

Anarchism

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For members of the public unfamiliar with anarchist theory, anarchist history, or people who identify as anarchists, *anarchy* simply means chaos. That superficial understanding enables political authorities to resort to fear-mongering, as during 2020's Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality and other forms of systemic racism, even though the vast majority of BLM activists and supporters were not anarchists. Serious discussion of anarchism's goals, principles, and methods is rare.

Current efforts to define anarchism generally lead to acknowledging that any definition is contested. Although some Greek philosophers and Chinese Taoists saw life without hierarchy as a positive ideal, most considered *anarchy* (from the Greek "without a ruler") a negative state of being. My computer's dictionary defines anarchism as a "belief in the abolition of all government and the organization of society on a voluntary, cooperative basis without recourse to force or compulsion." This definition highlights anarchism's opposition to the state but is vague about its equally central opposition to capitalism. (To clarify, the focus here is on anarchism on the left, its dominant form since developing as *libertarian socialism*.)

Rather than a specific definition, Uri Gordon (2008) suggests understanding anarchism simultaneously as a social movement, a political culture, and a collection of ideas centered around three themes: rejecting all forms of domination; direct action rather than appealing to state authorities, which includes "prefigurative politics" (incorporating anarchist values in group activities and structures); and diversity of people, projects, interactions, etc. Gordon notes that, in an effort to avoid confusion, many activists who embrace anarchist goals and methods refer to themselves not as anarchists but as anti-authoritarians or autonomous.

Regardless of definition, anarchist goals reflect assumptions about the interplay between human nature and the social order that differ significantly from those underpinning competing

political tendencies. Anarchists reject common views that human nature is so inherently negative that prehistoric societies without government, law, or police must have been hierarchical, inequitable, dangerous, or otherwise undesirable. They know that our ancestors lived successfully in stateless “primitive anarchies” for most of human history (Barclay, 1982) and that states, organized religion, legal systems, and the like are relatively recent inventions, which, anarchists argue, are designed primarily to sustain inequality and hierarchy.

Surprising to those who assume anarchists are motivated solely by individual ego, central to anarchist theory and practice is *mutual aid* – mutuality, solidarity, cooperation. Anarchists may want to do their own thing, but they want to do it in a supportive community, reaping the benefits of “communal individuality” (Ritter, 1980). Anarchist writers have long recognized the tension between these two goals. Emma Goldman wrote more than a century ago that “the problem that confronts us today, and which the nearest future is to solve, is how to be one’s self and yet in oneness with others, to deeply feel with all human beings and still retain one’s characteristic qualities” (1911). A century later, Cindy Milstein (2009) says, anarchism remains “the only political tradition that has consistently grappled with the tension between the individual and society” (p. 92).

In this sense, anarchism can be viewed as a psychopolitical movement. Understanding that the personal is political and that the political is also personal, anarchists seek to transform themselves as well as society. Although commonly rejecting mainstream psychology’s individualist, status quo orientation (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009), they routinely make psychological arguments to support their critiques, goals, and methods. This emphasis has interested a number of psychologists (e.g., Abraham Maslow, Paul Goodman, Noam Chomsky, Seymour Sarason) as well as radical therapists and psychoanalysts (e.g., Otto Gross, a precursor to Wilhelm Reich; Roberto Freire, creator of *somatherapy*). Anarchism’s focus on enhancing both autonomy and mutuality, demonstrated in its practical efforts to devise functioning groups, communities, and networks without hierarchy, makes it particularly relevant to standard topics in mainstream social and political psychology (e.g., power, group decision-making, cooperation/competition, obedience/resistance) as well as to topics drawing more critical attention (e.g., ideology, subjectivity, discourse) (Fox, 2011).

History and Practice

Efforts to create communities free of state control have arisen over many centuries (e.g., Anabaptists, Diggers, early Rhode Island and Quaker Pennsylvania), but anarchism's political form developed in 18th/19th century revolutionary Europe. Anarchists today debate the role of various writers of the period but typically emphasize political philosopher William Godwin ("the first anarchist") and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon ("the first self-proclaimed anarchist"); the latter's work was particularly influential during the revolutions of 1848 and beyond. Modern anarchists, who sometimes doubt whether Proudhon was consistently anarchist by today's standards, often cite instead Petr Kropotkin, a Russian zoologist whose book *Mutual Aid* (1902) rejected capitalist-friendly Social-Darwinian notions and provided justification for a society based on cooperation rather than competition.

