



The Circle A Crowd: Why I Subscribe to Anarchism

Amberly Jane Timperio

“Disobedience is the true foundation of liberty. The obedient must be slaves.” - Henry David Thoreau

“If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” - Emma Goldman

All forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary. This is the philosophy of anarchy.

For most people, the word brings to mind visions

of chaos, destruction and disorder – an unfocused fear of uncertain forces, however anarchy holds personal liberty in highest regard, unrestricted by man-made law.

Though I am reticent to bandy about with labels, and though Lao-tzu said the way that can be named is not the true way, anarchy seems to me a step in the right direction. Anarchy opposes hierarchical forms of organization, whether they be The State (capitalist or communist), corporations, organized religion, universities, (anything top down), as oppressive, and seeks to foster egalitarian voluntary associations, decentralization, consensus, mutual aid, and the do-it-yourself ethic.

Basically, in order for individuality to develop to the fullest possible extent, anarchists consider it essential to create a society based on liberty, equality and solidarity. Unlike ‘freedom’, which implies no boundaries and ignores obligations to others, liberty takes other

people into account; equality denotes the state of being essentially balanced; and solidarity suggests fellowship that arises from common responsibilities and interests.

The word anarchy comes from the Greek word “anarchos” (prefix **a/an** meaning “not” or “without”, **archos** meaning “a ruler”). So anarchy means ‘the absence of a master, of a sovereign.’ It does not mean disorder and confusion, it does not imply violence and social chaos. Neither does it oppose organization.

Anarchists’ opposition to ‘government’ means opposition to centralized, hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations or government. Anarchists do not oppose self-government through confederations of decentralized, grassroots organizations, so long as these are based on consensus and/or direct democracy, rather than the delegation of power to “representatives.” (While consensus may take more time than voting, voting is not as time-efficient as totalitarianism. What little is gained in efficiency is usually at the cost of

genuine participation and autonomy.)

Anarchists feel that liberty is essential for the fullest development of individuality, and equality is essential for genuine liberty to exist. That is why anarchists do not believe that everyone should be able to “do whatever they like,” because some actions invariably involve the denial of the liberty of others.

There can be no real liberty in a class-stratified, hierarchical society riddled with gross inequalities of power, wealth, and privilege. For in such a society only a few - those at the top of the hierarchy - are relatively free, while the rest of us are semi-slaves. Hence without equality, liberty becomes a mockery - at best the “freedom” to choose one’s master (boss), as under capitalism. Moreover, even the elite under such conditions are not really liberated, because they must live in a stunted society made ugly and barren by the tyranny and alienation of the majority, with a scarcity of “free” individuals with whom to interact.

The word anarchy has been demonized in mass media, but this misrepresentation makes sense – those who profit from the status quo will obviously insist that opposition to the current system cannot work in practice, and that a new form of society will only lead to disintegration. It is in their best interests to do so. No one in power wants to give that power up. It is human nature. Or is it?

Of course, what is considered “human nature” changes in accord with social circumstances. Slavery was considered part of “human nature” and “normal” for thousands of years. War only became part of “human nature” once kings turned up (around 10,000 years ago).

As MIT professor, linguist, anarchist and all-around cool guy Noam Chomsky says:

“Human nature has lots of ways of realizing itself, humans have lots of capacities and

options. Which ones reveal themselves depends to a large extent on the institutional structures ... If we have institutions which make greed the sole property of human beings and encourage pure greed at the expense of other human emotions and commitments, we're going to have a society based on greed, with all that follows. A different society might be organized in such a way that human feelings and emotions of other sorts, say, solidarity, support, sympathy become dominant. Then you'll have different aspects of human nature and personality revealing themselves."

[**Chronicles of Dissent**, pp. 158]

As Chomsky states, environment plays a central role in defining what "human nature" is, how it develops and what aspects of it are expressed. Indeed, one of the greatest myths about anarchism is the idea that anarchists think human nature is inherently good; rather, anarchists think it is inherently social, and therefore how human nature develops and expresses

itself is dependent on the kind of society we live in and create. A hierarchical society will shape people in certain (I believe negative) ways and produce a "human nature" radically different than a decentralized one might. So "*when we hear men [and women] saying that Anarchists imagine men [and women] much better than they really are, we merely wonder how intelligent people can repeat that nonsense. Do we not say continually that the only means of rendering men [and women] less rapacious and egotistic, less ambitious and less slavish at the same time, is to eliminate those conditions which favour the growth of egotism and rapacity, of slavishness and ambition?*"

[Peter Kropotkin, **Act for Yourselves**, p. 83]

As such, the use of "human nature" as an argument against anarchism is ultimately an evasion. It is an excuse not to think. "*Every fool,*" as Emma Goldman put it, "*from king to policemen, from the flatheaded parson to the visionless dabbler in science, presumes to speak authoritatively of human nature. The greater*

the mental charlatan, the more definite his insistence on the wickedness and weakness of human nature. Yet how can any one speak of it to-day, with every soul in prison, with every heart fettered, wounded, and maimed?" Change society, create a better social environment and then we can judge what is a product of our natures and what is the product of an authoritarian system. [**Red Emma Speaks**, p. 73]

