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Conclusion

Anarchism was to find echoes in all later non-Marxist radical ideas. The anarchist movement itself did not disappear and was boosted by the events of the Spanish Civil War, creating an historical discourse of revolution and betrayal. Post-war it continued as a small subset of the left, posing awkward questions for their ideological presumptions and offering anti-statist alternatives. Individualism persisted, too, as left libertarianism – a critical voice agitating for social justice and free markets against mainstream libertarianism's too-eager acceptance of corporate economic power. Elsewhere, anarchist ideas also permeated the peace movement as it waxed and waned in tune with the intensity of the threat of international conflict. Gandhi's Tolstoyan model of non-violence and village-centred development also gathered support. Cultural movements from Dada to Punk mined an anarchistic heritage, though one that would be hardly recognized by its earnest Victorian founders. More prosaically, the part of the town planning movement that drew ideas from Howard, Geddes and Mumford carried forward a highly pragmatic version. Both collectivist and individualist versions of anarchism informed different strands of feminism. It was to be resurrected again as Green politics and articulated as part of the movement challenging globalized capitalism. Anarchists are now fighting, sometimes literally, against austerity politics in Europe and the resurgence of the far right. Anarchism is a living tradition.

This tradition has a long pedigree. It is part of a continuing critique of conventional notions of progress that developed in reaction to the growth of industrial capitalist society. Its roots lie in the ideologies of the early nineteenth century in what was one position in a wide-ranging debate about government and economy, one that combined a preference for liberty with hostility to the state. In Britain, this critique was expressed through the work of William Godwin and the Ricardian Socialists, most notably Thomas Hodgskin. However, it was Pierre-Joseph Proudhon who developed this position into a recognizably anarchist discourse. There were three key elements to his analysis.

First, Proudhon was a vehement anti-capitalist. Drawing on Sismondi's description of under-consumption and Comte and Dunoyer's class analysis, he built his economic theories on a concept of universal just property, which he referred to as *possession*, a right based on usufruct. It was through this idea of extensive ownership that he sought to resolve the paradox of the productive and unproductive classes – that those who worked most starved, whilst those who worked least prospered.

Secondly, Proudhon's untrammelled hostility to the state related to its role as the protector of the unproductive classes and as the institutional guardian of injustice. That the state itself was an unproductive expropriator was the foundation of his belief that, even in different hands, it was incapable of reform and could never be an instrument of justice. The state would always be rooted in violence, deny liberty to its subjects, and impose the interests of the strong on the weak. Interestingly too, he saw the state as a corrupter of morals and work as morally redemptive. This conservative sheen to his work has helped publish many deeply mistaken interpretations, but it also the key to the third major aspect of his thought, the rejection of a notion of progress based on continuous economic growth.

Proudhon was one of the early advocates of limits to growth and thus he rejected both the economic and moral basis of mainstream nineteenth-century political economy. Instead, he proffered an alternative based on ownership for use and fair and free exchange – mutualism. This mutualism would not only ensure a just reward for labour, it would build collaboration and develop a complex, mutually dependent economy, which would mitigate the worst aspects of human nature. Competition and the division of labour would be transformed from instruments of exploitation into their proper role as the creators of a modern, collaborative economy. Such mutualism would eventually lead to layers of global collaboration through federalism.

Proudhon died in January 1865 when it was already becoming apparent that there was a different stream of anarchist thought emerging. Whereas Proudhon had rejected political action in favour of economic direct action, Bakunin, and later Kropotkin, favoured spontaneous revolution. Influenced by the revolutionary collectivism of the socialist movement, they rejected the state *and* all forms of property, including Proudhon's notion of possession. The paradox of just and unjust property was to be resolved by property's abolition. For anarcho-communists, property was the embodiment of injustice. Advocates of revolution sought a resolution of the conflicts that Proudhon saw as permanent and antagonistic, only capable of reaching a state of equilibrium through continuous social progress. Whilst Christian anarchists clung to the idea of non-violent social transformation, the bulk of the movement saw violence as a necessity. Anarchist communism was to develop as a faction of the revolutionary left.

