

Anarchism — a definition

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At this juncture it would probably be helpful to give a summary of the idea which won me over so completely at such a young age.

Anarchism encompasses such a broad view of the world that it cannot easily be distilled into a formal definition. Mikhail Bakunin, a man of action whose writings and example over a century ago did most to transform anarchism from an abstract critique of political power into a theory of practical social action, defined its fundamental tenet thus:

‘In a word, we reject all privileged, licensed, official, and legal legislation and authority, even though it arise from universal suffrage, convinced that it could only turn to the benefit of a dominant and exploiting minority, and against the interests of the vast enslaved majority.’

Anarchism is a movement for human freedom. It is concrete, democratic and egalitarian. It is rooted in normality as opposed to eccentricity. It has existed and developed since the seventeenth century, with a philosophy and a defined outlook that have evolved and grown with time and circumstance. Anarchism began — and remains — a direct challenge by the underprivileged to their oppression and exploitation. It opposes both the insidious growth of state power and the pernicious ethos of possessive individualism, which, together or separately, ultimately serve only the interests of the few at the expense of the rest.

Anarchism is both a theory and practice of life. Philosophically, it aims for the maximum accord between the individual, society and nature. Practically, it aims for us to organise and live our lives in such a way as to make politicians, governments, states and their officials superfluous. In an anarchist society, mutually respectful sovereign individuals would be organised in non-coercive relationships within naturally defined communities in which the means of production and distribution are held in common.

Anarchists are not dreamers obsessed with abstract principles and theoretical constructs. Events are ruled by chance and people’s actions depend on long-held habits and on psychological and emotional factors that are often antisocial and usually unpredictable. Anarchists are well aware that a perfect society cannot be won tomorrow. Indeed, the struggle lasts forever! However, it is the vision that provides the spur to struggle against things as they are, and for things that might be.

Whatever the immediate prospects of achieving a free society, and however remote the ideal, if we value our common humanity then we must never cease to strive to realise our vision. To settle for anything less means we are little more than beasts of burden at the service of the privileged few, without much to gain from life other than a lighter load, better feed and a cosier berth.

Ultimately, only struggle determines outcome, and progress towards a more meaningful community must begin with the will to resist every form of injustice: In general terms, this means challenging all exploitation and defying the legitimacy of all coercive authority. If anarchists have one article of unshakable faith, it is that, once the habit of deferring to politicians or ideologues is lost, and that of resistance to domination and exploitation acquired, then ordinary people have a capacity to organise every aspect of their lives in their own interests, anywhere and at any time, both freely and fairly.

Anarchists do not stand aside from popular struggle, nor do they attempt to dominate it. They seek to contribute to it practically whatever they can, and also to assist within it the highest possible levels both of individual self-development and of group solidarity. It is possible to recognise anarchist ideas concerning voluntary relationships, egalitarian participation in decision-making processes, mutual aid and a related critique of all forms of domination in philosophical, social and revolutionary movements in all times and places.

Elsewhere, the less formal practices and struggles of the more indomitable among the propertyless and disadvantaged victims of the authority system have found articulation in the writings of those who on brief acquaintance would appear to be mere millenarian dreamers. Far from being abstract speculations conjured out of thin air, such works have, like all social theories, been derived from sensitive observation. They reflect the fundamental and uncontainable conviction nourished by a conscious minority throughout history that social power held over people is a usurpation of natural rights: power originates in the people, and they alone have, together, the right to wield it.

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