When I first studied anthropology, I was riveted by my readings of the Mbuti Pygmies in northern Zaire, the earliest known inhabitants of the Congo Basin. The Pygmies in their original culture are true anarchists, with no chief, but rather shared land and tools, and shared decision making – where the women have just as much say as the men. The San Bushmen, indigenous peoples of the Kalahari Desert, are egalitarian in much the same way – they have no chief, instead reaching decisions by consensus, women are relatively equal, and they possess an economy based on gift exchange (also called reciprocity, whereas instead of purchasing

or trading goods and services, they are simply given freely, with the vague notion that a gift will likewise be bestowed upon you in the future.) Genetic evidence suggests Bushmen are one of the oldest, if not **the** oldest, peoples in the world – a “genetic Adam” according to Spencer Wells, from which all humans can ultimately trace their genetic heritage. [Wells, **The Journey of Man**, p.56] Many Native American tribes also exhibit anarchist leanings, including the Iroquois, who, although they had a clear political structure, lacked the coercive properties to consider it a governing force. Land was used and worked in common - in fact, private ownership of land, homes and cultural items was a foreign concept to them. Additionally, the Iroquois, like many Native American tribes, were matrilineal, women determined kinship, chose and/or dismissed the chiefs, and oversaw the village. The Inuit, indigenous people of the North American Arctic (also called Eskimos), organized themselves in a non-hierarchical fashion, with an emphasis on self-reliance; leadership was never

formal, and no one held the power to enforce their beliefs. Indigenous Australians (also called Aboriginals), the first human inhabitants of the Australian continent and its nearby islands, also demonstrated a state-less society. Other largely anarchist societies include The Icelandic Commonwealth (or Icelandic Free State), which had no king or other central executive power, and lasted for 300 years, ending in 1262 when the King of Norway took control, and the Celtic Irish, who lasted for 1,000 years without a central government, before Oliver Cromwell's conquest c.1650.

For the great majority of its existence the human race has lived in basically anarchic communities, with little or no hierarchy.

And if human nature is so inherently bad, as many claim, then giving some people power over others and hoping this will lead to justice and freedom is hopelessly Utopian.

Anarchists argue that hierarchical organizations

bring out the worst in human nature. While the privileged become corrupted by power, the powerless become servile in heart and mind (luckily the human spirit is such that where there is oppression, there is resistance and, consequently, hope). As such, it seems strange for anarchists to hear non-anarchists justify hierarchy as being necessitated by human nature, when it's hierarchy itself that produces the distortion of human nature being held up as example.

Therefore, anarchists "*do not so much rely on the fact that human nature will change as they do upon the theory that the same nature will act differently under different circumstances.*" [George Barrett, **Objections to Anarchism**, p. 360]

Every example of a government falling and the resulting chaos is used to dismiss anarchism as unrealistic. The media loves to proclaim a country to be falling into "anarchy" whenever there is a disruption in "law and order" and looting takes place. But there is a basic mistake being made here – assuming an anarchist

society without anarchists! An “anarchy” made up of people who still have the need for authority, property and statism would soon become authoritarian again, because *“the strength of the government rests not with itself, but with the people. A great tyrant may be a fool, and not a superman. His strength lies not in himself, but in the superstition of the people who think that it is right to obey him. So long as that superstition exists it is useless for some liberator to cut off the head of tyranny; the people will create another, for they have grown accustomed to rely on something outside themselves.”* [Barrett, p. 355]

I do not think that an anarchistic society can spring up overnight. And to be sure, it would come with its own obstacles and problems. It is a process, not an event. The ins-and-outs of how it would function would evolve over time in accordance with experience and objective circumstances. Maybe, instead of the mono-culture of One Big Movement searching for The Revolution, which ignores the lived experiences of ordinary folks,

we need thousands of smaller revolutions. Who knows what sparks will trigger change on a broader global scale?

Because we live in a society in which virtually all forms of organization are authoritarian, this makes them appear to be the only kind possible. Anarchists are not fatalists or genetic determinists, but believe in free will, which means that people can change the way they do things, including the way they organize society.

And there is no doubt that society needs to be better organized, because presently most of its wealth - which is produced by the majority - and power gets distributed to a small, elite minority at the top of the social pyramid, causing deprivation and suffering for the rest, particularly for those at the bottom.

Many anarchists focus our activity on convincing those subject to oppression and exploitation that they have the power to resist both and, ultimately, can end both by destroying the social institutions that cause

them.