Initially, the anarchist wing of the socialist movement worked with the Marxists who eventually ejected them for seeking to abolish centralized state rule rather than simply replacing state rulers with proletarian ones. Anarchist projects in Europe and the Americas, spreading into East Asia early in the 20th Century, ranged across the political-personal spectrum: revolutionary struggle, including sporadic highly visible assassinations; worker strikes aiming not just to improve factory conditions but to collectivize property; propaganda advocating women's rights, free love, and dismantling the nuclear family. Until the 1930s anarchist labor unions were major political forces in Argentina and especially in Spain until defeated by Franco's forces. By the mid-20th century the movement was in decline, but revived again in the 1960s rebellion against conventional politics and conventional life and the embrace of spontaneity and direct experience.

Especially relevant to shaping the form of today's mass-protest structures and strategies was the 1970s movement against nuclear power, beginning with the occupation of a nuclear plant construction site in Wyhl, Germany. The effort to do the same thing in the US, in New Hampshire, was not explicitly anarchist, but the New England Clamshell Alliance adopted anarchism's focus on direct action, small "affinity group" structure as part of mass organizing, and nonhierarchical decision-making. Many participants were reading anarchist writers, including Murray Bookchin (1971), who participated intermittently in Clamshell and then in the breakaway faction Coalition for Direct Action at Seabrook, whose larger proportion of anarchists

rejected purely symbolic civil disobedience. These organizations' norms, which spread throughout the anti-nuclear movement, were later replicated in the anti-globalization movement sparked by 1999's Seattle protest against the World Trade Organization; permeated the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement that arose in the wake of the Arab Spring; and persist today in explicitly anarchist groups as well as in multi-perspective groups and networks, including Antifa (Anti-Fascist), which began in Europe to oppose the spread of neo-Nazism and includes not just anarchists but also communists, progressives, and others networked in autonomous affinity groups without central coordination.

Anarchist influence was especially strong in the Occupy movement's direct actions and community building. Its catchphrase "We are the 99 percent!" was reportedly coined by anarchist anthropologist David Graeber. Although most participants were not anarchists, Occupy norms – horizontal democracy, refusal to appoint official leaders, consensus-seeking decision-making through General Assemblies, direct action such as site occupations and marches without seeking state permission, reliance on voluntary labor, and free distribution of food, clothing, and shelter, – came directly from anarchist theory and practice. As de facto experiments in ongoing quasi-anarchist community, Occupy sites exemplified prefigurative politics, acting today as we hope to live in the future, while grappling with inevitable difficulties, some of which reflected strained interactions between anarchists and the more numerous non-anarchists.

Anarchism's varying tendencies are reflected in a wide variety of organizations and projects, many of them far afield from the popular image of militant black-clad protestors. One project started four decades ago by former Clamshell/CDAS activists, Food Not Bombs, still distributes free food at protests and regularly to the homeless through autonomous groups in hundreds of cities around the world; it is sometimes the first group distributing food after natural disasters and other crises, as in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, on New York's Long Island after Superstorm Sandy, and on the Polish border as Ukrainians fled the 2022 Russian invasion. Similarly, media attention on anarchists facing off with state authorities during Black Lives Matter protests ignored those who came as medics or cooks, working out of vans or tents labeled Mutual Aid to offer free food and water, medical help, Covid-19 supplies, and other necessities. A more ongoing project began in 2013 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, where anarchists, following the

example of takeovers of abandoned buildings in many countries, “occupied three houses in the center of the city, using two as living spaces and keeping the third open to the community as a free space for meetings, workshops, movie screenings, study groups, debates, fundraisers, and other social and cultural events”; when the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic began, “They began to collect donations of money and materials including food, clothing, masks, and hygiene products to produce kits, which they distribute to their homeless neighbors and other occupations in the neighborhood on a weekly basis” (“Solidarity, Direct Action, and Self-Determination,” 2020).

Examples of other long-standing groups include the Anarchist Black Cross, advocating prison abolition; Anarchists Against the Wall, supporting Palestinians who oppose Israel’s Separation Wall; and academic outposts such as the Anarchist Studies Network that research and teach anarchist principles. Intentional and utopian communities, often explicitly or implicitly anarchist, have a long history, from ad hoc communes to the Israeli kibbutz movement (Horrox, 2009) to more than a thousand communities today of various types and sizes (Fellowship for Intentional Community, 2016). On a much larger scale, out of the disruption of Syria’s Civil War came the de facto autonomous Kurdish region of Rojava, organized along decentralist, pluralist, and feminist principles adopted after revolutionary leader Abdullah Öcalan read Murray Bookchin’s books while in prison (Fornarola, 2019).

