

Anarchism for the uninformed

An introductory selection of texts

Your friendly neighborhood spider-man

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What Is Anarchism? An Introduction

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What Anarchists Believe

Anarchists believe that the point of society is to widen the choices of individuals. This is the axiom upon which the anarchist case is founded.

If you were isolated you would still have the human ability to make decisions, but the range of viable decisions would be severely restricted by the environment. Society, however it is organised, gives individuals more opportunities, and anarchists think this is what society is for. They do not think society originated in some kind of conscious “social contract”, but see the widening of individual choices as the function of social instincts.

Anarchists strive for a society which is as efficient as possible, that is a society which provides individuals with the widest possible range of individual choices.

Any social relationship in which one party dominates another by the use of threats (explicit or tacit, real or delusory) restricts the choices of the dominated party. Occasional, temporary instances of coercion may be inevitable; but in the opinion of anarchists, established, institutionalised, coercive relationships are by no means inevitable. They are a social blight which everyone should try to eliminate.

Anarchism is opposed to states, armies, slavery, the wages system, the landlord system, prisons, monopoly capitalism, oligopoly capitalism, state capitalism, bureaucracy, meritocracy, theocracy, revolutionary governments, patriarchy, matriarchy, monarchy, oligarchy, protection rackets, intimidation by gangsters, and every other kind of coercive institution. In other words, anarchism opposes government in all its forms.

In a government society, anarchists may in practice apply to one coercive institution for protection from another. They may, for instance, call on the legal establishment for protection against rival governments like violent criminals, brutal bosses, cruel parents, or fraudulent police. “Do as I say or I’ll smash your face in” is often a more frightening threat than “Persons guilty of non-compliance are liable to a term of imprisonment”, because the perpetrator of the threat is less predictable. But the differences between different levels and forms of coercive institutions are less significant than the similarities.

For dictionary purposes, *anarchism* may be correctly defined as opposition to government in all its forms. But it would be a mistake to think of anarchism as essentially negative. The opposition to government arises out of a belief about society which is positive.

Anarchy

The ideal of anarchism is a society in which all individuals can do whatever they choose, except interfere with the ability of other individuals to do what they choose. This ideal is called *anarchy*, from the Greek *anarchia*, meaning absence of government.

Anarchists do not suppose that all people are altruistic, or wise, or good, or identical, or perfectible, or any romantic nonsense of that kind. They believe that a society without coercive institutions is feasible, within the repertoire of natural, imperfect, human behaviour.

Anarchists do not “lay down blueprints for the free society”. There are science-fiction stories and other fantasies in which anarchies are imagined, but they are not prescribed. Any society which does not include coercive institutions will meet the anarchist objective.

It seems clear, however, that every conceivable anarchy would need social pressure to dissuade people from acting coercively; and to prevent a person from acting coercively is to limit that person’s choices. Every society imposes limits, and there are those who argue, with the air of having an unanswerable argument, that this makes anarchism impossible.

But anarchy is not perfect freedom. It is only the absence of government, or coercive establishments. To show that perfect freedom is impossible is not to argue against anarchism, but simply to provide an instance of the general truth that nothing is perfect.

Of course, the feasibility of anarchy cannot be certainly proved. “Is anarchy practicable?”, is a hypothetical question, which cannot be answered for certain, unless and until anarchy exists. But the question, “Is anarchy worth striving for?”, is an ethical question, and to this every anarchist will certainly answer yes.

“Anarchy” in the Sense of Social Disorder

Besides being used in the sense implied by its Greek origin, the word “anarchy” is also used to mean unsettled government, disorderly government, or government at its crudest in the form of intimidation by marauding gangs (“military anarchy”).

This usage is etymologically improper, but as a matter of historical fact it is older than the proper one. The poet Shelley held opinions which are now called anarchistic, but in his poem “A Mask of Anarchy, written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester”, he uses the allegorical figure of “Anarchy” to mean tyranny. (The poem was published several years after it was written, and by that time anarchists were beginning to call themselves anarchists.)

Both the proper and improper meanings of the term “anarchy” are now current, and this causes confusion. A person who hears government by marauding gangs described as “anarchy” on television news, and then hears an anarchist advocating “anarchy”, is liable to conclude that anarchists want government by marauding gangs.

