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# ANARCHISM

A Very Short Introduction

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# Chapter 1

## Definitions and ancestors

The word ‘anarchy’ comes from the Greek *anarkhia*, meaning contrary to authority or without a ruler, and was used in a derogatory sense until 1840, when it was adopted by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to describe his political and social ideology. Proudhon argued that organization without government was both possible and desirable. In the evolution of political ideas, anarchism can be seen as an ultimate projection of both liberalism and socialism, and the differing strands of anarchist thought can be related to their emphasis on one or the other of these.

Historically, anarchism arose not only as an explanation of the gulf between the rich and the poor in any community, and of the reason why the poor have been obliged to fight for their share of a common inheritance, but as a radical answer to the question ‘What went wrong?’ that followed the ultimate outcome of the French Revolution. It had ended not only with a reign of terror and the emergence of a newly rich ruling caste, but with a new adored emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte, strutting through his conquered territories.

The anarchists and their precursors were unique on the political Left in affirming that workers and peasants, grasping the chance that arose to bring an end to centuries of exploitation and tyranny, were inevitably betrayed by the new class of politicians, whose first

priority was to re-establish a centralized state power. After every revolutionary uprising, usually won at a heavy cost for ordinary populations, the new rulers had no hesitation in applying violence and terror, a secret police, and a professional army to maintain their control.

For anarchists the state itself is the enemy, and they have applied the same interpretation to the outcome of every revolution of the 19th and 20th centuries. This is not merely because every state keeps a watchful and sometimes punitive eye on its dissidents, but because every state protects the privileges of the powerful.

The mainstream of anarchist propaganda for more than a century has been *anarchist-communism*, which argues that property in land, natural resources, and the means of production should be held in mutual control by local communities, federating for innumerable joint purposes with other communes. It differs from state socialism in opposing the concept of any central authority. Some anarchists prefer to distinguish between anarchist-communism and *collectivist anarchism* in order to stress the obviously desirable freedom of an individual or family to possess the resources needed for living, while not implying the right to own the resources needed by others.

*Anarcho-syndicalism* puts its emphasis on the organized industrial workers who could, through a ‘social general strike’, expropriate the possessors of capital and thus engineer a workers’ take-over of industry and administration.

There are, unsurprisingly, several traditions of *individualist anarchism*, one of them deriving from the ‘conscious egoism’ of the German writer Max Stirner (1806–56), and another from a remarkable series of 19th-century American figures who argued that in protecting our own autonomy and associating with others for common advantages, we are promoting the good of all. These thinkers differed from free-market liberals in their absolute

mistrust of American capitalism, and in their emphasis on mutualism. In the late 20th century the word 'libertarian', which people holding such a viewpoint had previously used as an alternative to the word 'anarchist', was appropriated by a new group of American thinkers, who are discussed in Chapter 7.

*Pacifist anarchism* follows both from the anti-militarism that accompanies rejection of the state, with its ultimate dependence on armed forces, and from the conviction that any morally viable human society depends upon the uncoerced goodwill of its members.

These and other threads of anarchist thought have different emphases. What links them all is their rejection of external authority, whether that of the state, the employer, or the hierarchies of administration and of established institutions like the school and the church. The same is true of more recently emerging varieties of anarchist propaganda, *green anarchism* and *anarcha-feminism*. Like those who believe that animal liberation is an aspect of human liberation, they claim that the only ideology consistent with their aims is anarchism.

It is customary to relate the anarchist tradition to four major thinkers and writers. The first was William Godwin (1756–1836), who in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, published in 1793, set out the anarchist case against government, the law, property, and the institutions of the state. He was the partner of Mary Wollstonecraft and the father of Mary Shelley, and was an heir of both the English tradition of radical nonconformity and of the French *philosophes*. His book brought him instant fame, soon followed by hostility and neglect in the political climate of the early 19th century, but it had an underground life in radical circles until its rediscovery by the anarchist movement in the 1890s.

