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Anarchism: Principles

Anarchism continues to produce at the beginning of the twenty-first century the passionate opposition it aroused at the end of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries when it became irretrievably associated with bomb-throwing and violence, a violence that has re-erupted in recent years with the widely publicized activities of self-professed anarchists in the anti-globalization or anti-capitalism movement and similar campaigns.

Yet anarchism - or left libertarianism, if one requires a less emotive term – is a long-established political position and ideology, associated with a substantial body of necessary, radical thought.

The anarchist tradition is characterized by such concepts and practices as autonomy, both individual and communal; mutual aid, or co-operation; organization from the bottom up; opposition to hierarchy; direct democracy or, at the very least, participatory democracy; federation; self-management; decentralization; anti-statism; anti-parliamentarianism; spontaneity; resistance to war; and increasingly, although with deep roots in the tradition, sustainability and ecology.

Anarchism is notorious for its diversity. Its accepted varieties range from the egoism of Max Stirner, through the individualism of Americans such as Benjamin Tucker and the mutualism of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, both of which accepted the institution of private property, to the collectivism of Michael Bakunin, communism of Peter Kropotkin and revolutionary trade unionism of the syndicalists. What connects almost all of these into a coherent political stance is unremitting hostility to the state and parliamentarianism, employment of direct action as the means of attaining desired goals, and organization through co-operative associations, built and federated from the bottom upwards. Of these it is the first that is entirely distinctive to anarchism. The state is rejected not just as integral to the current order but crucially as the means to any desirable transformation. Organization, it must be insisted against popular misconceptions, is not necessarily rejected by anarchists, whose concern is for their organizations to be fully democratic and built so as to withstand to the maximum the inevitable tendency to bureaucratization, the process in which, as it has been explained, a group seeks 'to manage from the outside the activities of others'.

For a century and a half anarchists have been overwhelmingly socialist, despite the concurrent existence of small numbers of individualists in Europe and the United States. A fruitful approach to understanding anarchism is to recognize its thoroughly socialist critique of capitalism, while emphasizing that this has been combined with a liberal critique of socialism, anarchists being united with liberals in their advocacy of autonomous associations and the freedom of the individual and even exceeding them in their opposition to statism. The apparent paradox is therefore that anarchism has historically been a type of socialism but simultaneously closely related to liberal thought.

'Libertarian' and 'libertarianism' are frequently employed by anarchists as synonyms for 'anarchist' and 'anarchism', largely as an attempt to distance themselves from the negative connotations of 'anarchy' and its derivatives. The situation has been vastly complicated in recent decades with rise of anarcho-capitalism, 'minimal statism' and an extreme right-wing laissez-faire philosophy advocated by such theorists as Murray Rothbard and Robert Nozick and their adoption of the words 'libertarian' and 'libertarianism'. It has therefore now become necessary to distinguish between their right libertarianism and the left libertarianism of the anarchist tradition. But 'libertarian' and 'libertarianism' also tend to be used as softer, less extreme terms than 'anarchist' and 'anarchism'

Anarchism: History

The historic anarchist movement was a workers' movement which flourished from the 1860s down to the close of the 1930s. On the other hand, there has been a consensus that anarchist precursors can be traced back to Chinese Taoism and Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu as well as to Classical Greece and Zeno of Citium. Most recently, it has been argued convincingly that the Mu'tazilite and Najdite Muslims of ninth-century Basra were anarchists. Examples begin to multiply in Europe from the Reformation of the sixteenth century and its forebears (for example, the Bohemian Taborites and German Anabaptists); the Renaissance (Rabelais and Etienne de la Boétie), also in the sixteenth century; and the English Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century (not only the Diggers and Gerrard Winstanley but also the Ranters). Some eighteenth-century figures are even more obviously anarchist: the Rousseau of *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), William Blake (1757-1827) throughout his oeuvre and William Godwin in his great *Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793). Unlike Blake, whose ideas made no impact on his contemporaries, Godwin exerted considerable influence, most markedly on his future son-in-law, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who went on to become, in Peter Marshall's words, 'the greatest anarchist poet by putting Godwin's philosophy to verse'.