Some anarchists have tried to overcome the confusion by calling themselves something different, such as autonomists or libertarians, but the effect has been to replace one ambiguity with another. “Autonomy” (which means making one’s own laws) commonly refers to “autonomous regions”, secondary governments to which some powers are devolved from the principal government. “Libertarian” is used in America to mean one who opposes minimum wages, on the grounds that they reduce the profits of employers.

The simplest way to avoid confusion would be to reserve the term “anarchy” for its etymologically correct meaning, and call social disorder by some other term, such as “social disorder”. Enlightened journalists are already following this practice.

Anarchism and Terrorism

The word “terrorism” means planting bombs and shooting people for political ends, without legal authority. Wars use much bigger bombs, kill many more people, and cause much more terror, but wars do not count as terrorism because they are perpetrated with legal authority.

Terrorism has been used by anarchists. It has also been used by Catholic Christians, Protestant Christians, Mohammedans, Hindus, Sikhs, Marxists, fascists, nationalists, patriots, royalists and republicans.

The vast majority of anarchists, at all times and places, have opposed terrorism as morally repugnant and counter-productive. So have the vast majority of Christians and so on, but in their cases it is not necessary to say so. In the case of anarchists it needs to be emphasised that they abhor terrorism, because malicious and ill-informed persons sometimes portray anarchists as wild-eyed bombers with no opinions at all, just an insane urge to destroy.

The “anarchist bomb-thrower” is a folk-myth, mostly derived from literature. It was originated in the “penny bloods” of the nineteenth century, and revived with gusto by the writers of “boys’ stories” in the early 1920s, when war was out of fashion but fictitious heroes still needed enemies.

Let it be emphasised. Only a small minority of terrorists have ever been anarchists, and only a small minority of anarchists have ever been terrorists. The anarchist movement as a whole has always recognised that social relationships cannot be assassinated or bombed out of existence.

Some Arguments for Government

The difficulty of arguing the anarchist case today has been compared with the difficulty of arguing the atheist case in medieval Europe.

In the middle ages people never wondered whether God existed; they just assumed, without ever considering the matter, that the existence of God was self-evident. In our time people never ask themselves whether government is necessary; they just assume that the necessity is self-evident. And when anarchists question the need for government, many people fail to understand the question.

It was once put to me as an argument against anarchism, that “if everyone could choose what to do, no-one would elect to join the army, and the country would be undefended”. My interlocutor was not an idiot, but could just not imagine a world without “countries” that needed armies to defend them against foreigners.

Bemused people ask how anyone could be induced to work if there were no coercion (“who will clean the sewers?”). Yet everybody knows that being forced to do things is not the only reason for doing things. Rich people who can afford to do nothing, workers in their “own” time, people who enjoy their jobs, even people who ask how anyone could be induced to work if there were no coercion, do things for other reasons.

People who work in sewers have told me they are proud of the importance of their job. People do things because they enjoy doing them, or are proud of their skill, or feel empathy with the suffering, or are admired for what they do, or get bored doing nothing.

Fear of the lash, or penury, or hellfire, is not needed for inducing people to do useful things. It is needed to make people endure the stressful indignity which working-class people call “work”: responsibility without power, pointless drudgery, being talked down to by morons. Anarchists believe that everything worth doing can be done without “work”.

Many people confuse government with organisation, which makes them suppose that anarchists are against band leaders and architects. But organisers and leaders are not the same as bosses. Anarchists have no objection to people following instructions, provided they do so voluntarily.

Some who concede that organisation occurs without government insist that government is necessary for large or complex organisation. People in anarchy, they say, could organise them-

selves up to the level of agrarian villages, but could not enjoy the benefits of hydro-electric schemes and weather satellites. Anarchists, on the other hand, say that people can organise themselves freely to do anything they think worthwhile. Government organisation is only needed when the job to be organised has no attraction for those who do it.

Government is even thought by some to be responsible for pair-bonding. Until quite recently a couple might live together for years and bring up a family, yet their love would still be classed as a casual affair if they did not have a marriage licence from the state.

Another daft argument for government is that people are not wise or altruistic enough to make their own decisions, and therefore need a government to make decisions for them. The assumption behind this contention is, either that the government does not consist of people, or that the people in government are so wise and altruistic that they can not only make their own decisions, but also make decisions for others. But everyone can see that getting into power does not require wisdom or altruism; the essential qualification is to be keen on getting into power.

A particular instance of the argument, that people are not responsible enough to make their own decisions, is the contention that children need “discipline” to prevent them from growing up anti-social. Anarchists have compared this to the old argument that babies need to be tightly bound, to prevent them from injuring themselves by kicking.