As Bob Black points out:

“You are what you do. If you do boring, stupid, monotonous work, chances are you’ll end up boring, stupid, and monotonous. Work is a much better explanation for the creeping cretinisation all around us than even such significant moronising mechanisms as television and education. People who are regimented all their lives, handed to work from school and bracketed by the family in the beginning and the nursing home in the end, are habituated to hierarchy and psychologically enslaved. Their aptitude for autonomy is so atrophied that their fear of freedom is among their few rationally grounded phobias. Their obedience training at work carries over into the families they start, thus reproducing the system in more ways than one, and into politics, culture and everything else. Once you drain the vitality from people at work, they’ll likely submit to hierarchy and expertise in everything. They’re used to it.” [The

Abolition of Work and other essays, pp. 21-2]

From the moment we are born, humans are forced to conform. We are institutionalized in school, having no control over when or what we learn. We are told what time to eat, to raise our hand to use the bathroom. We are honed into compliant worker bees, ready for the 9-to-5, selling our time for nickels and dimes. We are sold a false reality, plugged into the pretty colored box of distractions, content to be wage-slaves, trading real contact for the perceived bond with American Idol contestants; commercials invading our brain with black holes of want, envisioning freedom as a 10-seater SUV and processed cheese. We are wed to this dream deferred that is America, the criminal in-justice system, the inequality, the distrusting government with prying eyes. We are happy to let the fat cats lick from golden bowls, prancing fancy on our parks plowed under, deluded in the notion that they care about anything other than their own legacies, while we squeeze out

little cogs to replace ourselves in this greased machine.

No, I refuse to subscribe to that. I know this is supposed to be literature, an essay, but I am passionate, and tired of how bamboozled we are. We are not free.

It is assumed that only a select few (the rich), are intelligent enough to govern others. Usually, this elitism is masked by fine, flowing rhetoric about “freedom,” “democracy” and other platitudes used in an attempt to dull people’s critical thought by telling them what they want to hear.

The effects of hierarchy can be seen all around us. It does not work. Hierarchy and authority exist everywhere, in the workplace, at home, in the street. I try to talk to people. Share ideas. My brother says to me, “You know, I’m a simple man. I just want to work, come home, have a nice meal, watch some TV, get laid, go to bed, then get up and do it again.” How can I blame him, or anyone? We have all been conditioned out of thinking for ourselves, told what’s best for us by supposed and self-appointed experts.

When I attended the last anti-war protest at the Pentagon, to mark the anniversary of The American Empire’s war on Iraq, I was marching with some 50 or 60 fellow anarchists, when we diverged from the designated route. Unsure of where we were headed, we pressed on regardless, realizing soon afterward that we had marched onto a small loop road adjoining the main path. No one knew what to do. Should we stay, go back or march on? Even anarchists needed someone to tell them where to go! So insidious is our culture; we have been raised browbeaten, without the ability to question and think critically for ourselves.

So, out of my desire to maximize individual and therefore social freedom, I wish to dismantle all institutions that repress people; I am an anarchist.

I believe in the do-it-yourself ethic, which puts the premium on skill-sharing, as opposed to the skill hoarding so prevalent among ‘experts’. This does require time-consuming encounters, but they create genuine relationships based on friendship and mutual trust.

I believe in a place where time is not bought, sold, or leased and no clock is the final arbiter of our worth. For many people in North America, the problem is not just poverty, but lack of time to do the things that are actually meaningful. This is the consequence of a time-obsessed society, with its scarcity model - the foundation of capitalism.

Capitalism has evolved to be “efficient,” through brutal self-interest and the desire to prosper. The moment something becomes co-opted, owned, and created by corporations, it is out of the hands of ordinary people and is lost. Capitalism teaches us that we are data blips: dots on demographic charts that are born to work, commute, consume, and eventually die. Every fiber of our bodies knows something else exists beyond this depressing cycle and we yearn for real connections with other people and ourselves. Anarchy is not just a political strategy, or a collection of tactics; anarchy is a web of conscious connections.

Capitalism is based upon oppression and exploitation; workers do not govern themselves during the production process, nor have control over the product of their labor, and many times work is exported to countries with less labor regulations, further exploiting the workers to gain a wider profit margin. Anarchists reject the “*notion that men cannot work together unless they have a driving-master to take a percentage of their product*” and think that in an anarchist society “*the real workmen will make their own regulations, decide when and where and how things shall be done.*” By so doing workers would free themselves, “*from the terrible bondage of capitalism.*” [Voltairine de Cleyre, “*Anarchism,*” **Exquisite Rebel**, p. 75 and p. 79] (True anarchists are opposed to **all** economic forms which are based on domination and exploitation, including feudalism, Soviet-style “socialism”, slavery and so on. Capitalism is highlighted here because that is what is dominating the world just now).

A message to the grand tradition of the Left, by whom

I mean Democrats, liberals, and some radicals who would be happy to simply tweak the current system: you don't fool me. Despite alluring promises, you offer only a cuddlier version of the status quo, and in the end are no more liberating than the larger masters (as evidenced by the governments of Western Europe.)

A fatal flaw of the Left is the insatiable desire for mass. This governs not only its decisions, but its very organization. Mass organizations, even in the presentation of themselves to others (whether potential allies or the media), engage in a primitive chest puffing to feign that they are more massive than they are. The Left expends the majority of its resources and time chasing the chimera of mass: more bodies at the protest, more signatories, and more recruits.

Every lonely soul selling a radical paper under the giant shadows of gleaming capitalist billboards and under the gaze of the well-armed cop secretly daydreams of the masses storming the Bastille, the crowds raiding the Winter Palace, or the throngs marching into Havana.

