms that resemble volcanisms, exorcisms, heroisms, witticisms, tropisms, etc.

For those attached to *anarchism* as an ideology or a movement, those possibilities are certainly included among the possible *expressions of anarchy*, provided we can give some description of ideologies and movements in *anarchized* forms.

Anarchist can receive a very similar treatment. The *anarchy-ist* is a proponent or agent of *anarchization* — a producer of *anarchisms*. We can remind ourselves, of course, that Proudhon’s declaration — *je suis anarchiste* — did not necessarily mark out an identity, but could instead have marked an *anarchistic* tendency.

There is a gently partisan move, perhaps, in the order of the terms: (((anarchy)ist)ism). It has made sense for me to situate the *anarchist* agent between the idea of *anarchy* and its expression as *anarchisms*. If someone insisted that, in *their* anarchism, the practice was more or less given by the concept, and the anarchist actor must conform, well, it is a fairly simple matter to compare the roles of three key terms — anarchy, anarchist, anarchism — in the two accounts proposed. For most anarchists, however, I suspect placing the human agent at the center of things, at a certain distance from both abstract ideas and *-isms* will not seem terribly provocative.

With *an-archy*, things get more complicated. The prefix *an-* is privative, suggesting a loss or absence. *Archy* is indeed a part of the anarchist vocabulary, going back as far as the Proudhon quote referenced earlier, but it is certainly not a widely used term. We sometimes argue about the proper etymology for *anarchy*, but what the range of fairly “orthodox” anarchisms suggests is that no very narrow construal of the term will begin to capture the real breadth and diversity of anarchist critiques. For this *schematic anarchism*, I’ve chosen to adopt the use of *arche*, as described by near-anarchist Stephen Pearl Andrews:

Arche is a Greek word (occurring in *mon-archy*, *olig-archy*, *hier-archy*, etc.), which curiously combines, in a subtle unity of meaning, the idea of *origin* or *beginning*, and hence of *elementary principle*, with that of *government* or *rule*.

Again, if we encounter accounts of *anarchism* that depend on narrower definitions of *archy*, they are still likely to fall within the range of possibilities included in this “curious combination.” And maybe that’s enough pulling apart to allow us to quickly pull together some working definitions.

Archy

Interpreting *anarchy* as *an-arche*, and accepting Andrews’ “curious combination,” should help us to recall that anarchists have historically not only proposed to do without oppressive, authoritarian, hierarchical institutions, but also, in many cases, to dispense with the principles that attempt to justify them. That means not only resolving not to rule or be ruled, but also rejecting the domination of fixed ideas, naturalized relations and the whole range of means by which authoritarians attempt to salvage their project by appealing to “the way things are.” When we look at the historical emergence of anarchistic ideas, a key watershed is the shift from theories of “natural government” to theories of *anarchy*. We can certainly point out naturalized sources of authority and hierarchy that were missed by Proudhon and those who came after, but there is at least a conscious effort in those explicitly anarchist works to, as Proudhon put it, “eliminate the absolute.”

Anarchy

If *archy* is largely a matter of the *absolute*, *fixed ideas* and other elements of the status quo so thoroughly naturalized that rejection of them seems like a rejection of the natural order, perhaps it makes sense to say that, in the most general sense:

Anarchy is what happens in the absence of the very things we are led to believe will always be present.

Anarchism has been pursued as *anti-governmentalism*, *anti-statism*, *anti-monopolism*, *anti-authoritarianism*, *anti-absolutism*, *anti-capitalism*, etc. We tend to think of the *an-* in *anarchy* as fundamentally negative, because none of the targets of anarchist critique show any signs of disappearing without a struggle. Anarchists have, from time to time, tried to distinguish between negative and privative programs. Gérard de Lacaze-Duthiers’ *Encyclopédie anarchiste* entry on “Archies,” for example, makes a distinction between *anarchy*, *antarchy* (*anti-archy*) and *autarchy* (understood as self-rule), with anarchist position being defined by the absence of all authority, rather than by the struggle against it. He clarifies:

[A]n-archy does not imply an absolute indifference with regard to the social world: to place oneself outside of authority is to enter into conflict with it. Nevertheless, we can escape the fixed idea of combating it, an idea that ends by engendering slavery, by subordinating us to what we combat, and makes us use the same weapons as the enemy. An-archy is preferable in all respects to ant-archy.

Perhaps we should observe that the embrace of *anarchy* in a fundamentally *archic* society necessarily commits us to a negative project of eliminating archy and a positive project of learning to live with the anarchic alternatives, but these projects are really framed by the privative project of *getting outside, living differently*. What the range of anarchist critiques suggests to us is the range of presumably fixed, fundamental things that we aspire, if we are anarchists “in the full force of the term,” to do without. For present purposes, let’s just anticipate that any attempt to describe the range of anarchisms will have to accommodate the range of negative, positive and privative conceptions, whatever the process of analysis may teach us about the relationships between the various kinds of anarchist projects.

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Allow me to interrupt myself briefly. This play with concepts is, I think, very useful, but we have to be wary about relying too much on it. We’re gambling on the similarities between a naive view of anarchism and insights scattered through the anarchist literature. This summary is ultimately a draft for an introduction to a set of essays that will explore those similarities, framed as a set of reflections on “the present uses of the anarchist past.” Even if the whole exploration is as successful as I have some reason to hope it will be, we are obliged, I think, to periodically underline the ways in which whatever insights are produced must still differ from some sort of anarchist *arche*.

What that means, given what we have said about *archy*, is that *an-archy* is not a *rule* for us, nor is it “nature” or “just the way things are.” Neither is it any particular positive program. The embrace of anarchy itself simply commits us to the search for a particularly sort of radical alternative.

