

George Woodcock

Anarchism

The Encyclopedia of Philosophy

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ANARCHISM, a social philosophy that rejects authoritarian government and maintains that voluntary institutions are best suited to express man's natural social tendencies. Historically the word "anarchist," which derives from the Greek an archos, meaning "no government," appears first to have been used pejoratively to indicate one who denies all law and wishes to promote chaos. It was used in this sense against the Levelers during the English Civil War and during the French Revolution by most parties in criticizing those who stood to the left of them along the political spectrum. The first use of the word as an approbatory description of a positive philosophy appears to have been by Pierre Joseph Proudhon when, in his *Qu'est-ce-que la propriete?* (*What Is Property?*, Paris, 1840), he described himself as an anarchist because he believed that political organization based on authority should be replaced by social and economic organization based on voluntary contractual agreement.

Nevertheless, the two uses of the word have survived together and have caused confusion in discussing anarchism, which to some has appeared a doctrine of destruction and to others a benevolent doctrine based on a faith in the innate goodness of man. There has been further confusion through the association of anarchism with nihilism and terrorism. In fact, anarchism, which is based on faith in natural law and justice, stands at the opposite pole to nihilism, which denies all moral laws. Similarly, there is no necessary connection between anarchism, which is a social philosophy, and terrorism, which is a political means occasionally used by individual anarchists but also by actionists belonging to a wide variety of movements that have nothing in common with anarchism.

Anarchism aims at the utmost possible freedom compatible with social life, in the belief that voluntary cooperation by responsible individuals is not merely more just and equitable but is also, in the long run, more harmonious and ordered in its effects than authoritarian government. Anarchist philosophy has taken many forms, none of which can be defined as an orthodoxy, and its exponents have deliberately cultivated the idea that it is an open and mutable doctrine. However, all its variants combine a criticism of existing governmental societies, a vision of a future libertarian society that might replace them, and a projected way of attaining this society by means outside normal political practice. Anarchism in general rejects the state. It denies the value of democratic procedures because they are based on majority rule and on the delegation of the responsibility that the individual should retain. It criticizes Utopian philosophies because they aim at a static "ideal" society. It inclines toward internationalism and federalism, and, while the views of anarchists on questions of economic organization vary greatly, it may be said that all of them reject what William Godwin called accumulated property.

Attempts have been made by anarchist apologists to trace the origins of their point of view in primitive nongovernmental societies. There has also been a tendency to detect anarchist pioneers among a wide variety of teachers and writers who, for various religious or philosophical reasons, have criticized the institution of government, have rejected political activity, or have placed a great value on individual freedom. In this way such varied ancestors have been found as Lao-Tse, Zeno, Spartacus, Etienne de La Boetie, Thomas Münzer, Rabelais, Fenelon, Diderot, and Swift; anarchist trends have also been detected in many religious groups aiming at a communalistic order, such as the Essenes, the early Christian apostles, the Anabaptists, and the Doukhobors. However, while it is true that some of the central libertarian ideas are to be found in varying degrees among these men and movements, the first forms of anarchism as a developed social philosophy appeared at the beginning of the modern era, when the medieval order had disintegrated, the Reformation had reached its radical, sectarian phase, and the rudimentary forms of modern political and economic organization had begun to appear. In other words, the emergence of the modern state and of capitalism is paralleled by the emergence of the philosophy that, in various forms, has opposed them most fundamentally.

Winstanley. Although Proudhon was the first writer to call himself an anarchist, at least two predecessors outlined systems that contain all the basic elements of anarchism. The first was Gerrard Winstanley (1609-c. 1660), a linen draper who led the small movement of the Diggers during the Commonwealth. Winstanley and his followers protested in the name of a radical Christianity against the economic distress that followed the Civil War and against the inequality that the grandees of the New Model Army seemed intent on preserving. In 1649–1650 the Diggers squatted on stretches of common land in southern England and attempted to set up communities based on work on the land and the sharing of goods. The communities failed, but a series of pamphlets by Winstanley survived, of which *The New Law of Righteousness* (1649) was the most important. Advocating a rational Christianity, Winstanley equated Christ with “the universal liberty” and declared the universally corrupting nature of authority. He saw “an equal privilege to share in the blessing of liberty” and detected an intimate link between the institution of property and the lack of freedom. In the society he sketched, work would be done in common and the products shared equally through a system of open storehouses, without commerce.