It is hundreds of years since swaddling bands have been used, but there has still not been a single instance of a baby injuring itself by kicking. Nor has there been an instance of a child being spoiled by the rod being spared. Children benefit from a stable environment, but that is not the same as an authoritarian one.

Governments as Steps towards Anarchy

There are theories on both the left and right of politics, which advocate a planned sequence of societies, culminating in anarchy but beginning with a new kind of authoritarian society.

Best known of these is classical Marxism, which holds that the state will wither away, when people are so equal and interdependent that they no longer need restraint. The first step towards this goal is to impose a very strong government, of people of good will who thoroughly understand the theory.

Wherever Marxists have seized power, they have behaved like other people in power. Marxists accuse them of betraying the revolution, but anarchists think the pressures of power make all bosses behave in substantially the same way. (The anarchist Michael Bakunin predicted as early as 1867 that Marxist government would be “slavery and brutality”.)

There are self-styled “anarcho-capitalists” (not to be confused with anarchists of any persuasion), who want the state abolished as a regulator of capitalism, and government handed over to capitalists. Many go no further, but some see the concentration of power in the hands of capitalists as the first step towards a society where every individual is his or her own boss.

Other forms of government advocated as intermediate steps on the road to anarchy are world government, proliferation of small independent states, government by priests, and government by delegates of trade unions.

The anarchists, and the anarchists alone, want to get rid of government as the first step in the programme.

This does not mean they suppose government can be abolished overnight. It means they think the idea of educating people for freedom, by intimidating them into submission, is an absurd idea. Anarchists struggle for freedom from coercive institutions by opposing coercive institutions.

Until and unless a society free of government exists, nobody can be absolutely certain that such a society is feasible. If it is not, then Marxists and others who set up a strong government in the hope of eliminating government, do not just fail to attain their objective, but end up with more of what they were hoping to eliminate. Anarchists at least give themselves a chance of ending up with a society freer than it would otherwise have been.

Reformists measure progress by how near they are to attaining power. Anarchists measure progress by the extent to which prohibitions and inequalities are reduced, and individual opportunities increased.

The Origin of Government

For most of its existence, the entire human species lived by foraging. Modern foraging societies inhabit widely different environments, in rain forests, tropical deserts and the Arctic. Nevertheless they have similar ways of social organisation, so it seems reasonable to suppose that prehistoric foragers were similarly organised.

There are no rulers, bosses, chieftains, or elected councils. Day-to-day decisions are made by consensus. The rules of good behaviour are decided by custom and consensus, and enforced by what some anthropologists call “diffuse sanctions”.

Anarchists do not advocate return to a foraging economy, but use the fact that our ancestors lived for a million years without government as evidence that societies without government are viable.

This leaves anarchists with a question to be answered. If the first human societies were anarchies, then the first government must have arisen out of anarchy. How can this have happened?

There is no historical record of the event, because writing was not invented until governments were well established. But there are plausible conjectures, consistent with archeological and anthropological evidence.

Farming people, unlike foraging people, need to predict the cycle of seasons, so that they know when to do the planting. For early farmers, the method of prediction was to observe and remember the movements of the stars, a skilled job which must be done when most people are asleep. Perhaps early farmers had specialists in weather prediction. Perhaps these specialists acquired a reputation for actually controlling the weather, and were given privileges in return for ensuring that the seasons followed the required sequence.

A reputation for magical power does not in itself, however, make anyone into a boss. Anarchists see a more likely origin of government in systematic robbery.

Early farmers were probably harassed by foragers, who would of course regard a field of crops as a bonanza. There may also have been ex-farmers turned robbers because their crops had failed. Perhaps some of the robbers learned to take only part of the produce, leaving the farmers enough to live on. Perhaps they made themselves tolerable to the farmers by driving other would-be robbers away.

Anyway, by the time writing was invented the functions of weather controller and robber-defender were combined in the same person. A formidable combination of magic and coercion.

All over the world, there were royal families considered to be demigods, and a member of the royal family was chosen to become a god or the messenger of God, chief priest, absolute ruler, law-giver, and supreme commander of the armed forces.

Monarchy remained the universal form of top government for thousands of years, and most states retain some of the ritual trappings of monarchy.

Democracy

“Government of the people, by the people, for the people” is a poetic phrase which uses “the people” in three different senses: the people as a collection of individuals, the people as the majority, and the people as a single entity. In prosaic terms, it means power over individuals, exercised by the majority through its elected officers, for the benefit of the whole population. This is the ideal of democracy.

