Ryley, Peter. "Introduction." *Making Another World Possible: Anarchism, Anti-Capitalism and Ecology in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Britain*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. viii–xv. Contemporary Anarchist Studies. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501306754.0004>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 12:07 UTC.

Copyright © Peter Ryley 2013. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

INTRODUCTION

Much of this book has been written in Greece. My house is in the southwest of the Pelion peninsula, a crooked finger of land enclosing the Pagasitic Gulf. It is an area of breathtaking natural beauty associated in mythology with the Centaurs and Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. In 1839 David Urquhart wrote of his visit to the region:

This district exhibits what the soil can produce, and what happiness man can attain to when relieved from the intrusion of laws.¹

What could be a more appropriate location to write about anarchism? And today, it could be hardly more relevant.

The book has had two manifestations. The first was a PhD thesis, completed in 2006. Then Greece was booming and it would have been easy to shrug off the dysfunctional bureaucracy of the Greek state and romanticize local idiosyncrasies in the light of Urquhart's observation. By the time the opportunity arose to update and significantly rewrite the manuscript for publication, things had changed dramatically.

At the time of writing, the country is at the epicentre of a pan-European financial crisis; the result of banking failures and sovereign debt, exacerbated by the flaws in European Monetary Union. Reeling from austerity measures imposed from outside by a 'troika' of lenders, Greece's economy is spiralling downwards, poverty growing, whilst street demonstrations are met with clouds of tear gas and police brutality. Now anarchist ideas seem more urgent. Self-conscious anarchists are on the front line of protests whilst autonomous organizations respond to the collapsing living standards with mutual aid and alternative economic action.²

Yet, this is not the only on-going crisis and may not even be the most profound. Whilst the Greek protest movements call for measures to promote economic growth, the uncertain impact of a warming climate points to a contradiction. Any growth requires increases in consumption, and that additional production and consumption, at least if it is dependent on fossil fuels, could exacerbate climate change, threatening catastrophe. Calls for ecological sustainability then are becoming integral to any radical political economy.

And this is where the anarchist ideas that developed in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries are startlingly prescient. Global warming may not have been apparent at the time, but anarchist writers were acutely aware of the limits to growth and of the unsustainability of ever-expanding consumption. They also developed alternative political economies that explicitly addressed the financial failings of late Victorian capitalism, all within a much wider libertarian philosophy. Whilst it is hard to see an immediate anarchist solution arising from these twin crises, anarchist ideas have become increasingly prominent and some have been adopted as part of a popular response, most notably by the Occupy movement and its counterpart in the debtor European nations, the Indignant Citizens Movement.

At this point, nearly every book on

I look at launches into a lament about how it is misunderstood and stereotyped in popular imagination as an extremist doctrine advocated by bomb-wielding nihilists.³ I won't join in, but when reading them something interesting struck me. When writers try to move from saying what anarchism isn't to trying to define exactly what it is, it turns out to be an elusive beast and few definitions wholly satisfy.⁴

Definitions of anarchism tend to break down into three main types: political, economic and social. The first focuses on the anarchist rejection of the state and advocacy of autonomous direct action. The second tries to define anarchism in terms of its political economy, most frequently in its relationship to socialism; whilst the third focuses on personal liberation from what John Stuart Mill called 'the tyranny of the prevailing opinion',⁵ thereby creating, in John Moore's words, 'an entire art of living, which is simultaneously anti-authoritarian, anti-ideological and antipolitical'.⁶ The book will touch on all of these – the logic of anti-statism; the importance and growth of counterculture, especially in relation to gender and education; but my central focus will be on political economy. And that will involve a critical scrutiny of the relationship between anarchism and socialism.

Ruth Kinna gives a pretty good political definition of anarchism, describing it as a 'doctrine that aims at the liberation of peoples from political domination and economic exploitation by the encouragement of direct or non-governmental action'.⁷ But the moment we start asking about how domination and exploitation are to be countered, the central divisions in anarchist theory become apparent.