This association with violent revolution has left anarchism with a negative image in the popular imagination. Anarchism became synonymous with bombs. The small group of anarchist terrorists in the late nineteenth century are now seen as stereotypical of the movement as a whole. I remember the title a *Guardian* sub-editor gave a review of a number of books on anarchism in total disregard of their contents: 'With a knapsack full of bombs – can violence ever be justified?'¹ As Clark and Martin argue in their critique of Reclus' position on violence, the acts of outrage themselves 'were a miserable failure', provoking repression and reaction, achieving nothing and creating lasting damage to anarchism's image that stigmatizes it to this day.²

Anarchist communism was not uncontested. In the late nineteenth century, it was one of two strands of libertarian thought with the individualist movement, closer to both Proudhon and the early nineteenth-century writers, posing an alternative to collectivism through universal self-employment and property ownership. The two not only co-existed as rivals, but there were also commonalities in ideas, continued debate and close personal contacts. However, there was an increasing tendency for each to deny the validity of the anarchism of the other and their historical development was to take them on increasingly divergent paths. Individualism itself was a broad church and consisted of explicit anarchists, such as Albert Tarn and Henry Seymour, and 'fellow travellers', like Wordsworth Donisthorpe and Auberon Herbert. Despite Seymour's occasional lapses into blood-curdling rhetoric, the overwhelming basis of the movement was non-violent, especially with Herbert's absolute pacifism.

Their cautious and peaceful advocacy of economic action lacked the spectacular appeal and impact of romantic revolution and perhaps this is one of the reasons for their relative neglect by historians. Individualism has a limited presence in the historiography of British anarchism and is widely misunderstood. The history of the left became dominated by collectivism and anarchist communism offered a familiar discourse, though without a role for the state. Individualism rejected both the state and collectivism, thereby denying itself a place within the labour movement, and can thus seem anomalous to the historian. Above all, the rise of the modern, urban, mass society made collectivism appear both relevant and practical and it dominated the twentieth century. History is kinder to victors than the vanquished.

Later, with the rise of neo-liberalism, individualism seemed to be a precursor of the Thatcherite right rather than a libertarian alternative to it. Advocacy of private property and free markets lost their meaning when stripped of their nineteenth-century context. Arguably, unquestioning collectivism has allowed the left to abandon vast areas of its natural, libertarian territory to political rivals who have adapted it to differing ends. It is intriguing to see that the collectivist anarchist Colin Ward acknowledged the

areas of common ground between himself and David Green, the Director of the Health and Welfare Unit at the Institute of Economic Affairs. Ward disapproved of the fact that 'there was no place for him [Green] on the political Left' as a critic of 'the automatic assumptions of the political Left and its faith in the State'.³

Individualism and anarchist communism shared a number of features. Both were hostile to capitalism and, especially, the rise of the corporation. In particular, they were critical of the nature of the wage system and the alienation of the products of labour from the producer. 'Wagedom', as Donisthorpe called it, was thought to be a regime that was exploitative and reduced the worker to little more than a slave. Both varieties, too, shared a particular class analysis that saw an intimate relationship between political power and modern capitalism. The state was also seen, in essence, as an expression of the power of a dominant class, however that class was constituted. It was in itself inevitably exploitative. Both variants denied the existence of a social contract or that democratic government could ever express a general will or lead to an explicit consent to be governed. As such, neither of the two movements saw political action through the state as in any way being a process of liberation. This could only come through voluntary and spontaneous direct action by the people themselves. Above all, both movements had heretical views on the great Victorian religion of progress. Despite this, the possibility of cultural and intellectual progress was central to their beliefs; they were, for instance, both trenchant advocates of gender equality and they rejected a purely material concept of progress based on unending economic growth fuelled by consumerism.

However, the differences were no less profound. Central to the dispute between the two was the concept of property. Individualism drew on an older tradition that viewed forms of property as a guarantor of individual independence and economic security and as a device that ensured that the full value of labour was gained by the labourer. The distinction individualists drew was between valid and invalid forms of property. For communists, property was in itself a system of expropriation and an institution founded in injustice, which perpetuated exploitation. It was an unbridgeable chasm. This fundamental disparity fuelled all the other differences between them. On distribution and exchange, communists relied on the old slogan of 'to each according to their needs', denying the necessity of any formal system of exchange at all. Individualists placed exchange at the centre of their political economy, basing it on contract and free currencies. This, in turn, was reflected in contrasting views of social organization. Communists relied on spontaneous collectivist organization, individualists on mutualism, universal self-employment and an end to monopoly or the possibility of monopolization. Implicit in both these approaches was the need for different methods of social change. A propertyless society was seen as the product of a universal revolution, whilst individualism

eschewed revolutionary upheaval in favour of economic self-organization and a change of individual consciousness through self-education and social evolution.