In these fantasies, an insignificant individual becomes magically transformed into a tsunami of historical force. The sacrifice of her individuality seems to be a token price for the chance to be part of something bigger than the forces of oppression.

This dream is nurtured by the majority of the Left, and some anarchists: the metamorphosis of one small, fragile mammal into a giant, unstoppable behemoth.

The dream of mass is kept alive by the traditional iconography of the Left: drawings of large, undifferentiated crowds, bigger-than-life workers representing the growing power of the proletariat, and aerial photographs of legions of protesters filling the streets. These images are often appealing, romantic, and empowering: in short, *good propaganda*.

However, these images are not real – they are no more real, or desirable, than the slick advertisements offered to us by the cynical capitalist system. I marched, along with hundreds of thousands of people in New York City, and millions across the world – and Bush

and his cronies still went to war in Iraq. They don't care how many people are in the streets, they are going to follow their own agenda regardless.

Activists who pursue "efficiency" would have us believe that anarchist principles may be fine for an ideal world or even after the comfortably far off Revolution, but for now they are unpractical, selfish, and dangerous. These activists march smugly under the faded banners of political discipline, efficiency, and sensibility, and are yet ineffective, at least as far as social and political change is concerned. Thirty-odd years of marching around with signs in America has made little progress against the onslaught of capitalist and state power. Maybe it's time to try something different?

Traditionally, anarchists have been critical of the homogeneity that comes with any mass (mass production, mass media, mass destruction), yet many seem powerless to resist the image of the sea of people flooding the streets singing "Solidarity Forever!"

Dreams of usurpation and revolution have been

imprinted on many a vision of past struggles: we have bought a postcard from other times and want to experience it ourselves. If immediate, massive worldwide change is the only yardstick, the efforts of a small collective or affinity group will always appear doomed to fail.

Consumer society fills our heads with slogans such as "bigger is better" and "quantity over quality" and "strength in numbers". It should come as no surprise that the dream of a bigger and better mass movement is so prevalent among radicals of all stripes.

But the desire to achieve mass leads to many dysfunctional behaviors and decisions – like the urge to water down firm beliefs in order to gain popular support, leading to bland, homogeneous campaigns that are the political equivalents of the professionally-printed signs seen at so many protests and rallies, monotonously repeating the dogma of the organizers' message.

The diversity of tactics and messages present in any group must be smoothed out and compromised to focus

an easily digested slogan, or goal. In this nightmare, our message and actions simply become means to increase registration rolls, to fill protest pens, or add signatories on calls to action: all measures of mass.

These numbers are reached at the cost of stifled creativity and compromised goals. Ideas that would repel the media or expand a simple message beyond a slogan or sound-bite (such as “No Blood for Oil” or “Not My President”) are avoided because they might reduce mass. The healthy internal debates, disagreements, and regional variations must be downplayed. Yet these are the very differences that can make any resistance fluid and malleable, leading to adaptations and innovations.

Anarchy has the flexibility to overcome many of the traditional problems of activism by focusing on revolution not as another cause, but as a philosophy of living. By making our daily lives revolutionary, we can destroy the artificial separation between activism and everyday life. Why settle for comrades and fellow activists when we can have friends and lovers?

The downfall of many radicals and liberals, too, is when the larger group becomes our focus, not the work that it was created for. Then what was once a community becomes a movement; friends are replaced with mere allies. Dreams become ideology and revolution becomes work. Healthy debates devolve into popularity contests, ideological shell games, and cults of personality. We should work together, but only with equal status and with no outside force, neither the State, god, nor some coalition, determining the direction or shape of the work we do. Mutual trust allows us to be generous with mutual aid. Trust promotes relationships where bureaucracies, formal procedures, and large meetings promote alienation and atomization.

For anarchists, the idea that individuals should sacrifice themselves for the “group” or “greater good” is nonsensical. Groups are made up of dynamic individuals, and if people think only of what’s best for the group, the group will be a lifeless shell. It is only the dynamics of human interaction within groups which can give them

life. “Groups” cannot think, only individuals can.

The structures of the Left tell us that we must have armies, seize government power, and most of all, be state-like in order to “win.” Why should we let the State set the terms of our resistance anyway? Anarchists can come up with more flexible strategies. Our networks gladly lack a precise platform of principles and unceasing meetings. Instead, anarchists have irregular gatherings, rendezvous for specific projects, multiple skills, solid friendships, and limitless ambitions unconstrained by organizational hierarchies.

A common complaint about creative or militant actions is that they will not play well in the media (using the ever-popular tool of fear); that they will alienate some constituency or another. Calls for conformity, usually in the form of cynical chest-beating for ‘unity’, are powerfully effective tools for censoring passionate resistance from those not beholden to mass politics. What is missing in street demonstrations and in

communities is not unity, but genuine solidarity.

No one knows what The Revolution is going to look like, least of all the doddering, armchair prognosticators, who ignore their own surroundings to contemplate the perfection of the dialectic. It’s easier to ponder the future than it is to do something about the present.