Let's start with Amster *et al.*, who place classical anarchism 'firmly within the socialist movement, in opposition to capitalism and private ownership of the means of production'.⁸ The problem with this is that it is self-limiting; it excludes the individualist anarchists who favoured private ownership and who are a major feature of this study. This inconvenience is often dealt with by denying the validity of individualism as an authentic anarchist perspective. For example, Seán M. Sheehan, in his short book '*Anarchism*',

mentioned the egoist Max Stirner, but was dismissive, describing him as being ‘far removed from mainstream communist anarchism’ and talks of the ‘communist heart of anarchism’.⁹ Sheehan goes even further and, rather like an over-optimistic marriage guidance counsellor, hopes to reconcile anarchism with Marxism.¹⁰ Given the mental and physical cruelty dished out by Marxists over the years, I feel that irretrievable breakdown is the only sensible option. Let’s hope that this time the anarchists get to keep the house.

Even one of the best modern anarchist writers, Colin Ward, writes off individualism. Though fairer to it than some, he sees it as an American phenomenon, thereby ignoring the substantial British contribution, and concludes that in the twentieth century ‘their inventiveness seems to be limited to providing an ideology for untrammelled market capitalism’.¹¹ In one sense, he is right. After the nineteenth century, individualists made their peace with capitalism and, enthusiastically promoted by Murray Rothbard, morphed into right libertarians. Despite this, a left libertarian strand remains, combining elements of classic liberal economics with social libertarianism, emphasizing its radical inheritance and challenging the dominance of anarcho-capitalism. This is far closer to the individualists discussed in this book. Whatever the later developments, it cannot be denied that individualists have made a considerable contribution to anarchist thought, sharing the same antipathy to hierarchy but reaching for different solutions. They were particularly prominent in the period I am writing about and deserve to be included in the anarchist pantheon, yet their inclusion would deal a blow to the idea of anarchist political economy as *solely* a variant of mainstream socialism.

So how do we reach an inclusive definition? David Goodway gets closer with a neat aphorism describing anarchism’s ‘thoroughly socialist critique of capitalism ... combined with a liberal critique of socialism’.¹² This is not quite there though, because individualism’s critique of capitalism is not socialist,¹³ based as it is on extensive property rights and equitable exchange. I think we need to take a step back and get some additional perspective.

There are two ways to approach the problem. The first is to break with the idea of anarchism as a doctrine. Instead, I see anarchism as being rooted in an ethical choice, to live without hierarchy. Once that choice is made, it becomes necessary to examine the ways in which this may be possible. Of course, in a deeply stratified society we are drawn into discussions about class and economics and these have dominated one view of anarchism. But then hierarchy manifests itself in so many other ways – in gender relations, in education systems, in social status, in the structure of organizations, in managerialism, in our approach to the natural world and other species, through to the inequitable constraints on our personal liberty and simply in everyday life. And so, anarchists are drawn into discussions on all these

and more for the simple reason that hierarchy permeates our existence. Being good anarchists, and given the many possibilities and existential contradictions of our social, economic and personal lives, they don't agree. So anarchism is not fixed, it is a debate, an exploration of an ethical commitment and a living way of thinking. In this way, I am inclined to see anarchism as a process rather than a prescription.

The second is narrower, concentrates on political economy and is more directly relevant to this book. It is drawn from the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber's stimulating book on debt,¹⁴ a sustained essay on the interlocking of economics with ethics. Graeber puts forward this interesting proposition:

I will provide a rough-and-ready way to map out the main possibilities, by proposing that there are three main moral principles on which economic relations can be founded, all of which occur in any human society, and which I will call communism, hierarchy, and exchange.¹⁵

And this is where the divergence in anarchism occurs. Rejecting hierarchy means that communism and exchange remain and different strands of anarchism attach themselves to each. Anarcho-communism emphasizes collectivism, mutual aid and social solidarity, whereas individualists favour ownership, mutualism and markets.

Graeber is critical of modern markets, seeing them as impersonal frameworks, 'in which it was possible to treat even neighbours as if they were strangers'.¹⁶ However, another interesting and original book, Paul Seabright's *The Company of Strangers*,¹⁷ turns this on its head and argues that actually markets enable us to treat strangers as if they were neighbours. He contends that we are the only primates that collaborate with others outside our immediate kin network and we do so without direction through markets; '... even some of the simplest activities of modern society depend on intricate webs of international cooperation that function without anyone's [sic] being in overall charge'.¹⁸ So here we have two views: one that sees markets as an impersonal instrument of dehumanization, exploitation and commodification, and the other that argues that they are, or can become, networks of global cooperation and mutual dependency.¹⁹

