

THE NATURE OF ANARCHISM

By Carol Ehrlich and Howard J. Ehrlich

Anarchism is a theory of society, a political philosophy, an ethical guide for behavior, and a strategy for social change. Like all theories, parts of it have been tested, parts have never been tested; and parts must be taken on faith. Anarchists accept as a matter of faith, for example, the belief that people are capable of governing themselves.

Politics and Philosophy

The underlying philosophical basis of anarchism consists of a positive and a negative principle. Anarchists are *against* all forms of institutionalized authority (symbolized by "government" or "the State"), and are *for* the freedom of the individual to control her or his life.

On one end of the spectrum, anarcho-capitalists and right-wing Libertarians believe that getting government out of our lives should be sufficient to remove the restraints on our liberties. On the other end, anarcho-communists, sometimes called "libertarian socialists" or "left anarchists," believe that freedom cannot exist without equality. Equality requires the cooperation of individuals; and it is this left, or *social* anarchism, that we are concerned with.

Social anarchism is a theory of social organization based on voluntary association, mutual aid, decision-making by consensus, full participation by everyone, and an end to all power relationships (relationships of domination and subordination). Because it stresses the communal control of the workplace, because it stresses cooperation and not in-

dividual acts, it is a form of socialism. But it is socialism without Marx or Lenin, without centralism ("democratic" or otherwise), without a Party or Party cadre, without a government. Its organizational units are the working/living collective, the neighborhood, the affinity group, the community. These units form, when necessary, into networks across wider geographical areas in order to coordinate responses to issues and necessities such as transportation, defense, environmental issues, economic production and distribution, communications, and so on.

Social anarchism is a political philosophy for activists more than for theorists. Essentially, it is an ethical and practical guide to one's everyday behavior. This gives anarchists a perspective on revolutionary change as a process: a changed society is to be built out of a succession of present actions. One must act today, and not wait until some future revolutionary event. The revolution *is* the organized actions of people. And those actions themselves become the basis of our freedom. Though we can't entirely predict the outcome of our organizing, we can decide what our goals are, and can control the means we employ to try to reach those goals. The principle of the consistency of means and ends is central to anarchist thought and action.

In day-to-day terms, social anarchists employ direct action tactics, are non-violent, and treat everyone (including oneself) with respect. It means that they reject being placed in positions where they can dominate others, and equally that they refuse to assume positions of obedience to others. And it means that they build the sorts of organizational

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forms that are consistent with anarchist principles.

In short, anarchists believe there are both structural and ideological—social and psychological—bases for the existing inequalities (class, race, sex, and so on). Neither one can be reduced to the other. It is essential to work on both forms of social pathology, simultaneously. Do anarchists always succeed in living by this political philosophy? Since no one (not even anarchists) is perfect, of course not. But they do try—and, we hope, learn from both failures and successes—and then try again.

Myths of Anarchy

There are loads of them. A group of terrorists plants a bomb in a railroad station and the media label them as “anarchists.” Recession and inflation worsen and some expert declares the economy to be in a “state of anarchy.” The proposed solutions for these social ills, of course, are inevitably some form of increased central control.

The myths aside, anarchism is not chaos, or destruction, or disorganization or inaction. On the contrary—it requires a high degree of internal organization, continued action towards commonly-agreed upon goals, and a great deal of social responsibility.

Another commonly-heard myth is that in an anarchist community no one would work, and the whole thing would fall

apart. There would be the big rock candy mountain, or the pie in the sky (choose your favorite food metaphor), and everyone would fall greedily to it, neglecting the chores.

More likely, in a genuinely anarchist organization, most people would work more willingly than they do now, because they would be working for themselves. The nature of much of the work in society would change. For example, there wouldn't need to be jobs that exploit others, or terrorize them, or make a killing off them, or tell everyone else what to do. There is a high degree of motivation in knowing that you're doing good work. There's even more satisfaction when you know that you and your comrades will benefit, not the state or some anonymous investor.

People also hear that all anarchists want to reject city life and technology, and go back to the simple life in the country—no electric toothbrushes, no frozen foods, no jet planes. Some people do feel this way—and some of them are anarchists. But other anarchists like living in cities, and want to use and improve technology to help create an anarchist society.