Voters in a democratic election contribute to the choice of who shall exercise power on behalf of the majority, and in doing so consent to be ruled by whoever the majority chooses.

For five thousand years, monarchy was the mark of civilisation. In less than two hundred years, the norm of civilisation has become democracy. Military usurpers used to claim, either that the throne was rightfully theirs, or that they were acting on behalf of the monarch. Military dictators today claim, either that they have a mandate from the people, or that they are going to organise elections when order has been restored.

It used to be generally accepted that people had a duty to surrender their power unconditionally to a hereditary monarch. Now the accepted form is for citizens to surrender their power periodically, to rulers chosen by majority voting.

Anarchists are against the surrender of power, and therefore against democracy. Not just against the perversion of democracy (though that is often mentioned), but against the democratic ideal. They do not want people to give power to whoever they choose; they want people to keep their power for themselves.

Making Progress Towards Anarchy

Anarchists are extreme libertarian socialists, “libertarian” meaning the demand for freedom from prohibition, and “socialist” meaning the demand for social equality.

Freedom and equality are sometimes represented as antagonists, but at the extremes they coincide. Complete freedom implies equality, since if there are rich and poor, the poor cannot be permitted to take liberties with riches. Complete equality implies freedom, since those who suffer restrictions cannot be the equals of those who impose them.

Anarchists will not be content with anything less than complete freedom and complete equality, but they do not have an all-or-nothing attitude. They value partial freedom and partial equality. This is shown by the angry enthusiasm with which anarchists have agitated against the Poll Tax, the commercialisation of the National Health Service, anti-immigration laws, bad prison conditions, and the imprisonment of innocent persons.

Anarchists do not, however, help anyone to take power. They do not deny the sincerity of those who wish to use power for the improvement of society, but nobody can use power for anything, unless they first obtain it. The first aim of people seeking power, whatever they intend to do with it, must be to get and keep as much power as possible. As a guide to action, anarchists assume that the *first aim* of power-seekers is the *only* aim. This is not the whole truth, but it is close enough for practical purposes.

The anarchist strategy for improving society is to influence public opinion. In the long run, rulers need the consent of the ruled. No government, however despotic, can keep going if it gets too much out of tune with public attitudes. If enough ordinary people are determined on some particular relaxation of government, then the government must either concede or fall.

A subtle indicator of anarchist success is a gradual diminution of respect for authority generally.

A more obvious, but paradoxical indicator of success in anarchist endeavours (in alliance with those seeking particular partial freedoms) is legislation, for instance the Acts of Parliament ending conscription, or prohibiting corporal punishment in schools. Apologists for government represent such legislation as a benefit of government. As anarchists perceive it, however, governments refuse to give up any power at all, except as an alternative to losing power entirely. When they are forced to surrender a little, they are astute enough not to do so with a grudging expression, but to wear a smile of generosity.

Freedom of speech and assembly, freedom from utter penury, freedom of access to water and medicine, which would have been considered utopian dreams in this country a couple of centuries ago, are now considered ordinary. In the anarchist view, these freedoms were not given by kind-hearted rulers, but conceded by bosses who felt threatened. And public pressure must be maintained, to deter the bosses from taking back what they have conceded.

By and large, the structure of society conforms to what most people think is right. If most people are persuaded by a small part of the anarchist message, the result is a small lessening of prohibitions or inequalities, a small widening of individual choices. The change may occur peacefully, or it may take an insurrection. The new structure of society then becomes the ordinary structure, from which people may be persuaded to demand a further widening of choices.

Every anarchist would like everyone in the world to be suddenly persuaded of the whole of the anarchist message, and for the change from oppression to anarchy to happen in a single, fantastic, revolutionary leap. But as realists, anarchists also value creeping progress in the right direction.

Misapplications of the Term “Anarchist”

An anarchist is one who opposes government in all its forms. But sometimes the term “anarchist” is misapplied to persons who do not in the least conform to the definition.

Sometimes “anarchist” is wrongly used for people who use illegal means for political ends which are not anarchist. Guy Fawkes, for instance, is sometimes described as an anarchist, although his aim was to replace the oppressive English regime with one resembling the Spanish, which was even more oppressive. A recent British group, given to destroying magazines in bookshops, called themselves “anarchists” although their aim was an increase in censorship.