Like later libertarian philosophers, Winstanley saw crime as a product of economic inequality and maintained that the people should not put trust in rulers. Rather, they should act for themselves in order to end social injustice, so that the land should become a “common treasury” where free men could live in plenty.

Winstanley died in obscurity and, outside the small and ephemeral group of Diggers, he appears to have wielded no influence, except possibly over the early Quakers.

Godwin. A more elaborate sketch of anarchism, although still without the name, was provided by William Godwin in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). Godwin differed from most later anarchists in preferring to revolutionary action the gradual and, as it seemed to him, more natural process of discussion among men of good will, by which he hoped truth would eventually triumph through its own power. Godwin, who was influenced by the English tradition of Dissent and the French philosophy of the Enlightenment, put forward in a developed form the basic anarchist criticisms of the state, of accumulated property, and of the delegation of authority through democratic procedure. He believed in a “fixed and immutable morality,” manifesting itself through “universal benevolence”; man, he thought, had no right “to act anything but virtue and to utter anything but truth,” and his duty, therefore, was to act toward his fellow men in accordance with natural justice. Justice itself was based on immutable truths; human laws were fallible, and men should use their understandings to determine what is just and should act according to their own reasons rather than in obedience to the authority of “positive institutions,” which always form barriers to enlightened progress. Godwin rejected all established institutions and all social relations that suggested inequality or the power of one man over another, including marriage and even the role of an orchestra conductor. For the present he put his faith in small groups of men seeking truth and justice; for the future, in a society of free individuals organized locally in parishes and linked loosely in a society without frontiers and with the minimum of organization. Every man should take part in the production of necessities and should share his produce with all in need, on the basis of free distribution. Godwin distrusted an excess of political or economic cooperation; on the other hand, he looked forward to a freer intercourse of individuals through the progressive breaking down of social and economic barriers. Here, conceived in the primitive form of a society of free landworkers and artisans, was the first sketch of an anarchist world. The logical completeness of *Political Justice*, and its astonishing anticipation of later libertarian arguments, make it, as Sir Alexander Gray said, “the sum and substance of anarchism.”

Nineteenth-Century European Anarchism

However, despite their similarities to later libertarian philosophies, the systems of Winstanley and Godwin had no perceptible influence on nineteenth-century European anarchism, which was an independent development and which derived mainly from the peculiar fusion of early French socialist thought and German Neo-Hegelianism in the mind of Pierre Joseph Proudhon, the Besancon printer who has been called the father of anarchism. This tradition centered largely on a developing social revolutionary movement that attained mass dimensions in France, Italy, and Spain (where anarchism remained strong until the triumph of Franco in 1939), and to a lesser extent in French-speaking Switzerland, the Ukraine and Latin America. Apart from Proudhon, its main advocates were Michael Bakunin, Prince Peter Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, Sebastien Faure, Gustav Landauer, Elisee Reclus, and Rudolf Rocker, with Max Stirner and Leo Tolstoy on the individualist and pacifist fringes respectively. Also, there arose among nineteenth-century anarchists a mystique that action and even theory should emerge from the people. Libertarian attitudes, particularly in connection with the anarchosyndicalism of France and Spain, were influenced by the rationalization and even romanticization of the experience of social struggle; the writings of Fernand Pelloutier and Georges Sorel in particular emanate from this aspect of the anarchist movement. Nineteenth-century anarchism assumed a number of forms, and the points of variation between them lie in three main areas: the use of violence, the degree of cooperation compatible with individual liberty, and the form of economic organization appropriate to a libertarian society.