Godwin could not be identified as an anarchist until after anarchism had come into being as a social movement, which it only did from the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Moreover it also needed to be named as such, as it first was by Proudhon in 1840 in *What is Property?* where he not only calls himself an 'anarchist' - 'I am (in the full force of the term) an anarchist' - but also attempts to appropriate 'anarchy' as a positive concept. While he appreciates that 'the meaning ordinarily attached to the word "anarchy" is absence of principle, absence of rule; consequently, it has been regarded as synonymous with "disorder"', he asserts that 'Anarchy, - the absence of a master, of a sovereign - ...is the form of government to which we are everyday approximating...', emphasizing that he is 'a firm friend of order'. Like many anarchists to come, he considered anarchy to be the highest form of order, contrasting it with the disorder and chaos of the present.

Karl Marx took the initiative in conjunction with British liberal trade unionists in establishing the First International in 1864, but within a year or two they began to be challenged by the co-founding Proudhonist mutualists from France, reinforced by other libertarians as anarchist movements began to form also in Switzerland, Spain and Italy. A titanic clash of personalities and political philosophies ensued between Marx and Bakunin; and by the late 1870s both the International Working Men's Association and a rival anti-authoritarian International had collapsed. Further conflict ensued with the Second International of 1889, leading to the permanent exclusion of the anarchists by the state socialists from 1896. Despite the prominence of Bakunin and Kropotkin in Western Europe, anarchism only emerged as a significant movement in their native Russia as late as the Revolution of 1905. Here then we have the four major nations - France, Spain, Italy, Russia - and their attendant cultural systems that contributed to anarchism as a mass force in the labour movements of Europe and the Americas from the 1860s until the First World War. For anarchism was also strong in the United States - not among native-born Americans, but within the immigrant communities, above all the Germans, Russians, Russian Jews and Italians - and in Latin America, whence it was in part carried by Spanish and Italian militants and immigrants, notably in Mexico - where it was an influential current in the Revolution of 1910-20 - Cuba, Brazil and Argentina. Significant movements and traditions also existed in the Netherlands, Germany and Portugal, as well as East Asia, in Japan and China.

Anarchist communism was partially displaced as the dominant tendency within anarchism with the formation of the CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*) in 1895 and the rapid radiating out of syndicalism from France. In the USA revolutionary syndicalism took the form of the industrial unionism of the IWW (*Industrial Workers of the World*); elsewhere syndicalism attained mass followings in France, Italy, Argentina and Spain, where the mighty CNT (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*) was set up in 1910. It was the CNT which was responsible for the amalgam of 'anarcho-syndicalism', combining syndicalist preoccupation with the workplace, daily industrial conflict and the revolutionary general strike with the traditional anarchist belief in the need for an ultimate armed insurrection.

These decades of the heyday of international anarchism - already weakened by the war itself - came substantially to an end as a consequence of the Russian Revolution. Many anarchists and, perhaps especially, syndicalists were deeply impressed by the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in October 1917, their anti-parliamentarianism and their determination to move forthwith, without waiting for the maturation of capitalism, to the building of a socialist society, and they defected in large numbers to the national Communist Parties as they began to be formed. We now know that French anarchism remained strong until the mid-1920s; then

bounced back again ten years later with the Popular Front and particularly the Spanish Revolution and Civil War. Elsewhere anarchism withered away, save in the Hispanic world where in 1936 the CNT and FAI (Federación Anarquista Ibérica) spearheaded a major anarchist revolution in Spain, only for it to be put into reverse the following year by Stalinist counter-revolution. With the defeat of the Spanish Republic early in 1939, proletarian anarchism entered terminal decline globally, with only isolated pockets, as in Cuba it would appear, retaining significant strength.

The anarchist revival dates from the 1960s, which with its student radicalism and permissiveness created both a general libertarianism and a new audience receptive to anarchist ideas. The preoccupations of the cultural radicals of the sixties meshed readily with many traditional anarchist concerns, perhaps most markedly in the case of sexuality and education. This revival, which extended throughout Western Europe and North America, climaxed with the remarkable events in France, where in May 1968 student revolutionaries fought the riot police, took over the Sorbonne, controlled the Latin Quarter, and precipitated the occupations of factories by their workers as well as a general strike.