The voices of actual communities are alive in a way no theory could ever be, even if, for now, they take the form of tiny acts of resistance. Who doesn’t cheat on taxes, avoid cops, or skip class or work? These acts themselves may not be revolutionary, but they begin to unravel the control from above. Anarchist approaches must be relevant to everyday experiences. Our networks do not need to have officers, a manifesto, or necessarily even a name. They may not be ageless and permanent, but these models rarely outlive their usefulness, unlike formal parties and other “efficient” organizations which lumber on into irrelevancy.

There is no science of change. Revolution is not scientific. Activists should not be specialists in social

change any more than artists should be experts in self-expression.

I'll tell you a secret. Though anarchists have consciously distanced themselves from the idea of chaos (the circle A means "anarchy is order"), I think the connection between chaos and anarchism should be rethought and embraced, not repressed.

Anarchists should not polish the image of anarchism by erasing chaos. The arrogance of sociologists, economists, and other such experts is clear in their belief that human desire can be measured, ordered, and thus controlled. The attempts to predict and control all possibilities have long been the wet dream of totalitarians and advertising executives worldwide. Since Marx, who fancied himself a "scientist of mass behavior," revolutionary vanguards of all stripes have believed that they have discovered the perfect equation for revolution: a paint-by-numbers approach to social change.

It's no surprise that the sociologists of revolution,

earnest college Marxists, and the anarcho-literati are so enamored with platforms, policies, history, and dry theories. Unfortunately for them, and fortunately for us, chaos refuses to play by any rules.

The real world is messy, feisty, and subject to constant changes beyond the grasp of any human. The world is chaotic and anytime someone believes they can control it, the world finds yet another way to throw them off balance. Chaos is the wild card that allows a small community such as ours to have an impact much greater than expected by the experts.

Rigid hierarchical systems fear chaos and seek to control entropy. Their arrogance is to anarchists' advantage.

The hedged bet of efficient activists is that since freedom is never lived but only discussed, all change must be preplanned and tedious. They fear the chaos of a demonstration, or talk about class struggle without reference to what is revolutionary about the refusal of constraints in daily life. They shiver at the thought that

ideas or the people who hold them might get *out of hand*. For the self-proclaimed experts in social change, the most efficient demonstration is one with a single, clear message, clear audience, and preplanned script ... preferably a script written by them.

A mass mailing might be more efficient than talking to strangers, or setting up a lemonade stand in the park, but it isn't necessarily more effective. There is something to be said for taking the long route from here to there.

Any time humans leave our problems to be fixed by 'experts', we cede a little more of our autonomy. The judges, the professors, the scientists, the politicians, the cops, the bankers: these are all engines of efficiency. In their world, there will always be consumers and consumed, prisoners and captors, debtors and shareholders.

Anarchy is creating your own choices. It is a name, however arbitrary, for an infinite multitude of actions taken to erode the constraints of authority, freeing

ourselves from the dependence on the ravages of capitalism and the murderous intrigues of the State.

Anarchism is not a new concept – it was created in, and by, the struggle of the oppressed for freedom. As long as there have been statist, there have been anarchists. Through the years, threads of anarchist theory were developed by Taoists in ancient China, from about the sixth century BC, and ancient Greek Zeno, the founder of stoic philosophy, who proclaimed the sovereignty of the moral law of the individual around 270 BC.

Although Gerard Winstanley (**The New Law of Righteousness**, 1649) and William Godwin (**Enquiry Concerning Political Justice**, 1793) had begun to articulate the philosophy of anarchism in the 17th and 18th centuries, it was not until the second half of the 19th century that anarchism was constructed as a coherent theory with a systematic, developed program. This work was mainly started by four people - a German, Max Stirner (1806-1856), a Frenchman, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), and two Russians, Michael

Bakunin (1814-1876) and Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921). They took the ideas in common circulation within sections of the working population and expressed them in written form.

I'd like to stress here that anarchist schools of thought are **not** named after individual anarchists. We are **not** "Bakuninists", "Proudhonists" or "Kropotkinists" (to name three possibilities). Anarchists "*follow ideas and not men, and rebel against this habit of embodying a principle in a man.*" [**Errico Malatesta: Life and Ideas**, p. 199]

In the United States, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman were two of the leading anarchist thinkers and activists, both jailed repeatedly for voicing their beliefs. Goldman was a passionate supporter of individual rights; she also placed anarchism at the center of feminist theory and activism. Errico Malatesta spent over 50 years fighting for anarchism across the world, with fellow Italians Luigi Galleani and Luigi Fabbri. Louise Michel practiced militant activities during

the Paris Commune, and in building the anarchist movement in France. In Japan, Hatta Shuzo developed Kropotkin's communist-anarchism in new directions between the world wars. Britian Colin Ward became an anarchist when stationed in Glasgow during the Second World War.

Russian Leo Tolstoy is the most famous writer associated with Christian anarchism and has had the greatest impact in spreading the spiritual and pacifistic ideas associated with this tendency. His nonfiction magnum, **The Kingdom of God is Within You** (1894), details his complete nonviolent stance, his allegiance not to any earthly ruler, but only to God, and condemns the modern church as a heretic creation. (Tolstoy's words would later inspire a young Mahatma Gandhi; his last writing, in fact, was a letter to Gandhi.)