Finally—and the most serious misconception of all—there's the myth that there has never been a successful anarchist group. That's not so. Many groups, and even some societies, have been organized without centralized government, hierarchy, formal authority, or special privilege. That's anarchism, although it is seldom labeled as such. Feminist small

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 1980

Violence and Anarchy Rife in Indian State of Bihar

By MICHAEL T. KAUFMAN
Special to The New York Times

PATNA, India — Ten prisoners awaiting trial here in the state of Bihar have complained in court that they were blinded with acid by their wardens. In coal mines 10-year-old girls pull ore-filled wagons in narrow tunnels. A member of the state Legislative Assembly who has been named in 60 murder cases appears at the assembly hall escorted by five

THE NEW YORK TIMES

40 Iran Legislators Warn of Drift Toward Anarchy

TEHERAN, Iran, Feb. 18 (Reuters) — Forty members of Parliament, am

was addressed to him and published in
be read in open ses

J.S. Foreign Policy

The Road to 'Chaos and Anarchy'

... which is the sole recommen-
The Charter
of an illegal armed attack by Vietnam.
China's action stands on exactly the
same legal footing as the NATO treaty
... American security ar.

Polish Paper Warns Against Anarchy

... 'the Anarchy of Glass Breaking'

By Leon Wynter

Of course there is the understanding
at this is a "disadvantaged" (read,
minority") neighborhood;
"disadvantaged" is a term reminiscent
of more liberal — no, more sympa-
tic era, no longer recent.
too many urban neighborhoods
public spaces (such as the sub-
) ceded by the so-called middle
over the last 10 or 15 years, the
homesteader returns to find
he political, economic and social
systems, taken for granted else-
(by those who the system
without a... the system
... Carter Puri, India, a barbe-
marker outside the village, which is in the state of Haryana.

A Formula for Anarchy at City Hall

THOUGH WE TEND to remember them best as
the people who made marathon ballot counts a
way of life in the District of Columbia, the three
members of the Council on Ethics and
Integrity...

duct of office. With the mayor out, the council cl
man would become acting mayor; if the chair
too, were charged with a conflict of interest and
to step aside, the council would select one of it
large members to serve as chairman. How long
such investigation might take is unclear.

The board's former general counsel, Winfred
Mundle, rightly denounced the rule in a legal opin
prepared shortly before he left that job last mo

... Says Anarchy Spreads

groups, learning networks, working and living collectives, anti-nuke groups, food co-ops—many of these are anarchist in structure, whether or not their members consciously are aware of that, and whether or not they stay that way over time. So are the sorts of spontaneous groupings that form in response to disasters, strikes, revolutionary situations, and emergencies. We read about these quite often, though they are never called “anarchist.” If people in fact *knew* that’s what they had built, they might well try hard to maintain it as such—and even fleeting anarchist formations would last longer than most have. (This points to the need for us to “politicize” those settings—that is, to help people understand the political meaning of what they are doing.)

History

The history of any group can basically be handled two ways: by writing about “notable” figures and important events, or by presenting the everyday lives and work of ordinary people. This is as true for anarchism as for any other movement. We could tell you about important early figures such as Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, Ferrer, Kropotkin, Goldman, Berkman (and more). But we won’t. You should read about them: they were important figures who had much to do with shaping the political developments of their time. But to focus on individuals, particularly in such a small space as this one, creates a kind of “elite” (even if unintentionally) and is thus very anti-anarchist.

Literally, the history of anarchism begins with the first person who opposed the idea that any social group had the right to structure itself so that some of its members dominated other members. According to some writers, the word “anarchist” was first applied to those English and French revolutionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries as an insult. The term was used to suggest that these people wanted chaos and disorder. That stereotype has continued to plague anarchists to this day.