Another misapplication of the term “anarchist” is to anyone bloody-mindedly fixed in their opinions. I once heard a drunk on a bus, loudly advocating all sorts of authoritarian measures, including conscription, capital punishment, and “send the farkin wogs back”, with occasional repetitions of “If anyone disafarkingrees, let ‘em farking disagree. I ain’t farkin inristid, I’m a farkin anarchist”.

There are also “anarchist” poseurs, like the sartorial stylists who paint A-in-a-circle symbols on their leather jackets without having the least interest in anarchism as an idea, and wrongly self-styled “anarchists” (“anarcho-capitalists”) who want to abolish the state as a regulatory and welfare institution, but do not oppose capitalist oppression.

Revolutionary Violence and Pacifist Anarchism

With a few exceptions, anarchists are agreed that wars between governments should never be supported, and that group violence is acceptable only if it is used in furtherance of the anarchist revolution. The difference of opinion is about how much violence is useful.

At one extreme are those who argue that the revolution can only succeed if it involves no violence whatever. They contend that a society established by violent defeat of the bosses could only be maintained by violent suppression of the ex-bosses. Therefore violence cannot lead to anarchy, but only to a change of bosses.

At the other extreme are those who hold that any fighting between working-class people and the forces of authority, whatever the immediate motive and whoever wins, contributes to the revolution by showing that the bosses can be resisted. Anarchists of this persuasion have sometimes joined peaceful demonstrations and tried to provoke the police into attacking the demonstrators. (Anarchists are sometimes said to have caused riots by instructing peaceful demonstrators to attack the police. This is a ridiculous accusation. If people riot it is because they are angry, not because someone tells them to riot.)

Between the extremes of pacifism and bellicosity, most anarchists think violence is useful at some times but counter-productive at other times. In general they dislike violence because it is likely to end in defeat or injury, but they applaud successful risings, for instance the defeat of Ceausescu in Romania.

Anarchists have often joined armed resistance groups as individuals, and anarchist armies fought in Ukraine and Mexico in the 1920s, in Spain in the 1930s, and in Korea under Japanese occupation in the 1940s. In those countries now, the common stereotype of an anarchist is not a “mad bomber” but a freedom fighter.

There are anarchists now alive, who volunteered to fight against Franco in Spain, went to prison rather than join the British army to fight Hitler, and vociferously opposed the recent war against Saddam Hussein. They might be accused of inconsistency, in that they took arms against one dictator, but refused to take arms against two others equally bad.

In fact, however, their attitude is quite consistent, because it is positive. They act on their perception of what wars are *for*, rather than what they are against. The stated objective of the war against Saddam Hussein was to restore the monarchy in Kuwait. The stated objective of the war against Hitler was to preserve the British Empire. The stated objective of the anarchist fighters in Spain was a free society. Of these, only the objective of the Spanish war was considered worth fighting for.

Workers’ Control and Anarcho-Syndicalism

All anarchists believe in workers’ control, in the sense of individuals deciding what work they do, how they work, and who they work with. This follows logically from the anarchist belief that nobody should be subject to a boss.

“Workers’ control” is also used with another meaning, that of power being vested in the workers collectively, and exercised in practice by elected officers of the workers. This idea is called syndicalism, from *sydicat*, the French for trade union.

Elaborate constitutions have been invented, for syndicalist systems of government. Typically there are to be workplace committees consisting of directly elected delegates, local committees consisting of delegates from workplace committees, and so on up the pyramid to a delegate

committee which has overall control of industry. Delegates are also sent to local and national legislatures. The pyramid structure ensures that electors at different levels know their delegates personally, and delegates can be recalled at any time, which prevents them from making decisions contrary to the electors' wishes.

The purpose of such proposed constitutions is not anarchistic but democratic; not to get rid of government, but to make government accountable.

A looser meaning of syndicalism, however, is quite compatible with anarchism. This is simply to use the power of the trade unions, not just to secure better wages and conditions, but to bring about real social change. If the social change is towards anarchy, this is called anarcho-syndicalism.

Many anarchists active in trade unions are anarcho-syndicalists. Other anarchist trade unionists, however, disagree with anarcho-syndicalism. They contend that an effective trade union must include workers of every political persuasion, whereas an effective movement for social change must restrict its membership to those who favour social change.

What Anarchists Do

This chapter is intended to describe in general terms, without giving names, what goes on in the anarchist movement in Britain in the latter part of the twentieth century.