Individualist anarchism. Individualist anarchism lies on the extreme and sometimes dubious fringe of the libertarian philosophies since, in seeking to assure the absolute independence of the person, it often seems to negate the social basis of true anarchism. This is particularly the case with Max Stirner, who specifically rejected society as well as the state and reduced organization to a union of egoists based on the mutual respect of “unique” individuals, each standing upon his “might.” French anarchism during the 1890s was particularly inclined toward individualism, which expressed itself partly in a distrust of organization and partly in the actions of terrorists like “Ravachol” and Emile Henry, who alone or in tiny groups carried out assassinations of people over whom they had appointed themselves both judges and executioners. A milder form of individualist anarchism was that advocated by the American libertarian writer Benjamin Tucker (1854–1939), who rejected violence in favor of refusal to obey and who, like all individualists, opposed any form of economic communism. What he asked was

that property should be distributed and equalized so that every man should have control over the product of his labor.

Mutualism. Mutualism, developed by Proudhon, differed from individualist anarchism in its stress on the social element in human behavior. It rejected both political action and revolutionary violence — some of Proudhon's disciples even objected to strikes as a form of coercion — in favor of the reform of society by the peaceful spread of workers' associations, devoted particularly to mutual credit between producers. A recurrent mutualist plan, never fulfilled, was that of the people's bank, which would arrange the exchange of goods on the basis of labor notes. The mutualists recognized that workers' syndicates might be necessary for the functioning of industry and public utilities, but they rejected large-scale collectivization as a danger to liberty and based their economic approach as far as possible on individual possession of the means of production by peasants and small craftsmen united in a framework of exchange and credit arrangements. The mutualists laid great stress on federalist organization from the local commune upward as a substitute for the national state. Mutualism had a wide following among French artisans during the 1860s. Its exponents were fervently internationalist and played a great part in the formation of the International Workingmen's Association in 1864; their influence diminished, however, with the rise of collectivism as an alternative libertarian philosophy.

Collectivism. Collectivism is the form of anarchism associated with Michael Bakunin. The collectivist philosophy was developed by Bakunin from 1864 onward, when he was forming the first international organizations of anarchists, the International Brotherhood and the International Alliance of Social Democracy. It was collectivist anarchism that formed the principal opposition to Marxism in the International Workingmen's Association and thus began the historic rivalry between libertarian and authoritarian views of socialism. Bakunin and the other collectivists agreed with the mutualists in their rejection of the state and of political methods, in their stress on federalism, and in their view that the worker should be rewarded according to his labor. On the other hand, they differed in stressing the need for revolutionary means to bring about the downfall of the state and the establishment of a libertarian society. Most important, they advocated the public ownership and the exploitation through workers' associations of the land and all services and means of production. While in mutualism the individual worker had been the basic unit, in collectivism it was the group of workers; Bakunin specifically rejected individualism of any kind and maintained that anarchism was a social doctrine and must be based on the acceptance of collective responsibilities.

Anarchist communism. Collectivism survived as the dominant anarchist philosophy in Spain until the 1930s; elsewhere it was replaced during the 1870s by the

anarchist communism that was associated particularly with Peter Kropotkin, although it seems likely that Kropotkin was merely the most articulate exponent of a trend that grew out of discussions among anarchist intellectuals in Geneva during the years immediately after the Paris Commune of 1871. Through Kropotkin's literary efforts anarchist communism was much more elaborately worked out than either mutualism or collectivism; in books like *La Conquite du pain* (*The Conquest of Bread*, 1892) and *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1899) Kropotkin elaborated the scheme of a semiutopian decentralized society based on an integration of agriculture and industry, of town life and country life, of education and apprenticeship. Kropotkin also linked his theories closely with current evolutionary theories in the fields of anthropology and biology; anarchism, he suggested in *Mutual Aid* (1902), was the final stage in the development of cooperation as a factor in evolution. Anarchist communism differed from collectivism on only one fundamental point – the way in which the product of labor should be shared. In place of the collectivist and mutualist idea of remuneration according to hours of labor, the anarchist communists proclaimed the slogan "From each according to his means, to each according to his needs" and envisaged open warehouses from which any man could have what he wanted. They reasoned, first, that work was a natural need that men could be expected to fulfill without the threat of want and, second, that where no restriction was placed on available goods, there would be no temptation for any man to take more than he could use. The anarchist communists laid great stress on local communal organization and even on local economic self-sufficiency as a guarantee of independence.