With the continued growth of nation-states in the 19th century, anarchism developed as a self-conscious political philosophy based on the opposition to all forms of government. In the 19th century, anarchism and Marxism both opposed the state (recall Engels’ famous phrase about the need for the state to “wither away”), and also opposed each

other. As early as the 1840s, Marxists and anarchists were in bitter disagreement as to how the dissolution of the state would come about. The disagreement on the best means to the revolutionary end was and is crucial. The issues include disagreement on the need for a “dictatorship of the proletariat”; on the revolutionary nature of the working class; on the necessity of historical stages; on class as the “motor” of revolution; on the need for a leadership elite, on centralism and mass society, among other things. Anarchists do not place faith in any of these. Instead, anarchists believe that the impulse to create societies based on freedom and equality can come from all sectors of society; that the conflicts between authority and freedom transcend “stages.” Power is the root cause of all forms of inequality; and centralism, as an organizational form, leads to differences in power.

These beliefs have made anarchists “enemies of the state,” and the state has responded by systematically harassing and murdering many anarchists. For example, in the U.S. alone, there was the frame-up and execution of anarchists in the Haymarket case of 1886 in Chicago; the mass jailings and deportations after World War I when J. Edgar Hoover, founding director of the FBI, began to build his career; and the Sacco and Vanzetti murders in the late 1920s.

What of anarchism in recent years? Although Marxism has received major praise (or blame) for sparking contemporary revolutionary activity, anarchism’s contributions have gone relatively unnoticed. Like the person who discovered that s/he had been speaking prose all their life, many people have begun to discover that they have been practicing anarchism without knowing it. Much of the New Left of the 1960s and early 70s, the counterculture, the women’s liberation movement, the free school and anti-draft and anti-nuke movements, even “libertarian Marxism” and socialist-feminism, is at its core, anarchist. And just as ethnic historians, feminist historians, and gay historians have spoken of the need to recover their history so that they can know who they are now, so anarchists have to recover their history. The project of the anarchist historian is to help us understand the present and to help us build upon the undercurrents of our anarchist past.

Controversies

There are many ongoing controversies

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Originally both anarchists and Marxists opposed the state.

Motivation in work comes from the benefit it gives to all.

within the left, or social anarchist movement. Some are issues of organizing within the larger society; others reflect problems of living our lives, of carrying out anarchist ideals. We are all, to some extent, products of the stratified society. The "political" and the "personal" blend into each other. Each contains components of the other.

Sexism. Anarchist feminists have criticized male anarchists for carrying over behavior patterns from the larger society, for preaching equality among brother anarchists that does not extend to women. Impressing the truth of this upon many men, and working out ways of correcting it, has often been difficult.

Styles of Living. Should anarchists live collectively, that is, in groups of three or more? Some think so, and argue that single or couple living is wrong because it fosters isolation and exclusivity. Those who disagree—either in principle or because they believe people should live in ways that are emotionally most rewarding for them now—argue that anarchists should not tell other anarchists how they should want to live.

Mutual Aid. How strictly should anarchists share income, property, and other resources now—particularly if the work load is not shared more or less equitably? Is it un-anarchist for someone to have more than someone else? If so, how much more is too much more?

Principles of Group Structure. How do we organize among ourselves to achieve maximum empowerment and cooperation? Some anarchists think that strict rotation of work is essential so that everyone learn skills and no one hoard them. Others argue that those with particular talents and interests should be allowed to pursue them, so long as no rewards of power or status result.

Anarchists try to operate by consensus, but this creates some hard questions for which there are no facile answers. Where is the line between holding fast to one's ideas and blocking consensus? Where is the line between group solidarity and being suppressed by an informal power elite? The arguments aren't so much over the principle of consensus as over the means of implementing it. But the means aren't always clear.

How Do We Organize, and Whom Do We Organize? Some anarchists think it most important to organize ourselves (i.e., groups of already committed anarchists who will then organize others indirectly through education and example).

Others emphasize outreach to non-anarchists, on the grounds that if we can't convert others, we aren't doing our job of changing society. It's a little like the old "mass vs. cadre" organizing debate in marxist circles, but without the built-in hierarchies.