BUT: 'The anarchists of the 1960s were not the historic anarchist movement resurrected; they were something quite different – a series of new manifestations of the idea' (Woodcock, 1986). For the new anarchists were students or peace activists or some such (increasingly environmentalists); their movement was not composed of artisans or labourers or peasants. To take a notable example, whereas in France Socialisme ou barbarie and Cornelius Castoriadis did come out of the workers' movement and Trotskyism, the origins of Situationism in contrast lay in the artistic avant-gardism of Cobra and the Lettrist International, splinters ultimately derived from Surrealism, and far removed from the matrix of Proudhon's thought a century earlier.

I've stressed that the 'idea of anarchism' long predated the third quarter of the nineteenth century and it is this idea which has survived the demise of the historic movement. Kropotkin believed that 'throughout the history of our civilization, two traditions, two opposing tendencies have confronted each other: the Roman and the Popular traditions; the imperial and the federalist; the authoritarian and the libertarian'.

Artists and anarchism

Herbert Read explained: 'In calling [my] principles Anarchism I have forfeited any claim to be taken seriously as a politician, and have cut myself off from the main current of socialist activity in England. But I have often found sympathy and agreement in unexpected places, and there are many intellectuals who are fundamentally anarchist in their political outlook, but who do not dare to invite ridicule by confessing it'. There is truth in this, yet the argument should not be pressed too far (for it needs to be refined). While intellectuals frequently played very significant roles in the socialist and other radical movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they were not particularly attracted to anarchism: certainly not in the way they undoubtedly were to Marxism and democratic socialism. Anarchism's appeal has been as much, if not more, emotional than rational. Anarchism definitely did not recruit – maybe perhaps in Italy, for example, but not overall – the lawyers, economists, historians and academics which the other socialist movements did. It can be argued, on the other hand, that anarchism – or, at least, anarchist theory – has received disproportionate contributions from intellectuals trained or active in the life sciences, geography, progressive education and the like. The geographers Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus, anthropologist Elie Reclus, and educationalists Louise Michel, Sébastien Faure and Francisco Ferrer come readily to mind.

Yet there can be no doubt that one type of intellectual has been consistently drawn to anarchism, placing a premium on absolute freedom and non-interference in their personal and social lives, and belonging, like Read himself, to the artistic and literary avant-gardes. Significant clusters of anarchist painters and writers existed in pre-1914 Italy, New York before and during World War One and, most impressive of all, the France of the 1880s and 1890s, where the Neo-Impressionists – Camille and Lucien Pissarro, Paul Signac, most probably the enigmatic Georges Seurat – and the Symbolist writers, including one of the greatest poets, Stéphane Mallarmé, all consisted of militant anarchists or sympathizers. In Bohemia the fact that Jaroslav Hašek had been a member of anarchist groups and worked on anarchist journals helps to explain the subversive genius of *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk*; and Franz Kafka had attended anarchist meetings in Prague, gaining considerable familiarity with anarchist writers and personalities, and actually mentioning Bakunin and Kropotkin in his diary. An undistinguished German actor, Ret Marut, fleeing from Munich in 1919, recreated himself in Mexico as a notable novelist, B. Traven.

The Arts and Crafts perspective

William Morris followed John Ruskin in believing 'that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour; that it is possible for man to rejoice in his work...and ... that unless man's work once again becomes a pleasure to him...all but the worthless must toil in pain, and therefore live in pain'.

Eric Gill (1882-1940) was a distinguished letter-cutter, typographer and illustrator – and also a remarkable sculptor. He reiterated continually in the last years of his life that 'the artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist', a dictum appropriated from his friend, the Anglo-Tamil art historian and aesthetician, Ananda Coomaraswamy.

The most important event of Gill's life was when, on his thirty-first birthday, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church; and thereafter he pioneered a series of Catholic craft communities.

What especially impressed Read about Gill was that he 'belonged to that rare company of integral socialists, whose lives are a consequence of their socialism, their socialism a consequence of their lives': he had, Read thought, managed to live like an anarchist. Attempting in the year of his death to summarize 'the work which I have chiefly done in my life', Gill wrote that it was

to make a cell of good living in the chaos of the world. Lettering, type-designing, engraving, stone-carving, drawing – these things are all very well...and I have earned my living by them. But what I hope above all things is that I have done something towards re-integrating bed and board, the small farm and the workshop, the home and the school, earth and heaven.