Anarchosyndicalism. Anarchosyndicalism began to develop in the late 1880s, when many anarchists entered the French trade unions, or syndicates, which were just beginning to re-emerge after the period of suppression that followed the Paris Commune. Later, anarchist militants moved into key positions in the Confederation Generale du Travail, founded in 1895, and worked out the theories of anarchosyndicalism. They shifted the basis of anarchism to the syndicates, which they saw as organizations that united the producers in common struggle as well as in common work. The common struggle should take the form of "direct action," primarily in industry, since there the workers could strike most sharply at their closest enemies, the capitalists; the highest form of direct action, the general strike, could end by paralyzing not merely capitalism but also the state.

When the state was paralyzed, the syndicates, which had been the organs of revolt, could be transformed into the basic units of the free society; the workers would take over the factories where they had been employees and would federate by industries. Anarchosyndicalism created a mystique of the working masses that ran counter to individualist trends; and the stress on the producers, as distinct from the consumers, disturbed the anarchist communists, who were haunted by

the vision of massive trade unions ossifying into monolithic institutions. However, in France, Italy, and Spain it was the syndicalist variant that brought anarchism its first and only mass following. The men who elaborated the philosophy of anarchosyndicalism included militants, such as Fernand Pelloutier, Georges Yvetot, and Emile Pouget, who among them created the vision of a movement arising from the genius of the working people. There were also intellectuals outside the movement who drew theoretical conclusions from anarchosyndicalist practice; the most important was Georges Sorel, the author of *Reflexions sur la violence* (*Reflections on Violence*, 1908), who saw the general strike as a saving “social myth” that would maintain society in a state of struggle and, therefore, of health.

Pacifist anarchism. Pacifist anarchism has taken two forms. That of Leo Tolstoy attempted to give rational and concrete form to Christian ethics. Tolstoy rejected all violence; he advocated a moral revolution, its great tactic the refusal to obey. There was much, however, in Tolstoy’s criticisms of contemporary society and his suggestions for the future that paralleled other forms of anarchism. He denounced the state, law, and property; he foresaw cooperative production and distribution according to need.

Later a pacifist trend appeared in the anarchist movement in western Europe; its chief exponent was the Dutch ex-socialist, Domela Nieuwenhuis. It differed from strict Tolstoyism by accepting syndicalist forms of struggle that stopped short of violence, particularly the millenarian general strike for the abolition of war.

Despite their differences, all these forms of anarchism were united not merely in their rejection of the state, of politics, and of accumulated property, but also in certain more elusive attitudes. In its avoidance of partisan organization and political practices, anarchism retained more of the moral element than did other movements of protest. This aspect was shown with particular sharpness in the desire of its exponents for the simplification of life, not merely in the sense of removing the complications of authority, but also in eschewing the perils of wealth and establishing a frugal sufficiency as the basis for life. Progress, in the sense of bringing to all men a steadily rising supply of material goods, has never appealed to the anarchists; indeed, it is doubtful if their philosophy is at all progressive in the ordinary sense. They reject the present, but they reject it in the name of a future of austere liberty that will resurrect the lost virtues of a more natural past, a future in which struggle will not be ended, but merely transformed within the dynamic equilibrium of a society that rejects utopia and knows neither absolutes nor perfections.

The main difference between the anarchists and the socialists, including the Marxists, lies in the fact that while the socialists maintain that the state must be taken over as the first step toward its dissolution, the anarchists argue that,

since power corrupts, any seizure of the existing structure of authority can only lead to its perpetuation. However, anarchosyndicalists regard their unions as the skeleton of a new society growing up within the old.

The problem of reconciling social harmony with complete individual freedom is a recurrent one in anarchist thought. It has been argued that an authoritarian society produces antisocial reactions, which would vanish in freedom. It has also been suggested, by Godwin and Kropotkin particularly, that public opinion will suffice to deter those who abuse their liberty. However, George Orwell has pointed out that the reliance on public opinion as a force replacing overt coercion might lead to a moral tyranny which, having no codified bounds, could in the end prove more oppressive than any system of laws.

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