How Many Anarchists Are There?

The size of anarchist movements has varied from place to place and from time to time. At some times and places the numbers have been overestimated, as people not of the anarchist persuasion have joined anarchist armies, trade unions and so on, and have been included as anarchists in the statistics. In this country now, the numbers may well be underestimated.

The listed membership of the several national anarchist organisations is a few hundred at most. The number of participants in the 1992 anti-election rally in Trafalgar Square was variously estimated at 750 and 1,200. The total circulation of anarchist periodicals is less than thirty thousand, including those sold to non-anarchists. Judging by these indicators, the anarchists are a minuscule minority.

Other indicators, however, suggest rather large numbers.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, large numbers of people marched from Aldermaston to London over the Easter weekends, in protest against atomic weapons. At first everyone marched as an individual, but later the participating groups were invited by the organisers to carry banners. More than one in forty of the marchers then declared themselves to be anarchists.

It seems fair to extrapolate from this that anarchists numbered more than one in forty of all those in favour of nuclear disarmament, perhaps one per cent of the total population.

Since about 1980 one of the polling organisations, ICM, has recorded the numbers of those who, when asked how they intend to vote, declare that they will not vote at all. The proportion of refusers-to-vote has seldom fallen below seven per cent.

There are many reasons for refusing to vote, but it seems a conservative estimate that one in seven of the refusers, or more than one per cent of the population, refuse to vote for the anarchist reason that "it only encourages them".

If it is correct that the anarchists are between one and two per cent of the adult population, then there are about half a million of them; a small minority, but not a minuscule minority.

The experience of most anarchists is that they had lived for some time before they encountered anarchism as a serious idea, so it seems likely that the number of unwitting and potential anarchists is larger than the number of self-identified anarchists.

How Old Are Anarchists?

Members of anarchist groups are mostly young (under 35), some old (over 50), and only a few of middle age. Young anarchists often conclude that there must have been a decline in the anarchist movement a couple of decades past, or even that anarchism is a very recent idea; but

this is a wrong conclusion. The age profile of the anarchist movement has been the same for fifty years at least.

What happens is that anarchists in their middle years stop attending anarchist group meetings, as their time is taken up with raising families and pursuing careers. They do not stop being anarchists or arguing the anarchist case, but they become less conspicuous. Later, when they have more spare time, some but not all of them reappear in the conspicuous movement.

At first sight political parties appear very different, in that their most conspicuous members are of middle age. But these middle aged activists are in fact paid organisers and career politicians. The age profile of *unpaid volunteers* in political parties is about the same as that of the conspicuous anarchist movement. We may conclude that the apparent shortage of middle-aged anarchists is caused by the absence of jobs and careers in the anarchist movement.

Because it is always true that most members of anarchist groups are young, the movement is always enthusiastic, energetic and full of fresh ideas. For the same reason it lacks patience and has little sense of its own history.

Sometimes a new anarchist group is founded where there was a flourishing group a few years earlier, and the new group knows nothing whatever of the earlier group. Ex-members of the earlier group look on approvingly, but do not introduce themselves because they are busy with their own affairs.

Young people in a movement where nearly everybody is young can take decisions on their own, which is one reason why older anarchists refrain from interfering. Inexperience and the over-optimism characteristic of youth cause a few failures. There are “mass meetings” at which only the organisers turn up because they have not been publicised, and magnificent publicity campaigns for book fairs, for which no one has thought to book a hall. On the whole, however, young anarchists organise themselves quite well.

How Anarchists Are Organized?

The anarchist movement consists of autonomous groups and individuals. They publish and distribute literature, organise meetings and demonstrations, run communes or free schools or advice centres or clubs, and discuss anarchism among themselves. Some groups do all these things, some just one. They may be named for a locality, or the function they choose to perform (“Such and such Press group”), or by some fanciful name.

As well as casual contacts between groups, there are several informal but deliberate communication networks, and three or four “national organisations” which consist in practice of autonomous groups in regular communication, who sometimes agree on common resolutions and take joint responsibility for publications.

A few groups have formal membership, but this is not usual. For the most part, the members of a group are those who are active in it. There are individuals intermittently active, of whom nobody is sure whether they are members of the group or not. Many are members of several groups simultaneously.