Internal Debates

Gordon (2008) emphasizes four areas of current anarchist contention within the more general opposition to domination: the nature of decision-making in groups that oppose power imbalance and hierarchy; the role of various forms of violence and property destruction; attitudes toward technology and other hallmarks of civilization; and connections to movements for national liberation. Anarchist groups have devised a wide array of responses to these and other differences. Thus, *Wikipedia’s* article on Anarchist Schools of Thought describes some two dozen tendencies, including mutualism, anarchist communism, anarcho-syndicalism, Christian anarchism, anarcho-pacifism, anarcha-feminism, green anarchism, anarcho-primitivism, insurrectionary anarchism, post-anarchism, and, finally, “anarchism without adjectives.” As a practical matter, these differences have not generally prevented anarchists in different traditions from working together.

As an international movement with a history of political activism and community experimentation, anarchism's internal debates are less tied to geographic location than to how best to respond to divergent local conditions. But although specific actions and projects vary widely, the core of anarchist theory, practice, and style is recognizable in very different places. In building on earlier international efforts such as the anti-nuclear and anti-globalization movements, for example, the Occupy movement developed multinationally, drawing inspiration from parallel anarchist and anarchist-tinged movements ranging from the Arab Spring to the Indignados in Spain to anti-austerity activism in Greece and elsewhere.

A somewhat peripheral debate, with its own confusion about definition, stems from individualists on the right claiming to be anarchists because they reject the political state even though they embrace capitalism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this argument developed most strongly in the United States, where adherents shifted the word "libertarian" from its identification with the "libertarian socialist" anarchist left toward the political right; today "libertarian" is most often used by anarcho-capitalists (who generally see either no role for the state or a minimal one of protecting private property) and by members of the Libertarian Party and related tendencies. US libertarians, often influenced by Ayn Rand and other individualist writers, oppose not only government interference in speech, drug use, consensual adult sexuality, and so on but also interference in capitalism, a linkage that the historical anarchist political movement clearly rejects.

Relevance for Psychology

Anarchism challenges not just defenders of the status quo but also other radicals who seek to transform one societal element or another while leaving intact hierarchy, competition, or other system bulwarks. Non-anarchist efforts typically set aside the "anarchist insight" described by community psychologist Seymour Sarason: reliance on the state diminishes both personal autonomy and the sense of community. "That is to say, the more the lives of people are a consequence of decisions made by Kafkaesque officialdom, the more they are robbed of those communal bonds and responsibility upon which the sense of rootedness is built" (Sarason, 1976, p. 251). Anarchists, not surprisingly, fault both liberal and radical agendas that enhance state control. Rejecting the assumption that changing the identity of those in power will change the

system, they experiment to see what else might work, putting into practice Paul Goodman's sense of "the anarchist principle" as "a social-psychological hypothesis with obvious political implications" (1966/1979, p. 176).

Despite psychology's relevance to anarchist thought, psychologists have played a minor role in the field of anarchist studies, which attracts contributions across a range of other disciplines (Amster, et al., 2009). Brown (2008) suggested that an anarchist psychology "will not emerge from a different model of the person but rather from a simultaneous rethinking of person and collective together" (p. 2). "Indeed the very thought of creating such a disciplinary division seems inimical to anarchism. But what we might say is that psychology in an anarchist register must take 'life' as its object rather than 'subjectivity' or 'the individual'" (Brown, 2008, p. 10).

Critical psychologists (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009) could help address a significant problem: Despite emphasizing the interaction between changing ourselves and changing the world, anarchists have not routinely explored ways to resolve personal and interpersonal complexities that hinder, and sometimes stem from, their political efforts (Fox, 2011). They don't always know how to sustain the new forms of communication and community that their projects require. As Barclay (1982) pointed out, "individual members [of anarchist intentional communities] ... have been reared in the cultural traditions and values of th[e] state and have only the greatest difficulty divesting themselves of their deleterious effects" (p. 103). Anarchists too experience "dynamics of racist, sexist, ageist or homophobic behavior" (Gordon, 2008, p. 52). Addressing the tension between the political and the personal, Milstein (2009) agrees: "It's going to be an ongoing struggle to find the balance" (p. 15).

That struggle continues. As psychologist Jamie Heckert (2010) noted, "While anarchism does attract people whose idea of freedom is individualistic (arguably a notion more consistent with capitalism) and anarchist subcultures and movements frequently suffer from patterns of machismo and racism, these patterns of hierarchy are themselves challenged and transformed as an integral part of a movement which is a living tradition" (p. 20, citations omitted).

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