

# The Romantic Realists

## An Introduction to Anarchism

### The Seattle Group

1969

Anybody can make a black flag. You take a rectangle of black cloth—(don't bother hemming its edges, the police will confiscate it anyway, so don't invest much effort in its making)—and attach it to a pole. That's all. It's easy.

It gets a lot of attention at demonstrations.

When a kid asks you what it means, you tell him, Anarchy, and the kid looks at you in awe: groovy.

To the kid, who never heard of anarchy before the word's recent repopularization in the new left, it sounds groovy because it suggests that doing whatever he wants to do, without responsibility is a valid form of resistance to a social order that seeks to mold him to its—not his—desires.

To the monitor with armband and bullhorn who asks you to take the flag away, it signifies frivolous mockery of the earnest discipline he brings to Movement organizing, threatens the image of Responsible Protest, and will probably Provoke Violence.

To the bearded and bereted activist, anarchy is wanton hedonism, arch-antithesis of the diligence and frugality enjoined by his little red book.

To the pig that confiscates it, your flag is a blatant challenge to Law and Order, terrifying in its dark mystery; from what hidden conspiracy did it appear?

There are other definitions. Your dictionary says anarchy is chaos. Cartoonists portray it as a round bomb bulging the back pocket of a furtive little Slav in a broad-brimmed hat. To the mass media, at least it's "American": a bunch of spoiled college kids raising gratuitous hell. For the communitarian, anarchy is a Return to Innocence.

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None of this can account for the sudden reappearance, seemingly from nowhere, of anarchy's black flag on the ramparts of the left. What brings anarchism—in eclipse for half a century—to the fore today is the entirely novel possibility of its realization. Until cybernetics unveiled the very real potential of a world in which neither want nor constrained labor are socially necessary, the ideal of a non-coercive society could never be more than a utopian dream. Yet that ideal, so consistent with the technological possibilities of today, arose in an era of sweatshops and starvation, of utter degradation of the brutalized wage-slaves—men, women, and children alike—who

toiled in ill-lit, ill-ventilated, incredibly hazardous factories. Little wonder that its 19<sup>th</sup>-century proponents differed widely in their views of how the anarchist vision might be brought about, or that their fellow-revolutionaries often scorned them for the audacity of their dreams and the disorderliness of their tactics.

The eclipse was occasioned both by ruthless State suppression—e.g., the Haymarket Affair (1886), the “criminal syndicalism” prosecutions under Attorney general Palmer (1919), the frame-ups and murders of IWW organizers, etc.—and by the bright diversionary hopes for the future of social revolution in the young USSR. Anarchists had been in the vanguard of socialist revolution there, confident that libertarian principles would guide the formation of the new order; but those principles fell before the demands of expediency in the consolidation of Bolshevik power. The insight of today’s generation—that not merely the *form* of State authority, but Authority per se is the perpetuator of coercion, war and personal alienation—has remained unilluminated by any ongoing tradition of anti-authoritarian thought. A few candles flickered through the 50-year night: Freedom Press in London, Kropotkin’s article in Encyclopedia Britannica, the dog-eared Little Red Songbooks in folksingers’ pockets; but their light was unseen or misinterpreted.

The new leftist today comes upon Anarchy like Schliemann uncovering Troy.

By Peter Kropotkin’s definition in the article just mentioned (Encyclopedia Britannica, 11<sup>th</sup> edition), anarchism is:

“... a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government..., harmony in such a society being obtained not by submission to law or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being. In a society developed on these lines, the voluntary associations which begin to cover all the fields of human activity would take a still greater extension so as to substitute themselves for the State in all its functions...

“... such a society would represent nothing immutable. On the contrary — as is seen in organic life at large — harmony would (it is contended) result from an ever-changing adjustment and readjustment of equilibrium between the multitudes of forces and influences, and this adjustment would be the easier to obtain as none of the forces would enjoy a special protection from the State...