Despite these deep divisions continuing and developing, a new position began to emerge around the turn of the nineteenth century. Its emphasis was on ecology and evolution, locating left libertarianism within an understanding of humanity's relationship with the natural and the built environment. Drawing on Kropotkin, Elisée Reclus was the first to develop this perspective, though he never abandoned his own revolutionary communism. It was his younger friend and collaborator, the Scottish polymath Patrick Geddes, who fully articulated this new approach as a form of bio-regionalism allied to social and intellectual evolution. In doing so, he broke with the confines of a class analysis to root notions of social progress within a holistic approach to human and natural ecology. The omission of Geddes from the anarchist pantheon is especially curious as he is one of the few figures who represent a direct transmission of ideas from the classical anarchists to the present day via his self-confessed disciple, Lewis Mumford. Mumford in turn strongly influenced Murray Bookchin and the English anarchist Colin Ward cited them both as major sources.

Ultimately both individualist and communist anarchism came from the same school; both were grand narratives of a remade world. Equally, they rested in their own ways on a faith in two myths, the revolution as a way of remaking people and society or the evolutionary possibilities of continuous human social and intellectual improvement. Such ideas became unfashionable in a pragmatic age in search of 'what works', complacently basking in the apparent permanence of consumerist industrial progress.

As history forgot to end at the start of the twenty-first century, the nature of this progress is once again being contested. Economic and ecological crises have stimulated a vibrant protest movement and a ferment of new thinking. Many of the arguments and alternatives of the new movements are comparable to those of the nineteenth-century anarchists. Partly this is unconscious – in facing similar dilemmas, they have independently reached similar conclusions – but at other times there is a deliberate rediscovery of older ideas. Whilst the idea of total revolutionary transformation is as far away as ever, there are several highly pertinent anarchist discourses that are being articulated anew in a number of different settings. This is becoming the era of an anarchism of small things.

First, the individualist and mutualist emphasis on exchange is not just in opposition to communism – it is a standing critique of neo-liberal market thinking. Whilst fair trade has been contrasted with free trade, one of the most interesting of recent trends is the revival of the notion of currency reform. The individualist anarchist idea of free competition in currencies has even sparked a recent cause célèbre with the prosecution of Bernard von NotHaus for producing his own competing US currency, the Liberty Dollar.

Perhaps his conviction is a vindication of the individualists' insistence on the potency of such actions, particularly given the prosecutor's description of von NotHaus as a 'domestic terrorist'.⁴ The whole issue of the control of currency also brings into question the role of debt and credit in precipitating the financial crash.

On a macro level, David Graeber's anthropological study of debt proposes the revival of the Babylonian custom of periodic debt forgiveness – a jubilee – to eliminate debt bondage. Guido Giacomo Preparata⁵ sees a solution in the revival of the idea of Silvio Gesell and Rudolph Steiner of time-limited currencies, preventing accumulation of either wealth or debt and thereby curbing speculative market instability. At the micro level, David Boyle⁶ recognizes that we do have an existing multiplicity of systems of exchange and currency and argues for their 'rapid expansion ... driven by the urgent need to find ways of rebuilding social networks and supporting small businesses...'.⁷ The growth in community-based currencies, credit unions and micro-banking as a response to both the financial crisis and the conditions that led to it points to the prescience of the individualist anarchists and the possibility of collaborative and localized market exchange.

And there is something else too. These systems of exchange are the structures that enable what David Graeber has called 'everyday communism' to flourish. Nothing to do with property ownership, he writes of it as 'the foundation of all human sociability',⁸ a rough-and-ready sense of justice, of mutual aid and obligation and, above all a moral principle:

... once we start thinking of communism as a principle of morality rather than just a question of property ownership, it becomes clear that this sort of morality is almost always at play to some degree in any transaction – even commerce.⁹

So here is another glimpse of synthesis, of localized free exchange producing the sociability and mutual aid of collaborative and self-regulating communities, a unity between communism and exchange.

Secondly, this doesn't mean that we should forget property. This was a central concern of anarchists and their debate illuminates many of the key issues of our times. Peasant ownership of land has been seen as a key to food production and rural development, whilst security of tenure in urban areas is central to the development of sustainable communities. This is a challenge to the anarchist communist tradition that took the absolutist position that the abolition of property and the ending of exchange was the only way to social equality and justice. However, there is also a cogent argument to be made in favour of communally controlled common resources. Arguably, we need not take a simplistically monist position on property. As J. H. Levy pointed out, individual ownership cannot flourish

without some form of collective property alongside it. After all, the private house is of little use without the public street.