The second of these pioneers was Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65), the French propagandist who was the first one to call



**1. William Godwin (1756–1836), from the portrait by James Northcote, now in the National Portrait Gallery, London.**

himself an anarchist. He became famous in 1840 by virtue of an essay that declared that ‘Property is Theft’, but he also claimed that ‘Property is Freedom’. He saw no contradiction between these two slogans, since he thought it obvious that the first related to the landowner and capitalist whose ownership derived from conquest or exploitation and was sustained only through the state, its property laws, police, and army; while the second was concerned

with the peasant or artisan family with an obvious natural right to a home, to the land it could cultivate, and to the tools of a trade, but not to ownership or control of the homes, land, or livelihood of others. Proudhon was criticized for being a mere survivor of the world of peasant farmers and small artisans in local communities, but he had a ready response in setting out the principles of successful federation.

The third of the classical anarchist luminaries was the Russian revolutionary Michael Bakunin (1814–76), deservedly famous for his disputes with Marx in the First International in the 1870s, where, for his successors, he predicted with remarkable accuracy the outcome of Marxist dictatorships in the 20th century. ‘Freedom without socialism,’ he said, ‘is privilege and injustice, but socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality.’ His elaborations on this perception are cited in innumerable books published since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and subsequently of the regimes it imposed on its satellites. Typical of Bakunin’s observations was a letter of 1872 in which he remarked:

I believe that Herr Marx is a very serious if not very honest revolutionary, and that he really is in favour of the rebellion of the masses, and I wonder how he manages to overlook the fact that the establishment of a universal dictatorship, collective or individual, a dictatorship which would create the post of a kind of chief engineer of world revolution, ruling and controlling the insurrectionary activity of the masses in all countries, as a machine might be controlled – that the establishment of such a dictatorship would in itself suffice to kill revolution and warp and paralyse all popular movements . . .

The last of these key thinkers was another Russian of aristocratic origin, Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921). His original reputation derived from his work as a geographer, and in a long series of books and pamphlets he sought to give anarchism a scientific basis. *The Conquest of Bread* (1892) was his manual on the



**2. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65), from the painting of *Proudhon and His Children* (1865) by Gustave Courbet.**





**3. Michael Bakunin (1814–76), an early portrait.**

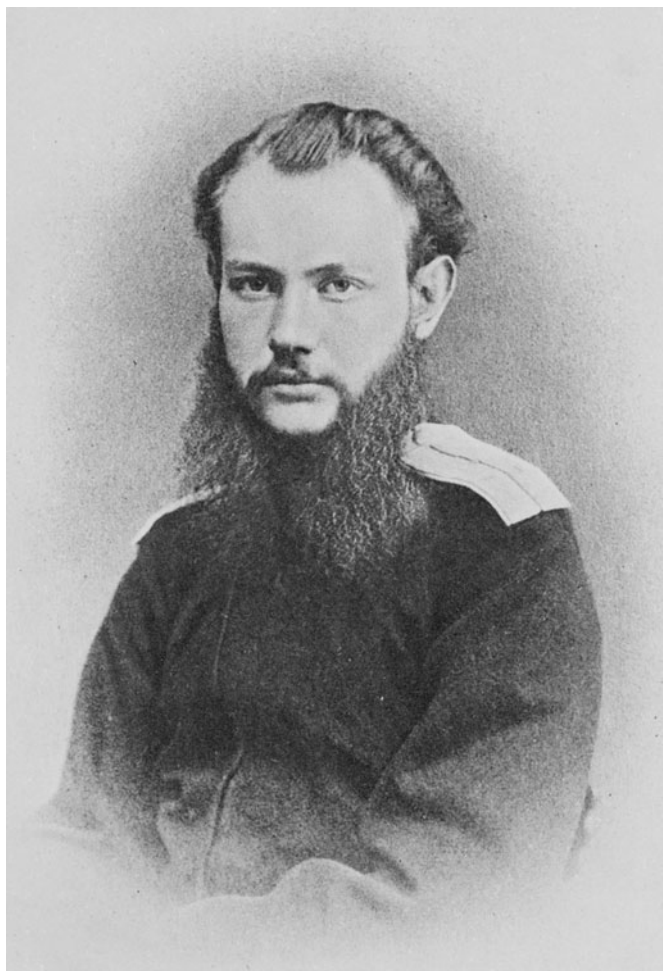
self-organization of a post-revolutionary society. *Mutual Aid* (1902) was written to confront those misinterpretations of Darwinism that justified competitive capitalism, by demonstrating from the observation of animal and human societies that competition within species is far less significant than cooperation as a precondition for survival.

*Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1899) was Kropotkin's treatise on the humanization of work, through the integration of agriculture and industry, of brain work and physical work, and of intellectual and manual education. The most widely read on a global scale of all anarchist authors, he linked anarchism both with subsequent ideas of social ecology and with everyday experience.

Some anarchists would object to the identification of anarchism with its best-known writers. They would point out that everywhere in the world where anarchist ideas have arisen, there is a local activist conspiring to get access to a printing press, aware of the anarchist undercurrent in every uprising of the downtrodden all through history, and full of ideas about the application of anarchist solutions to local issues and dilemmas. They point to the way in which anarchist aspirations can be traced through the slave revolts of the ancient world, the peasant risings of medieval Europe, in the aims of the Diggers in the English Revolution of the 1640s, in the revolutions in France in 1789 and 1848, and the Paris Commune of 1871. In the 20th century, anarchism had a role in the Mexican Revolution of 1911, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and most notably in the revolution in Spain that followed the military uprising that precipitated the civil war in 1936. The part played by the anarchists in these revolutionary situations is described in the following chapter.

In all these revolutions the fate of the anarchists was that of heroic losers. But anarchists do not necessarily fit the stereotype of believers in some ultimate revolution, succeeding where all others had failed, and inaugurating Utopia. The German anarchist Gustav Landauer declared that:

The state is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.



**4. Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) photographed in 1864, the year of his first explorations of unmapped regions of Siberia.**

Moreover, if the anarchists have not changed society in the ways that they hoped were possible, the same is true for the advocates of every other social ideology of the past century, whether socialist or capitalist. But, as I stress in Chapter 8, they have contributed to a long series of small liberations that have lifted a huge load of human misery.

Anarchism has, in fact, an enduring resilience. Every European, North American, Latin American, and Asian society has had its anarchist publicists, journals, circles of adherents, imprisoned activists, and martyrs. Whenever an authoritarian and repressive political regime collapses, the anarchists are there, a minority urging their fellow citizens to absorb the lessons of the sheer horror and irresponsibility of government.

The anarchist press re-emerged in Germany after Hitler, in Italy after Mussolini, in Spain after Franco, in Portugal after Salazar, in Argentina after the generals, and in Russia after 70 years of brutal suppression. For anarchists this is an indication that the ideal of a self-organizing society based on voluntary cooperation rather than upon coercion is irrepressible. It represents, they claim, a universal human aspiration. This is illustrated by the way that people from non-European cultures took Western anarchist ideas and concepts and linked them to traditions and thinkers from their own countries.

Anarchist ideas were brought to Japan by Kotuku Shusui in the very early years of the 20th century. He had read Kropotkin's writings while in prison during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. When released he visited California, making contact with the militant anarcho-syndicalists of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and returned to Japan to publish an anti-militarist journal, *Heimen*. Kotuku claimed that there was always an anarchist undercurrent in Japanese life, deriving from both Buddhism and Taoism. He was one of 12 anarchists executed in 1911, accused of plotting against the Emperor Meiji. All through the first half of the century, a series of

successors continued propaganda and industrial action against militarism, and were suppressed by government, to reappear in a changed climate after the horrors of the Second World War.