More recently, Noam Chomsky and Murray Bookchin have kept the social anarchist movement at the front of political theory and analysis. Chomsky has written

50+ books, and countless essays criticizing media and politics, including **Profit over People**, **Chronicles of Dissent**, and **Failed States: The Abuse of Power and Assault on Democracy**. Bookchin, before his death last July, authored two dozen books on politics, philosophy, urban affairs, and ecology.

Similarly, anarchistic tendencies and organizations have existed in every major revolution - the New England Town Meetings during the American Revolution, the Parisian “Sections” during the French Revolution, the workers’ councils and factory committees during the Russian Revolution to name just a few examples (See Bookchin’s **The Third Revolution**, a four-volume history of the libertarian impulse in European and American revolutionary movements).

I could go on – there are many more to mention (including other notable libertarian thinkers like Henry David Thoreau, Albert Camus, Aldous Huxley, Lewis Mumford, and Oscar Wilde.) I certainly advocate

additional personal research, but just as important, there are also the thousands of “ordinary” anarchists who have never written books (nor maybe even opened a book by Bakunin or Goldman), but whose common sense and activism have encouraged the spirit of revolt within society. As Kropotkin put it, “*anarchism was born among the people; and it will continue to be full of life and creative power only as long as it remains a thing of the people*” [**Anarchism**, p. 146].

I don’t want to get bogged down in the multiplicities of anarchist philosophy. A brief overview: individualist anarchists focus, as their name suggests, on individual solutions to societal problems; social anarchists (who embrace syndicalism, mutualism, collectivism and/or communism), prefer communal solutions. Syndicalists focus on trade unions, pacifists on non-violence, primitivists on lack of technology, greens on the earth, anarcha-feminists on the role of women, and so on. There is also “anarchism without adjectives,” which,

in the words of historian George Richard Esenwein, refers to “*an unhyphenated form of anarchism, that is, a doctrine without any qualifying labels such as communist, collectivist, mutualist, or individualist. For others, . . . [it] was simply understood as an attitude that tolerated the coexistence of different anarchist schools.*” [**Anarchist Ideology and the Working Class Movement in Spain, 1868-1898**, p. 135]

We are complex and diverse individuals – why would all of our strategies and concerns be the same? The anarchist movement (like life itself) is in a constant state of flux, discussion and thought - as would be expected in a movement that values freedom so highly. The most obvious thing to note about the different types of anarchism is that, “*[n]one are named after some Great Thinker; instead, they are invariably named either after some kind of practice, or, most often, organisational principle . . . Anarchists like to distinguish themselves by what they do, and how they organise themselves to go about doing it.*” [David Graeber, **Fragments of An**

Anarchist Anthropology, p. 5]

Rather than being an expression of some sort of incoherence, the numerous types of anarchism simply show a movement which has its roots in real life rather than the books of long-dead thinkers. It also shows a healthy recognition that people are different, and that different tactics and organizations may be required at different social periods and struggles.

Despite the best attempts of groups searching for a specific, homogeneous, coherent trajectory for the American anarchist community, there is none: it is diverse, flexible, decentralized, chaotic, and adaptable. It spreads simply, as individual social relationships are the foundations for hybrid networks of resistance.

It is naive to think that by proclaiming a platform or points of unity, we can develop trust and solidarity with strangers. There is no singular “anarchism” and there hopefully never will be. The moment anarchy becomes capital A Anarchism, with all the requisite platforms

and narrow historical baggage, it is transformed from the activity of people, into yet another stale ideology for sale on the marketplace.

We don't have to be a mono-culture. Instead, think of anarchy as an ecology of cultures - like microbes in the petri dish or a protest in the streets - demanding and thriving off diversity.

Though it might sound like it, anarchy is no abstract philosophy. Wherever oppressed people stand up for their rights, take action to defend their freedom, practice solidarity and co-operation, fight against oppression, organize themselves without leaders and bosses, the spirit of anarchism lives.

Anarchists are weary of any new orthodoxy, although that is what people raised in the West are trained to desire most: the Next Big Thing, be it an author, TV show, movement, or anything other than what we are doing in our own lives. Because culture can be so fluid, transferable, and mutable, this has worked to our advantage. Instead of anarchy from

above, dictated by media darlings or experts, there are dozens of competing, diverging, and mutating versions of anarchy. This is a fundamentally good development.

Instead of spending time grandstanding at a podium, anarchists, radicals, anyone searching for an alternative, can spend more of our time creating some semblance of anarchist society within the deranged culture we presently live in. These communities of resistance are happening throughout the world through the creation of semi-permanent autonomous zones like infoshops and community gardens, free clinics and organic farms, pirate radio stations, collective houses, and performance spaces. Any time an individual barter goods, trades services, and gets around paying taxes on them, they are fostering their own resistant community.