It has become commonplace to associate markets with capitalism, as if the two were intrinsically linked. However, the individualists challenged that notion and opposed the emerging corporate capitalism of their day. They argued that cooperative markets could only exist in the absence of the distorting power of the state and through free currencies as the medium of exchange. Above all, the equality of each party in the process was to be ensured by extensive property rights. In doing so, they divorced the free market from capitalism, distinguishing between markets as a method of exchange and capitalism as a pattern of ownership. And it was this

question of ownership that became another fault line, dividing the anarchist movement into those who viewed property itself as the main instrument of exploitation as opposed to those who felt that the problem lay with its accumulation and monopolization.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there were attempts to reconcile this division through the promotion of ‘anarchism without adjectives’. At its simplest, this meant recognition of commonalities and a toleration of diversity. But this was not all. A more synthetic approach was emerging that partly centred on ecology. And it was this approach that systematized something that was inherent in all the anarchist thought of this period – a rejection of the dominant model of progress based on endless increases in consumption driving permanent economic growth.

The critique of progress encountered in the writings of the British anarchists of this period needs to be distinguished from two other commonly held anti-progressive views. The first was the ‘back to the land’ movement, popular in Victorian England,²⁰ arguing for rural resettlement and a predominantly agrarian economy. The second is more pervasive and is more often associated with the political right – Traditionalism.²¹

Traditionalism is a doctrine that repudiates scientific rationalism in favour of a mystical understanding rooted in perennialism, a belief in the unity of spiritual truth that is expressed by all religions. It rejects modernism and yearns for a return to a traditional, utopian and largely invented past. The Traditionalist idea of progress is cut from the same cloth. In a process referred to as ‘inversion’, they argue that what is perceived to be progress is really decline. The reason why this should be so is that the more Western society advances, the more it moves away from the spiritual truths that were embodied in the traditional societies of the East. This always struck me as another example of Orientalism and, following Andre Gunder Frank’s convincing and provocative critique of Eurocentrism in economic history,²² marginalizes the important contribution of the East to the development of the very modern society Traditionalists deplore.²³ This type of anti-progressive thinking has become popular in Green politics, though I like Michael Bywater’s splenetic response:

In short, the Ancients spent what thinking time they had trying to make phenomenological bricks without ontological straw. They were wrong about almost everything, hopelessly confused sequence and causation, left the scantiest record of their thinking, and croaked in short order...

Those who believe in the Wisdom of the Ancients disbelieve in any progress in human understanding. It is the intellectual equivalent of saying *There’s nothing worth watching on the telly any more* or *This so-called music the young people listen to, it’s rubbish*. In truth, it is not the Wisdom of the Ancients that we have lost; it’s any fathoming of their true Ignorance.²⁴

The problem is that both Bywater and Traditionalists are missing the point. Other peoples, particularly simple societies that have persisted into our era, have enormous knowledge and expertise in the management of their local environment. Some too had developed social ethics that certainly impressed Peter Kropotkin. However, their expertise and ethics were wrapped in metaphysical explanations that were clearly wrong. Both the Traditionalists and their critics focus on the metaphysics as being the source of either wisdom or ignorance depending on their point of view, whereas it is the expertise that is deserving of our respect.

Traditionalism certainly has links with some aspects of anarchism. Partly this was the result of personal journeys. For example, Alan Antliff in his fine study of anarchism and aesthetics²⁵ devotes much space to the 'arts and crafts' anarchism of Ananda Coomaraswamy. But, as the historian of Traditionalism, Mark Sedgwick, points out, by the 1920s he had moved to become a leading Traditionalist writer.²⁶ Modern anarchism has also taken up Traditionalist discourses. Arthur Versluis²⁷ and Mark Sedgwick²⁸ have also commented on its influences on the work of Peter Lamborn Wilson (Hakim Bey), whilst the anarcho-primitivist Fredy Perlman pays direct tribute to one of the leading Traditionalist writers, Mircea Eliade.²⁹ Certainly, Perlman's book is a striking evocation of the idea of inversion.