There are two anarchist methods of organising activities within the group. One is for the members to discuss what they shall do and arrive at a consensus, or occasionally a majority decision. The other, equally anarchistic, is for an energetic individual to declare an intention of doing something, and invite others to join in. Such “prime movers” may be flamboyant or retiring. They may or may not be designated functionaries like secretaries or convenors. Often, only the members of the group know who they are.

Middle-aged anarchists, in temporary retirement from conspicuous activity, often maintain contact by subscribing to a periodical or distribution network, or membership of a national organisation.

Anarchist Literature

A seven-year old asked her anarchist parents, “Do anarchists have to sell books?”

Since advances in printing technology in the 1970s made publication less expensive, books, pamphlets, periodicals and free leaflets have become the most visible of anarchist activities. Some groups publish literature as one of many activities and some (including “groups” consisting on one individual) specialise in publishing. Printing is sometimes by amateurs, sometimes by local reprography shops, and sometimes by an anarchist workers’ co-operative which is a flourishing commercial printer.

The standard of books and pamphlets is good. There are many reprints of well-tried anarchist works. New work is generally well written and, if it includes illustrations, well drawn. Production is often very cheap to keep the price down, but with a few awful exceptions the product is neat and legible.

The standard of anarchist periodicals varies from excellent to abysmal. There are several useful fortnightly, monthly, and quarterly magazines and newspapers, some national and some local. Some community magazines, and some specialist newsletters, have a regular anarchist input. There are also numerous, short-lived anarchist fanzines whose chief merit is that they give their producers the experience of writing and publishing.

There are posters and free leaflets, some published in connection with specific events, and some intended to be timeless. Like the periodicals, they vary from excellent to rubbish.

Three groups, separately organised but regularly cooperating, now undertake the distribution of anarchist literature from publishers in Britain and other English-language countries, to commercial and radical bookshops everywhere.

Commercial publishers produce occasional anarchist works, but in this country no anarchist publisher or distributor makes a net profit. If there are any gross profits, they are reinvested. Distributors use their profits to subsidise publishing.

Recently there have been one or two illegal anarchist radio stations. There are some published recordings, and a few excellent videos, mostly produced by students using college equipment. No doubt we shall see more of these, as equipment becomes more accessible.

Anarchist literature is sold in commercial bookshops and radical bookshops including anarchist shops. Occasional anarchist bookstalls are put up at meetings, gigs, and festivals, and in colleges and sometimes street markets. There are also anarchist mail-order book services.

There are book fairs, at which anarchists congregate to sell literature (and some tee-shirts, badges and snacks) largely, but not exclusively, to each other. The oldest established of these, the annual Anarchist Bookfair in London, is the main regular anarchist gathering.

Meetings and Demonstrations

Before television became common, street-corner soapbox oratory was a popular entertainment and there were some brilliant anarchist orators. Today, as far as I know, there are no regular outdoor anarchist meetings. There are regular indoor public meetings, where although the public is invited, most of those who actually attend are anarchists.

Anarchists are more often seen in demonstrations organised by other groups, aimed at limited and specific widening of individual choices. In processions where banners are carried, anarchist groups may identify themselves, but anarchists often join demonstrations as unlabelled individuals. They include middle-aged anarchists in “temporary retirement” from the conspicuous movement.

Anarchists have always been involved in campaigns for nuclear disarmament. They were among those who organised the second Aldermaston March (the first was by a lone pacifist), and took part in the third and subsequent ones organised by CND (which was until 1964 an affiliate of the Labour Party). They were heavily involved in the Committee of 100 which demonstrated against the Bomb by obstructing traffic, and primarily responsible for the “Spies for Peace” who discovered and revealed the secret nuclear shelters called Regional Seats of Government. They took part in some of the “Peace Camps” at the gates of nuclear weapons bases. A group of anarchists went out in a dinghy to meet the first American nuclear submarine to be stationed in a Scottish loch, and actually succeeded in landing on its deck.

Aldermaston marches are no longer annual events, but there was one in 1989 in which many anarchists took part as individuals, and on the last day a large number of them suddenly produced wire cutters and attacked the fence around the Aldermaston site. This action had been arranged in advance through an anarchist network. Later an anarchist came across an obscure judicial ruling that a nuclear weapons establishment had a public right of way through it, and a group of anarchists embarrassed the guards by insisting on their legal right to walk through the fenced area.