What anarchism also does is to question the way in which collective property is held. Neo-liberalism has exposed the failings of the Fabian conception of the state. The state may hold collective property, but that gives no right of ownership to the people who use it. As conventional property rights include the ultimate right of disposal, then it has proved perfectly possible for states to dispose of collective property at will, regardless of the interests of the citizens. This is why anarchists and anti-privatization campaigners have looked at alternative methods of collective property holding, for example through co-operatives and municipalization. Changing the nature of property relations and extending control over collective property would also, Green thinkers insist, allow for the empowerment of communities to regulate and control their local ecosystems. Extensive property holding, they argue, is a way to create ecological sustainability.

Thirdly, the early anarchists were critics of the new forms of corporate organization, and in an age when, as Noreena Hertz points out, 'fifty one of the hundred biggest economies in the world are now corporations, only forty nine are nation states',¹⁰ this opposition to collective economic power is also highly pertinent. But it is not simply the powerful economic and political positions of corporations that matters, the way those corporations are run should also concern us. As Nick Cohen memorably put it in his polemic in defence of free speech: 'Every time you go into your workplace, you leave a democracy and enter a dictatorship.'¹¹ Managerialism is a cult of leadership and a system of hierarchy that makes the kind of demands on staff that would please the most dedicated Stalinist. It pervades the public sector as much as the private. Anarchism, together with its own methods of organization, stands as witness to the dysfunction of bureaucratic power structures and poses alternatives.

After the explosion of individual freedoms from the 1960s onwards, there has been a backlash. Feminists are facing the need to refight old battles, free speech is under pressure from a new round of religious intolerance fed by fear of the violence of believers, and, less significantly, there is an increase in measures of social control. As well as seemingly endless moral panics on crime and anti-social behaviour, people are currently assailed by a range of initiatives from binge drinking to obesity,¹² all designed to change individual conduct. The fourth way in which anarchism contributes to modern politics is to take issue with the current fashion for the curtailment of liberty. This 'over-regulation' was the target of the polemics of many nineteenth-century libertarians. The individualists provide a rich seam of trenchant criticisms of both the effectiveness and the intentions behind governmental attempts at social reform, seeing them as an expression of class interest. They also set the pattern for a libertarian critique of some of the authoritarian left's most

favoured themes. For example, Wendy McElroy, the modern libertarian feminist, provocatively challenges what she sees as the authoritarian and statist impulses in radical feminism. Her book defending pornography¹³ is typical of her assaults on conventional, and authoritarian, wisdom. McElroy is well aware of the historical context of her critique and directly draws from libertarian feminist history.¹⁴

Finally, there is the anarchist notion of direct action. To see this solely in terms of street protest is mistaken. It also refers to a highly practical and experimental tradition, which involves people creating their own anarchist spaces where they can develop collective and individual structures that they both own and control. Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward, in particular, have explored the history of these traditions of direct action and experimentation.¹⁵ Its legacy is to be found in community businesses, squatters' movements, low-impact environmental lifestyles, etc. Ward asserted that this tradition is a strong one with deep roots in the Victorian period. It provided an alternative model of social welfare that was ignored by the triumph of Fabian statism.

When we compare the Victorian antecedents of our public institutions with the organs of working-class mutual aid in the same period, the very names speak volumes. On the one side the Workhouse, the Poor Law Infirmary, the National Society for the Education of the Poor in Accordance with the Principles of the Established Church; and on the other, the *Friendly Society*, the *Sick Club*, the *Co-operative Society*, the *Trade Union*. One represents the traditions of fraternal and autonomous associations springing up from below, the other that of authoritarian institutions directed from above.¹⁶

Self-help, outside the global economy, is both a survival technique and a way of confronting and challenging the power of that economy, but, above all, it is one that is not imposed and, being constructed and owned by those it serves, cannot be removed by a passing ideological fancy. It can also be an effective political strategy in a world free of grand narratives. As Colin Ward put it:

And the extent to which we choose, or accept, or are fobbed off with, or lack the imagination or inventiveness to discover alternatives to, authoritarian solutions to small problems is the extent to which we are their powerless victims in big affairs. We are powerless to change the course of events over the nuclear arms race, imperialism and so on, precisely because we have surrendered our power over everything else.¹⁷

For Proudhon and the later individualists, the mere practice of mutualism was itself a revolutionary act. Communists clung to the necessity of a

transformational revolution, although they also recognized the possibilities of the everyday exercise of mutual aid. It was Patrick Geddes who made the transition between theory and practice by developing a radical pragmatism, techniques of making small changes that nevertheless revolutionized the lives of individuals and communities.

