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Wayne Martin Mellinger

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Media Images of Anarchists Distort Our Understanding of

Anarchism

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Media Images of Anarchists Distort Our Understanding of Anarchism

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The only time we hear of anarchists in the popular press is when they have committed acts of violence and destruction. Hence, to many people the word “anarchist” means “bomb-throwing kook” or “terrorist.”

The media present a disparaging stereotype of anarchists as black-clad youth with masks over their unshaven faces, fists raised in the air, typically behaving poorly and probably getting ready to smash some bank’s window. Historical research reveals this cultural representation has roots in the 19th century.

Moreover, anarchy has come to denote the dog-eat-dog chaos that emerges when the State’s forces of social control are absent. “Anarchy” in popular media culture is typically violent street crowds getting away with murder and other forms of destructive lawlessness. So pervasive are these connotations that most would not associate anarchism with any utopian image of a future society that is just, equal and peaceful at all.

Recently, several major newspapers have reported the detention of three “self-described anarchists” in a federal facility near

the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. The three have refused to testify before a grand jury and are suspected of damaging a federal appeals courthouse during the May Day protests in Seattle (Los Angeles Times, Oct.19).

Given our media portrayals of anarchists, one might never suspect that the most frequently cited living scholar in the world is Noam Chomsky, a noted MIT linguist, respected anarchist thinker and tireless social justice activist.

So what is anarchism, and what do anarchists believe?

Anarchism as a term means “no state” or “no rulers,” and anarchists are generally against all organized governments and the power that they have over us. Anarchism is a vision of a future without domination, a critique of hierarchical forms of social organization, and a mode of praxis guiding us on how we are to move forward in the present moment.

Anarchism provides a critique of all forms of domination. While classical Marxism provided many leftist political thinkers with much insight into the machinations of capitalism and class domination, from an anarchist perspective Marxism bought into an acceptance of the ability of the State to serve the needs of a populace.

Moreover, considering the issues of gender inequality, racism, ecological ruin, homophobia, etc., has led many contemporary activists and philosophers to think that, rather than attempting to salvage Marxism, we need a theoretical approach inherently concerned with all forms of oppression.

Anarchism, I believe, can allow us to examine all aspects of modernity, including many that are ignored by other strands of critical social theory. Anarchism questions the very premises of modernity, including our notions of progress, rationality, civilization, democracy, freedom and justice.

Anarchism is not merely a critique of domination in modern society. It provides a vision of what human beings are capable of becoming, how we might organize our lives and how our potential

is squashed by hierarchical social relationships. Anarchism is a vision of a social world in which each person actively participates directly in the decisions that affect their own everyday lives. It is a vision of society without authority.

Seven key ideas of anarchism include:

1. mutual aid — voluntary reciprocal cooperation for mutual benefit;
2. anti-hierarchy — opposed to any system of stratification in which one group has power over another;
3. libertarian — individual liberty, especially freedom of expression and action, is upheld;
4. decentralization — power is dispersed among the populace;
5. consensus decision-making — a method of group decision-making that seeks consent, not necessarily agreement on laws and policies;
6. rejection of the idea that the ends justify the means;
7. direct action — when a group of people take an action which is intended to reveal an existing problem.

Of course, there are many different definitions of these terms and many different varieties of anarchism, and not all would agree with my listing above. We live in times in which there are healthy debates in a lively anarchist political movement.

Anarchist modes of praxis involve “walking the talk.” This means that we cannot achieve liberating and non-hierarchical goals through oppressive and non-consensual forms of organizing. Anarchists, unlike some other radical perspectives, do not simply hope to grab power and force their way of doing things on others.

Anarchism provides a way to move forward through voluntary association, consensus decision-making, decentralized and non-hierarchical organization. “How we get there” is very important! Moreover, there is a carnivalesque, Dionysian and celebratory aspect to much of the contemporary anarchist social movement, in which politics is often infused with performance, poetry and parade.

By all standard indicators of a healthy country, the United States has fallen behind other industrialized nations. To many of us, it is clear that we are on the wrong path. The attempted reforms of the past 30 years have largely been offset by exacerbations in other social ills.

We need a new operating system — a new political economy built upon sustainability, fairness and justice. To me, anarchists are people who have given up on reform and are committed to major transformations in how things work. They have lost faith in the current system and in our ability to salvage it. Anarchists want a New American Dream, one built on social justice, economic democracy and environmental sustainability. Rather than vilifying them, I think we should thank them.

The next time you read or hear about anarchists in the popular media, know that many of these folks are peaceful, progressive activists working hard to bring about a more just social world and that most of them are largely law-abiding. And many of us are pacifists.

— Wayne Mellinger, Ph.D., is a board member of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice and is an active advocate for all those who suffer on the streets. He holds a certificate in alcohol and drug counseling from Santa Barbara City College.