When Nirex, the quango responsible for disposing of waste from nuclear energy plants, opened “information centres” in places where they intended to dump waste, one anarchist demonstrated, ingeniously and convincingly, that the staff of the “information centre” in Bedford had no information about nuclear dangers. He left a paper packet on a table in the centre, and told staff it contained mud from near Sellafield, emitting alpha radiation. The staff ran their Geiger counter over the outside of the packet and got no reading. When a journalist from the local newspaper turned up, they told him the story about alpha radiation was a hoax. The journalist was no nuclear physicist, but he had enough layman’s knowledge to know that alpha radiation does not penetrate paper, and was amazed to find that the staff of the “information centre” did not know.

Anarchists have been closely involved in successful agitations for changes of the law, such as the abolition of the death penalty, and the prohibition of corporal punishment in schools. In the case of the death penalty, the final, successful agitation which followed the execution of Derek Bentley was begun by anarchists in London, with two meetings, the first called in the name of an anarchist group, and the second called by the same group calling themselves the League Against Capital Punishment. After the second meeting, the anarchists stood aside to let the League be taken over by the lawyers and politicians who had run earlier anti-hanging campaigns, and this time at last they were successful.

When a law was passed prohibiting landlords from including “no coloured” in accommodation advertisements, anarchists were among those who visited corner shops to tell the owners that their advertising boards were breaking the law.

A more recent successful campaign involving anarchists was against the Poll Tax. They were prominent in street demonstrations, and decorously made nuisances of themselves, taking up the time of magistrates’ courts with footling disputes.

Anarchists enthusiastically joined the workers in two big conflicts with the employers, the miners’ strike and the Murdoch printers’ strike, and many smaller ones.

Some anarchists are hunt saboteurs, and participants in the animal liberation movement. Recent events organised by anarchists have included “Bash the rich” marches towards the millionaire dwellings of Hampstead, and “Stop the City” demonstrations in the London financial centre.

Anarchists join demonstrations against racial victimisation by the police, and have been accused, probably falsely, of organising “race riots”. With or without anarchist banners, they often join demonstrations against tyrannies elsewhere in the world.

The most exclusively anarchist demonstrations occur at times of general elections, when all political groups are excited into activity, and anarchists run anti-election campaigns. Thousands of leaflets are printed and given away, dozens of meetings are held, and the meetings of candidates are heckled to make the anarchist point that politicians want us to surrender our power to them.

Agitation against an election appears to have no effect on the election, but the existence and opinions of the anarchist movement become known to people, including a few people who had not known they were anarchists.

Direct Action

“Direct action” originally meant action such as strikes and sabotage, intended to have an immediate effect on a situation, as distinct from political activity which might have a round about effect through representatives, or demonstrative activity whose effect was to get publicity.

These days direct action is often used to mean demonstrations which are dangerous, or violent, or illegal, but whose intended, immediate effect is only to get publicity for an idea. I have included such actions under “Meetings and demonstrations” above. Here, I use the term “direct action” in something like its original sense, to mean anarchist activity which has a direct effect on the range of choices for some individuals.

There are anarchist workers’ co-operatives, which cannot avoid trading with capitalist society but are not directly dominated by a boss. There are anarchist communities, where people live in a non-authoritarian environment, sometimes holding all their assets in common. A few household communities are also workers’ co-operatives at the same time. The anarchists who live and work in them not only widen their own choices, but also demonstrate to the world that such non-authoritarian ways of life are feasible.

Anarchists are disgusted by the idea of houses standing empty when people are homeless, and have always supported squatters movements. Several anarchist groups run squatters advice centres, keeping lists of suitable empty buildings as well as giving legal advice. One group of anarchists were jailed for preventing the gutting of council houses to prevent squatting, and subsequently engaged by the council to organise squatting as a temporary, partial solution to the housing shortage.

There have been and are anarchist clubs, in rented and squatted premises. Some buildings squatted by anarchists have been opened as community resource centres, including cafes which sell very cheap food. Anarchist propaganda is available at such places, but not forced on anybody. Sometimes the organisers have been offered council grants for their services to the community, and sometimes they have accepted them.

Anarchists often undertake to visit and communicate with prisoners who have few other friends. Often the prisoners hold anarchist opinions or are deemed innocent, or both, but this is not always the case.

The last two paragraphs may make anarchists look like “dogooders”. They would object to that description. But their commitment to widening the choices of individuals is not just a matter of publicising anarchy and advocating revolution. It is also a matter of practical, direct action.

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Taken from original print copy. Donald Rooum and Freedom Press (ed.). What Is Anarchism?
An Introduction. London: Freedom Press, 1995.

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