Though there may be some traces and cross-influences, neither of these critiques were central to the ideas of the subjects of this book, who remained scientific rationalists, often enthusiasts for modern technologies and firm believers in the necessity of human progress. It is just that the progress they envisaged was not the same as that of the mainstream of both left and right. It was neither linear nor inevitable. They saw limits to growth, stressed the importance of intellectual, ethical and cultural development, and argued that the maximization of human liberty and self-determination was integral to human progress. What is more, their social and economic theories drew lessons from the natural sciences, specifically from Darwin's evolutionary biology and Ernst Haeckel's concept of ecology. And they often eschewed a simplistic monism. Progressives glorified the city, nostalgics yearned for arcadia, yet many of these anarchists argued for the unity of urban and rural, together with an ecological understanding of the place of humanity in both the natural and built environments.

This was a more commonplace view in the nineteenth century than is often perceived. For example, John Stuart Mill wrote in support of the 'stationary state', an end to economic growth, though only after technology had reduced the hours of labour and ensured sufficiency for all. Even then, he was adamant that 'a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement'.³⁰ And it is this sense of the possibilities of human and technological evolution that permeates the anarchism of this period. What anarchists were arguing for was a change in

social relations, social evolution and an understanding of humanity's place in nature that would make such progress possible.

I suppose that the next question that arises is, why choose history to explore these themes? The obvious answer is that I am an historian, more comfortable in the byways of the nineteenth century than in the modern, but there is obviously more to it than that. Firstly, I want to reassert the importance of history against the arrogance of the present, which stresses its own novelty and originality. Instead, I am with Graeber's view that almost all social possibilities are present in all periods of history and with Frank's suggestion that 'all manner of relations of production were and remain widely intermingled even within any one "society", not to mention world society as a whole'.³¹ The nineteenth century was not such a different world as it seems and the relevance of many of the ideas is manifest, even if some widespread beliefs, such as phrenology, now strike us as either sinister or comic.

In the same way, an understanding of modern anarchism is helped by knowledge of the evolution of anarchist ideas. It is one of the strengths of anarchism is that it takes its history seriously and not dogmatically, refusing to see its classic texts as holy writ. And this book tries to contribute to this historical exploration. It is an exercise in genealogy as elucidation; knowing what we were is often a way of enhancing our understanding of who we are and of where we are going.

My final aim is purely historical. There is a move in intellectual history towards empiricism as a way of counteracting anachronistic interpretations of ideas.³² This means looking at ideas in context rather than as isolated abstractions. This book is attempting to widen our understanding of the nature of anarchism and its place in the radical milieu that developed in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And what a milieu it was. The interconnections between groups and ideas and the sheer breadth of thinking are fascinating. Anarchism is often included in studies these days, but even where it is, the picture is incomplete. In particular, individualism is often absent or, if included, misunderstood, and a key synthetic figure like Patrick Geddes is well regarded but rarely included in the anarchist canon.

This book aims to provide a more inclusive picture of the anarchism of the period and to do so means that it has to explore minor journals, archives of correspondence, less famous writers and the idiosyncratic as well as the renowned. In reading this material, a remarkable picture emerges of a broadly non-sectarian milieu,³³ a free exchange of ideas, robust but comradely debates, profound disagreements but a mutual recognition that all were combatants in the struggle for liberty. Again, the tendency to exclude individualism is a perfect example of how our view can be shaped by anachronistic readings, in this case seeing individualists as neo-liberal capitalists, rather than the anti-capitalist radicals that they really were.

The book begins by looking at relevant modern anti-capitalist and Green politics before moving on to an historical discussion of how a distinctive political economy developed that questioned the conventional economic notion of progress. The second chapter discusses the development of anarcho-communism's thinking on revolution and mutual aid through the work of Peter Kropotkin, before subsequent chapters introduce the reader to the work of two groups of individualists: the English Individualists, a group of anti-statist libertarians, and the individualist anarchists. Next, it charts the development of communist anarchism, focusing on three main groups: working class revolutionaries, British and European writers and activists mainly clustered around the Freedom group, and the rarely included Christian anarchists. Finally, it examines the emergence of a distinctive ecological anarchism in the work of Elisée Reclus and Patrick Geddes.

Inevitably, the book cannot be comprehensive. I have not discussed syndicalism and Patrick Geddes is the only figure included who continued to be active for long after the First World War. For those interested in the later development of a distinctive British anarchism, Carissa Honeywell has written on some of the key people who followed.³⁴ However, I hope that what follows will give the reader an understanding of the foundations of an indigenous British anarchist tradition, though also one with strong European links and influences as well as contacts with the United States, and will show its enduring importance both to the milieu of its time and to the wider development of anarchist ideas in the years that followed.