Anarchist

In previous drafts of this work, I have focused on the question of how one *becomes an anarchist* and provided the following account as at least the beginning of an answer:

An individual, having recognized and rejected the *archy (arche)* that structures the social world in which they live, deciding that they want to live differently and relate to others on a radically different basis, becomes an *anarchist* by embracing and internalizing *anarchy*, which they then express through the experimental construction of *anarchisms*.

An increased focus on the complicated aspects of embracing, internalizing and expressing a privative concept obviously raises questions not adequately addressed in this brief account, but the rudiments present seem correct, as far as they go. If we are looking for some kind of litmus test, then it shouldn’t be too hard to distinguish between those who are, however successfully or unsuccessfully, at least grappling with the difficulties from those who, recognizing that things are indeed difficult, have chosen to change the subject without necessarily dropping their claim to the “anarchist” label.

If we’re honest, I think we have to acknowledge that, given the mix of conceptual difficulties and existing conditions, *being an anarchist* is a project at which nearly all of us are going to fail much of the time — sometimes spectacularly, despite our best efforts and intentions. That realization is probably not incompatible with the slightly more reassuring idea that becoming an

anarchist is an ongoing process, involving repeated renegotiations of the terms of our anarchism, in contexts that are constantly changing.

In “The Anarchist Tension,” Alfredo Bonanno has, I think, described this dynamic in a powerful way. Having raised the question of defining anarchism, he notes that “it is necessary to take up the question ‘What is anarchism?’ time and time again.” He then continues:

So anarchists keep asking themselves the same question: What is anarchism? What does it mean to be an anarchist? Why? Because it is not a definition that can be made once and for all, put in a safe and considered a heritage to be tapped little by little. Being an anarchist does not mean one has reached a certainty or said once and for all, ‘There, from now on I hold the truth and as such, at least from the point of view of the idea, I am a privileged person’. Anyone who thinks like this is an anarchist in word alone. Instead the anarchist is someone who really puts themselves in doubt as such, as a person, and asks themselves: What is my life according to what I do and in relation to what I think? What connection do I manage to make each day in everything I do, a way of being an anarchist continually and not come to agreements, make little daily compromises, etc? Anarchism is not a concept that can be locked up in a word like a gravestone. It is not a political theory. It is a way of conceiving life, and life, young or old as we may be, whether we are old people or children, is not something final: it is a stake we must play day after day.

There is a great deal to like about that description, but one thing that we might highlight is that, if we cannot say with certainty what “anarchist practices” will be from day to day and circumstance to circumstance, part of the reason for that is that anarchy — like *life*, with which it is so often identified in anarchist thought — does have a constant, definable character of a particular sort. If, as the saying goes, “only change is permanent” — if anarchy is always characterized, as I have suggested in the past, by “profusion and uncertainty” — that remains a kind of permanence, on the basis of which we can talk about anarchy in positive terms. And that means that there is a story into which we can weave ourselves as *anarchists* as well.

Over the last couple of years, I’ve described *being an anarchist* in terms of “action in the face of uncertainty,” as a “bilge-rat’s gambit,” which may involve sinking the ship that carries and shelters us, etc. I don’t think that there is any getting around the risks involved in the anarchist commitment to another kind of life. If it didn’t seem excessively partisan in a context where I’m trying to be inclusive, I would be inclined to say that “I am an anarchist” rings just a bit hollow if the speaker isn’t committed to kinds of change that they can’t quite “justify.”

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Anarchisms

Given the rest of the framework proposed, the range of *anarchisms* we might recognize is obviously going to be both broad and diverse in kind. As I’ve said, the goal here is modest. It is not a question of reducing the complexities of our analysis in any preemptive way, but simply of proposing some tools that allow the complex analysis to move forward more smoothly. My goal is not so much to say in a few words what *anarchism* is — or what *an anarchism* is — but instead to be able, when confronted with something that is presented as an anarchism, to make a useful

judgment regarding the claim and to note the ways in which a given anarchism might resemble or differ from others with some claim to the label.

What the schematic provides, with its rather extreme simplicity, is a model for analyzing these purported *anarchisms*, which ought to imply and presumably reveal the *anarchy* at their heart, the kind of anarchist who would be their agent and the archy that they hope to dispense with — just as the identification of an *archy* or *anarchy* ought to at least set us on the trail of the kinds of *anarchists* and *anarchisms* it seems to call for.

Among the generalizations that I think we can make about the range of *anarchisms* is that, as expressions of anarchy and anarchist agency, they will necessarily be experimental. There will always be a choice of anarchisms and a need to move beyond our desire to break with the archic status quo to the messy work of sifting through the anarchic alternatives. We can expect that work, I think, to be as subject to reinvention and reconsideration as the ongoing project of being or becoming an anarchist.

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I'm going to leave things there, for now, having already spent more weeks wrestling with the details than was perhaps entirely useful. My goal of establishing a very basic framework, on the basis of which I might pursue the promised “exploratory typography of anarchisms,” seems accomplished — and, while I have enjoyed the extended period of largely solitary reflection and writing, its pleasures have started to pale considerably. For me, the next phase is to return to something like my usual routine of research, translation, reading and reflection — hopefully re-viving some sidelined projects along the way — with the new tools in hand.

In particular, I am interested in assembling a set of more or less “classical” anarchist texts which seem to relate most particularly to the definition and explanation of the key terms that have been the focus here — texts which can then be treated to particular close, focused readings in which these tools are put to the test. My goal is to work through a series of such readings — many of them suggested in the course of constructing this summary — and assemble them as a first installment of the *Our Lost Continent* history / historiography project — setting the terms for “The Journey Back,” which would essentially pick up the dropped threads from “Margins and Problems” and move forward.

In the meantime, however, I hope that others will get some use out of what are at least somewhat unconventional reflections on some basic anarchist concepts.

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