What About Coalitions? Do we ever enter into coalitions with other (non-anarchist) groups? When, and with whom? Related to this question: do we ever support reforms (which by definition are tied into the system) such as rent control, moratoriums on nuclear plant building, affirmative action, ERA, legislation against sterilization abuse, etc? If so, aren't we strengthening the system we oppose? If not, aren't we impossibly purist?

What Is Our Relation To the State? Could an anarchist accept a job from a state agency? Or does it matter since so many employers (and benefits) are state-subsidized? What about grant funds? If we accept such money are we contradicting anarchism's denial of the state? If not, are we passing up a chance to put what the State has expropriated (i.e., our and others' tax money) to good use? And what about taxes? Should they be resisted totally or selectively, privately or publicly?

The Question of Violence. Most social anarchists do not advocate violence. Some believe that it is an inescapable dimension of revolutionary change. The problem for them is how to minimize violence in the process of building a good (and nonviolent) society. Some anarchists believe that we cannot build a good society through violent means. For them, revolutionary nonviolence is the principled way to go. For them, however, the question remains: What is violence? Is it killing people? Yes, of course. But is it blowing up a building with no one in it? Some say yes—since you can't ever be sure it is vacant.

Is bombing a military building the same as burning draft board files? What about cutting down a fence in front of a nuclear plant site? Is that a violent act? Does it become defined as such if you know that act will provoke the police into violence? And what about self-defense? Resisting a rapist? Among anarchists committed to nonviolence, these questions are all matters of some controversy.

The issues and controversies of the anarchist movement are, of course, not unique. They are the issues central to all persons and movements working for

social change. Fundamentally, however, anarchists reject the beliefs that basic change can come about through electoral reform, or that change requires the seizure of state power, or that change requires first the destruction of all existing institutional forms. If social anarchists were to carry a banner, it would doubtless read "We are building the new society in the vacant lots of the old."

Resources

For a start there is the **International Blacklist—An Antiauthoritarian Directory** (719 Ashbury St., San Francisco, CA 94117, \$2.00). It will lead you to all of the major groups, and publishers, and bookstores. Perhaps the most comprehensive and easily available bibliography focusing on American anarchism appears in David DeLeon's, **The American as Anarchist**, (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) pp. 196-235.

There is no current history of anarchist thought, but George Woodcock's 1962 book, **Anarchism—A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements** (Cleveland: Meridian Books) is adequate. **Reinventing Anarchy** is an anthology in which are collected the significant writings of the past 15 years. Edited by Howard J. Ehrlich, Carol Ehrlich, David DeLeon, and Glenda Morris, it contains a major section on anarchist-feminist writings (Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979). A good contemporary manifesto is Colin Ward's **Anarchy in Action** (NY: Harper & Row, 1973).

Much of anarchist writing comes out in small local publications. The **Blacklist** will help you locate those near you. There are a number of national periodicals of outstanding quality. **Black Rose** (Box 1075, Boston, MA 02103); **Soil of Liberty** (Box 7056, Powderhorn Station, Minneapolis, MN 55407); **Social Anarchism** (2743 Maryland Avenue, Baltimore MD 21218); **Fifth Estate** (4403 Second Ave., Detroit, MI 48201); and **Comment** (Box 158, Burlington, VT 05402) are the most stimulating of the anarchist periodicals. Two publications close to an anarchist orientation are the monthly **Off Our Backs** (1724 20th St., NW, Washington, DC 20009), which is the oldest feminist newspaper in the United States, and **WIN Magazine** (326 Livingston St., Brooklyn, NY 11217) which features news, news analysis, and cultural essays.

Soil of Liberty and **Fifth Estate** run a

mail-order service for books and pamphlets of many anarchist writers. **Wooden Shoe Books and Records** (112 S. 20th St., Philadelphia, PA 19103) has an extensive catalog. The **Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review**, published irregularly, is a fine review journal usually containing reprints of inaccessible articles, as well as new essays. All of the mail-order services stock it.

Non-print media include **Pacific Street Film Projects** (22 First St., Brooklyn, NY 11231) and, for audio tapes, **The Great Atlantic Radio Conspiracy** (2603 Talbot Road, Baltimore, MD 21216). Both are award-winning producers; both are attempting to spread anarchist ideas to large audiences.