Overall, the great contribution that these anarchists made to the political thinking of their time was their rejection of the conventional notion of material progress. Instead, they insisted on an alternative form of human progress as both the cause and result of social change. The type of progress they espoused was highly particular. It was rooted in intellectual and cultural development, the establishment of justice and the maximization of liberty. Human improvement certainly lay in science and technology, but it was also to be shaped by moral and ethical qualities. A future utopia of material abundance was a chimera, as too was a civilization based on increasing consumption regardless of need. Yet, human beings were capable of choosing to live in better ways, in material comfort certainly, but also as equals, without hierarchy and in balance with the natural world. Work may be inescapable, but is also sociable and enjoyable if it is undertaken without exploitation. The possibility of intellectual achievement is boundless. Above all, anarchists rejected the capitalist's sophistry that public good would spring from personal greed. Instead, they saw ruinous exploitation of the people and the planet enriching the few.

In this way, anarchism speaks to today in ways that are only too comprehensible. Rather than promising instantaneous transformation, a reinvented anarchism without adjectives offers the possibility of practical action that develops spheres of liberty within the system, without abandoning the hope that it may one day replace it. The American historian Christopher Lasch made an interesting distinction between optimism and hope. Optimism he saw as 'a blind faith that things will somehow work out for the best'.¹⁸ However, 'Hope does not demand a belief in progress. It demands a belief in justice: a conviction that the wicked will suffer, that wrongs will be made right ... Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it.'¹⁹ Furthermore, hope does not 'prevent us from expecting the worst. The worst is what the hopeful are prepared for.'²⁰

Anarchism is a doctrine of hope. It may reject injustice but does not offer a future imagined utopia; instead, it invites people to create their own lives, freely and without coercion. It celebrates and values all human life and, often realistically, faces the human predicament. However idiosyncratic some of the ideas that have sprung from it are, it is hardly surprising that at a time of global ecological, economic and political crisis it is being rediscovered.

Notes

- 1 *The Guardian* (9 April 2005).
- 2 John P. Clark and Camille Martin (eds), *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity*, p.67.
- 3 Colin Ward, *Social Policy: An Anarchist Response* (Freedom Press: London, 1996), p.15.
- 4 <http://www.fbi.gov/charlotte/press-releases/2011/defendant-convicted-of-minting-his-own-currency> (accessed 4 November 2012).
- 5 Guido Giacomo Preperata, 'Of Money, Heresy and, Surrender, Part I: The Ways of our System, an Outline', *Anarchist Studies* (Vol. 17 No.1, 2009), pp.18–47 and 'Of Money, Heresy and, Surrender, Part II: A plea for Regional and Perishable Currency', *Anarchist Studies* (Vol. 18 No.1, 2010), pp.9–39.
- 6 David Boyle, *More Than Money: Platforms for Exchange and Reciprocity in Public Services* (New Economics Foundation and NESTA: London, 2011).
- 7 *Ibid* p.24.
- 8 David Graeber, *Debt* (Chapter Five), Kindle location 1960.
- 9 *Ibid* (Chapter Five), Kindle location 2077.
- 10 Noreena Hertz, *The Silent Takeover, Global Capitalism and the Death of Democracy* (Arrow Books: London, 2001), p.8.
- 11 Nick Cohen, *You Can't Read This Book: Censorship in an Age of Freedom* (Fourth Estate: London, 2011), p.149.
- 12 Thereby neatly sidestepping growing evidence of the more serious impact on health of inequality and poverty.
See e.g. Richard G. Wilkinson, *The Impact of Inequality: How to make Sick Societies Healthier* (Routledge: London, 2005) and Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (Penguin: London, 2010).
- 13 Wendy McElroy, *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1995).
- 14 See Wendy McElroy (ed.), *Freedom, Feminism and the State*, second edn. (The Independent Institute: Oakland, CA, 1991).
- 15 See for example Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward, *Arcadia for All. The Legacy of a Makeshift Landscape* (Mansell, 1984) and Colin Ward, *Cotters and Squatters: Housing's Hidden History* (Five Leaves: Nottingham, 2002).
- 16 Colin Ward, *Social Policy: An Anarchist Response*, p.9.
- 17 Colin Ward and David Goodway, *Talking Anarchy* (Five Leaves: Nottingham, 2003), p.55.
- 18 Christopher Lasch, *The True and only Heaven*, p.81.
- 19 *Ibid* pp.80–1.
- 20 *Ibid* p.81.