In the 1940s Read came to envisage what he called a 'double-decker' or 'duplex civilization', in which there will be a division between a public machine art, abstract and geometrical, and a private naturalistic or humanistic art. He gives the example of ancient Egypt, where a religious art, mainly of public buildings and sculptured monuments, and which was geometric, rational, objective, abstract, co-existed for centuries with a domestic art, largely of paintings, small carvings and various kinds of decorated vessels, and which was naturalistic, lyrical, even sentimental. Obviously contemporary society already exemplifies to a significant extent a double-decker civilization. He proposed that the 'creative arts of every kind should be made the basis of [the] educational system':

The result would be a private art standing over against the public art of the factories. But that - in our painting and sculpture, our poetry and dancing, our artist-potters and artist-weavers - we already have. That is to say, we have a tiny minority of people calling themselves artists. I am recommending that everyone should be an artist.

Conclusions

My problem is this. Anarchist theorists are thin on the ground, as are anarchist commentators on mainstream culture. And I'm not aware of any anarchist, or even libertarian, writings on arts policy. But the obvious points to make are these:

- (i) Organizations must be autonomous: run by their members without outside interference.
- (ii) The arts administrators are State functionaries, cultural bureaucrats – even if the conduit by which funds are distributed to the arts practitioners. Remember the definition of bureaucratization as the process in which a group seeks 'to manage from the outside the activities of others'. Funds need to be delivered direct to the art form without mediation.
- (iii) But the consumers, the audience, must not be forgotten. The audience needs to be involved in the decision-making of arts organizations.
- (iv) Pluralism. What if the audience is tiny, an infinitesimal fraction of the overall population? This will be the case with high-cultural art forms, and even more so if they are modernist and avant-garde. An essential component of modernism has been its elitism, despising the middle class and popular culture, and making a virtue of its inaccessibility. All right, I accept this - have even rejoiced in it. But (and possibly I'm

culturally schizophrenic here) the democratic rights of the majority (the source of tax revenue) must be respected. Most anarchists are deep pluralists, believing that individuals or groups must be free to follow their own interests and desires, provided that the ability of others thereby to do the same is not infringed. (This is classic liberalism, as expounded by John Stuart Mill.) There needs to a 'double-decker' or 'duplex' civilization – to whatever factor – in this pluralist sense also, with minority enthusiasms co-existing with popular culture(s). (On the other hand, to what extent, is contemporary, mass culture truly 'popular'? It is rather the product of economic forces of big business, the media, consumerism etc – frequently transmitted by highly-educated people – that determine the forms and content of popular culture today.)

(v) Everybody must be an artist. As Morris said: 'I do not want art for a few, any more than I want education for a few, or freedom for a few'. And the arts must be reintegrated into the total of personal and social activities.

(vi) There is a natural lifespan for most organizations and especially creative projects. The innate conservatism of most human beings tends to resist this inevitability. But is essential for organizations to be wound up, to be terminated, when they have served their purpose, when their creativity has waned. (The word 'institution' has negative connotations in English. 'Institutionalization' refers to this very process of bureaucratization and loss of innovative drive. Can this be the same in Swedish? I note the distinction between free groups and institution dance companies.)

To conclude:

Anarchists have always stressed the centrality of the control of the means of production as much as the matter of their ownership. This insight is of especial relevance today when socialism has been removed from the political agenda for the foreseeable future mainly owing to Communist despotism, but also because of the inadequacies of public enterprise as implemented by social democracy and, overall, a dislike of interference by the State. (This is certainly the case in Britain. Is it also in Sweden, with your distinctively different history?) The most important – as well as most popular – thing is for individuals and groups to be able to take command of their everyday circumstances and determine the course of their lives, almost certainly collectively: to institute personal and communal autonomy, so far as they are possible, and to exercise individual responsibility. This is equally true for the arts, where the relevant individuals and groups are not only the artists but also their audiences.

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o PRAXIS is a forum for discussion on art and culture policy, organized by the artist-run production group PRODUKT. To see videos from PRAXIS - [click here](#).

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