Chinese anarchism emerged at much the same time, through the influence of students who had been to Tokyo or to Paris. Those who studied in Japan were influenced by Kotoku Shusui, and stressed the links with a long-established stream in Chinese life. As Peter Marshall explains,

Modern anarchism not only advocated the Taoist rural idyll, but also echoed the peasant longing embedded in Chinese culture for a frugal and egalitarian millennium which had expressed itself in peasant rebellions throughout Chinese history. It further struck a chord with two traditional concepts, *Ta-t'ung*, a legendary golden age of social equality and harmony, and *Ching-t'ien*, a system of communal land tenure.

Those young Chinese who studied in Paris were attracted by the writings of Bakunin and Kropotkin, as well as by Darwinian evolutionary theory. They rejected attempts to link anarchism with Lao Tzu's Taoism and with agrarian history. With the fall of the Manchu dynasty in 1911, both anarchist factions thought that their hour had come. But in fact the revolutionary ideology that slowly triumphed in the turbulent history of 20th-century China was that of the Marxist-Leninists. And as we shall see in Chapter 2, the programmes imposed by force on the Chinese were a dictatorial parody of anarchist aspirations.

Korea, too, has an anarchist tradition linked with 19th-century hopes for peasant communism, but due to 35 years of Japanese occupation fiercely resisted by the anarchists, among other political factions, their reputation is that of patriots in a country where the North is a Marxist dictatorship while the South is a model of American-style capitalism.

In India the history of the first half of the 20th century, and the struggle to end British rule, was dominated by Mohandas K. Gandhi, who built a unique ideology of non-violent resistance and peasant socialism from a series of semi-anarchist sources and linked them with Indian traditions. From Tolstoy he evolved his policy of non-violent resistance, from Thoreau he took his philosophy of civil disobedience, and from a close reading of Kropotkin his programme of decentralized and autonomous village communes linking agriculture with local industry. After independence was achieved, his political successors revered his memory but ignored his ideas. Later in the century Vinoba Bhave's *Sarvodaya* movement sought a non-violent land-based revolution, rejecting the politics of central government.

In Africa, Mbah and Igarewey the authors of a study of the failure of state socialism imposed by governments draw attention to the

seemingly endemic problem of ethnic conflicts across the continent; the continued political and economic marginalization of Africa at the global level; the unspeakable misery of about 90 per cent of Africa's population; and, indeed, the ongoing collapse of the nation state in many parts of Africa.

They argue that:

Given these problems, a return to the 'anarchic elements' in African communalism is virtually inevitable. The goal of a self-managed society born out of the free will of its people and devoid of authoritarian control and regimentation is as attractive as it is feasible in the long run.

The reader may wonder why, if ideas and aspirations similar to those of the anarchists can be traced through so many cultures around the world, the concept is so regularly misunderstood or caricatured. The answer is to be found in a very small episode in anarchist history.

There was a period, a century ago, when a minority of anarchists, like the subsequent minorities of a dozen other political movements, believed that the assassination of monarchs, princes, and presidents would hasten popular revolution. Sad to say, the most deserving victims, Mussolini, Franco, Hitler, or Stalin, were well protected, and in terms of changing the course of history and ridding the world of its tyrants the anarchists were no more successful than most subsequent political assassins. But their legacy has been the cartoonist's stereotype of the anarchist as the cloaked and bearded carrier of a spherical bomb with a smoking fuse, and this has consequently provided yet another obstacle to the serious discussion of anarchist approaches. Meanwhile, modern political terrorism on an indiscriminate scale is the monopoly of governments and is directed at civilian populations, or is the weapon we all associate with religious or nationalist separatism, both of them very far from the aspirations of anarchists.

In the entry for 'Anarchism' that Kropotkin wrote in 1905 for the 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, he began by explaining that it is

the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government – harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements, concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilised being.

Implicit in this definition is the inevitability of compromise, an ordinary aspect of politics which has been found difficult by anarchists, precisely because their ideology precludes the usual routes to political influence.