Current gatherings in Ohio, Nevada, Colorado, Kentucky and Washington spotlight anarchy, and worldwide there are technologically-savvy collectives in South Korea, Bolivian Community Wells, military

resistors in Uganda, and indigenous groups in Bolivia, Brazil and Ecuador. Existent anarchist organizations and initiatives are also active in our communities - Food Not Bombs (going 26 years strong, with hundreds of autonomous chapters throughout the world, sharing free food and protesting war and poverty), Community Supported Agriculture (works to support family farms and develop a sustainable food system), Homes Not Jails (public action advocacy group, who for the past 15 years have occupied vacant buildings, and helped homeless people move in), ACT UP (committed to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights, as well as ending the AIDS crisis), Anti-Racist Action (fighting fascism since 1988), The American Indian Movement (helps to preserve a culture nearly decimated), The Earth Liberation Front (an underground movement with no leadership, membership or official spokesperson), Earth First! (protecting wilderness for 28 years), Copwatch (provides resources to fight police misconduct, and strategies to combat abuse and corruption for the past

17 years), Free Schools (worldwide decentralized skill-sharing communities bolstered by a gift economy), Industrial Workers of the World (also known as Wobblies, a 102-year-old union that promotes worker solidarity in the struggle to overthrow the employing class), the Ithaca Health Fund (a cooperative which helps members pool their resources to reduce health care costs, and offers a free clinic), the Ithaca Dollars program (uses their own currency to spur investment within the community), Reclaim The Streets (resistance collective with a shared ideal of community ownership of public spaces), Anarchist Black Cross (brings attention to the plight of all prisoners), Tenant's Unions (30-year-old program to create housing justice), Free Bins (usually located at infoshops and community centers), as well as other mutual aid and barter-oriented projects like How to Start a Community Kitchen, How to Squat a Building, Confronting the FCC and Defending Your Micropower Station From Being Shut Down, and Child-minding co-ops.

Real people are finding real ways to help our friends and ourselves. We are undermining authority, and seeking freedom from the shackles of oppression.

Historically, anarchists have exerted their independence worldwide. The Paris Commune of 1871, created after France was defeated by Prussia in the Franco-Prussian war, played an important role in the development of both anarchist ideas and the movement – a role echoed by anarchists nearly a century later during the May-June '68 Revolt in France, where anarchists and students seized the Sorbonne, held demonstrations, occupied factories and aided striking workers.

Just before the turn of the century in Europe, mass revolutionary syndicalist unions surged. The libertarian potential (subsequently squashed by Lenin) in the Russian Revolution during the early 20th century, sparked later Italian factory occupations after the end of WWI. The Spanish Revolution in 1936 is a good example of a really large-scale anarchist revolution;

over seven million people, including about two million National Confederation of Labour members, put self-management into practice in the most difficult of circumstances and actually improved both working conditions and output.

French mutineers of the first World War, slave revolts in the New World, the English Diggers, the fiery sailors of frozen Kronstadt, Black Blocs of Seattle, Quebec City and elsewhere, the Seminole Nation, whose existence stretched before the creation of the United States until well after the Civil War - radical communities of leaderless resistance all. The Zapatistas, an armed indigenous rebellion out of Chiapas Mexico, stormed into the front-page of global news on the day of the ratification in 1994 of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Today there are miners rebelling in the Appalachian Mountains, and the nomadic Gypsies, who lacking any semblance of economic, military or political power, have resisted assimilation for more than 600 years.

I don't kid myself. I know that anarchy is hard work, critical thinking is hard work, and so is mutual aid and resistance. People don't want to know their neighbor, let alone help them; most consider it a burden to think for themselves. But I consider the struggle for freedom as infinitely better than the peace of slavery. Even Benjamin Franklin said, "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

Unfortunately, the majority of human beings fear real freedom, and indeed, do not know what to do with it. Hence the prerequisite of an anarchist revolution is a period of consciousness-raising in which people gradually become aware of submissive/authoritarian traits within themselves, see how those traits are reproduced by conditioning, and understand how they can be mitigated or eliminated through new forms of culture, particularly new child-rearing and educational methods.

Anarchists are often aligned with violence in popular

thought, a direct result of the fact that media coverage of anti-globalization demonstrations firmly connect anarchism with violence, even though the protesters have been the ones to suffer the greatest violence at the hands of the state. As anarchist activist Starhawk notes, "*If breaking windows and fighting back when the cops attack is 'violence,' then give me a new word, a word a thousand times stronger, to use when the cops are beating non-resisting people into comas.*" [**Staying on the Streets**, p. 130] There were instances of police brutality and violence against peaceful protests, notably at May Day/Immigration Rights rallies at MacArthur Park in LA (*Washington Post*, May 8, 2007; Page A08). At the 2004 Republican National Convention, I saw first-hand abuse by police officers, when I witnessed a cop on horseback baton a man carrying a child on his shoulders. In 2001, demonstrators at the G8 summit in Genoa, Italy were targeted by police, leaving one man, Carlo Giuliani, 23, dead from gunfire, and more than 100 others wounded (*CNN*, July 21, 2001). In

1999, there were numerous reports of police brutality and injuries following a protest of the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle. (*The Seattle Times*, December 12, 1999). Not to mention The Haymarket Riot in 1886 in Chicago (the origin of May Day), in which seven people fighting for an 8-hour work day were blamed for the death of a policeman, and with no evidence were sentenced to death by hanging (chicagohistory.org).

This does not mean that anarchists have not committed acts of violence. They have, as have members of numerous other political and religious movements. Historically, anarchists have destroyed machinery, and engaged in arson against factories, while some people, at least calling themselves anarchists, have assassinated primary political and business figures, including Tsar Alexander II in 1881, King Umberto of Italy in 1900, and President William McKinley a year later, (during a roughly 20-year period starting in 1880, in which this violence was characterized by anarchists

as “propaganda by the deed”).

“*The State’s behaviour is violence,*” points out Max Stirner, “*and it calls its violence ‘law’; that of the individual, ‘crime.’*” [**The Ego and Its Own**, p. 197] Little wonder, then, that anarchist violence is condemned, but the repression and violence that provoked it is ignored and forgotten.

Anarchists recognize that there are important differences between the violence of the oppressor and the violence of the oppressed. If you cage people in like animals and artificially constrain their options, violent insurrection and revolt begin to look attractive. When people feel their voices aren’t heard, they often aim to make sure their fists are felt. They desire to destroy the establishment – this is, of course, a reaction to the violence and oppression placed upon them by established institutions.

Anarchists are **not** against individuals, but the institutions and social relationships that cause certain

individuals to have power over others. Therefore the anarchist revolution is about destroying structures, not people. As Bakunin pointed out, *“we wish not to kill persons, but to abolish status and its perquisites”* and anarchism *“does not mean the death of the individuals who make up the bourgeoisie, but the death of the bourgeoisie as a political and social entity economically distinct from the working class.”* [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 71 and p. 70]

Anarchists tend to be skeptics, and not believers. Bakunin expressed this radical skepticism as so: *“No theory, no ready-made system, no book that has ever been written will save the world. I cleave to no system. I am a true seeker.”*

Most anarchists consider the Church to be steeped in hypocrisy and the Bible a work of fiction, riddled with contradictions, absurdities and horrors. It is notorious in its debasement of women and its sexism; humans are sinners who should be obedient slaves.

That said, anarchists do not deny that religions contain important ethical ideas or truths, and that they can be the base for strong and loving communities. They can offer a sanctuary from the alienation and oppression of everyday life and offer a guide to action in a world where everything is for sale. Many aspects of Jesus’ or Buddha’s life and teachings, notably the Golden Rule, are inspiring.

Anarchists seek a society in which people interact in ways which enhance the liberty of all rather than crush the liberty (and so potential) of the many for the benefit of a few. Anarchists do not want to give others power over themselves, the power to tell them what to do under the threat of punishment if they do not obey. Perhaps non-anarchists, rather than be puzzled why anarchists are anarchists, would be better off asking what it says about themselves that they feel this attitude needs any sort of explanation.

Leaders are neither necessary nor desirable. I reject

the idea that power and domination are necessary for society. Anarchy is a philosophy against coercive authority, against any inequality of power or privileges between individuals. I am a fanatic lover of freedom and liberty, and because humans are thinking creatures, to deny them liberty is to deny them the opportunity to think for themselves, which is to deny their very existence as humans.

Society, while shaping all individuals, is also created by them, through their actions, thoughts, and ideals. Challenging institutions that limit one's freedom is mentally liberating, as it sets in motion the process of questioning authoritarian relationships in general. We should not forget that capitalist and State power, to a great extent, is power over the minds of those subject (backed up with sizable force). As long as this holds, humans will acquiesce to authority, oppression and exploitation as the normal condition of life.

As Bertrand Russell noted, the anarchist *“does not*

wish to abolish government in the sense of collective decisions: what he does wish to abolish is the system by which a decision is enforced upon those who oppose it.” [**Roads to Freedom**, p. 85]

One of the challenges I, and others, face as anarchists, is to transform a society of passive consumers into active and creative participants in their own futures. There is no single vision of the future. There are no easy-to-digest definitions or pithy 10 steps to liberation. As children of the Empire, do we fight among ourselves for the scraps, or do we mutiny against our mad captains?

As I've said, there is no secret for revolution, no master theory. Revolution is absurdly simple. Go out and meet folks who are just as passionate as you are - and if they don't realize it, help them along the way. Combine forces, scheme, and make plans. Then do it. The power of the old system will eventually collapse like the house of tattered cards that it is.

In the words of Max Stirner, *“the great are great*

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only because we are on our knees. Let us rise.”

In conclusion, I'd like to say this: Anarchists have big hearts and big dreams. Anarchy is not a religion and it is not merely an ideology or brand of politics; it is a living, evolving ecology of resistance. It is simply a promise we made to ourselves, the most meaningful path between ourselves and freedom.

Some people will try to dissuade us, pointing out these are not revolutionary times. There is no such thing as revolutionary times. Time does not rule us: we create the times, revolutionary or not. Whenever we break free from our chains of routine and hierarchy, the times are revolutionary.