“If, it is contended, society were organized on these principles, man would not be limited in the free exercise of his powers in productive work by a capitalist monopoly, maintained by the state; nor would he be limited in the exercise of his will by a fear of punishment, or by obedience towards individuals or metaphysical entities, which both lead to depression of initiative and servility of mind. He would be guided in his actions by his own understanding, which necessarily would bear the impression of a free action and reaction between his own self and the ethical conceptions of his surroundings. Man would thus be enabled to obtain the full development of all his faculties, intellectual, artistic and moral, without being hampered by overwork for the monopolists, or by the servility and inertia of mind of the great number. He would thus be able to reach full *individualization*...” [Emphasis is Kropotkin’s]

From the first phrase, these words articulate the new left’s aspirations. That anarchism, the process of working toward anarchy, is a “theory of life and conduct” gives it immediate relevance to the current insistence on fusion of revolutionary goals and tactics with a personal life-style enjoyable in the here-and-now. The appeal of anarchism is overwhelming to those of us who are trying to reintegrate the alienated pieces of ourselves, to resist the fracturing of our lives into “po-

litical” activities, “social” activities, “work,” “play,” and the like, for anarchism asserts the validity of all our needs and desires in their totality. Far from demanding the abnegation of individual will to the collective welfare, it maintains that the individual’s freedom for self-fulfillment and his freedom of choice in social commitment are inseparable, and together comprise an essential criterion of the non-authoritarian society it strives to bring about.

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To the charge of irresponsibility, most anarchists would answer that responsibility to oneself is the most exacting responsibility of all. It accepts no excuses, permits no evasions: one’s deeds, and the judgements that underlie them, are one’s own, and neither obedience to authority, deference to prestige, nor submission to numbers can have any part in justifying them. The anarchist desires no less than other persons the esteem of his fellows, for that desire is part and parcel of the gregariousness of our human species. The burden of his responsibility is that his principles deny him all recourse to the customary amenities of buck-passing and complaisance. He has no crutches, and no hiding-place. If his responsibility nevertheless rides lightly on his shoulders, that is because in assuming it he shrugged off the oppressive yoke of authority, which others bear without hope of riddance.

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It is the function of anarchists to propagate that hope and nourish it to certitude. By whatever means his personality inclines him to—whether it be forming a commune, sniping at police cars, blowing minds with street theatre, or writing Letters to the Editor—the anarchist aims to impart to people the confidence to dispense with authority. As opportunity affords, he intervenes to loosen authority’s hold in any facet of people’s lives, in order that they may discover and exercise their atrophied powers of self-reliance. Few genuine revolutionaries—therewith, few anarchists—expect thoroughgoing social change to be brought about by coup d’etat, But the anarchist may well exploit, for their heuristic value, the most quixotic of endeavors. (See *Ten Days That Shook the University* (BCM/Situationist International, London, W.C.1), and relate the coup in the Strasbourgh student union to later events in Paris and elsewhere.)

Any effort by people, singly or in voluntary cooperation, to take to themselves control of their own lives or the performance of social functions is grist for an anarchist’s mill. Each will use it—or pass it up—according to his own bent, expecting the totality of their efforts to cover most opportunities.

Recall that the goal of anarchism is a fully libertarian society, in which voluntary bodies replace Business and the State in performing desired social functions, unneeded functions (e.g., war, repression, coercion to labor) are eliminated, and each person is thereby freed to develop his uniquely individual humanity. The recollection will indicate that the scatter-gun tactics just outlined are the only means consistent with that end in a pre-revolutionary period.

As the initial skirmishes of impending revolution break out, anarchist activities may strike “disciplined” radicals as more disruptive to the Revolution than to the Established Order. In a sense, they are. By then, other forces too are working toward the established order’s downfall; the concern peculiar to anarchists is that each even partial interregnum (the period of ungovernability which is revolution-in-progress) be prolonged to maximize occasions for popular self-reliance and mutual aid. Certainly this will conflict with the efforts of those eager to install a

new authority—however less harsh—in place of the old. In revolution, the anarchist undertakes to anticipate and forestall that counterrevolution which most other radicals would regard as the consummation of their hopes, the seizure of State power. His aim is to render all governance impotent, by freeing people from their imagined need of it, as technology frees them from their material needs.

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That the productive potential of cybernating provides humanity at last with the technological base to implement its age-old but hitherto impractical dream of freedom from constraint was indicated in 1964 by the Crowley's article, "Beyond Automation" (Monthly Review, November 1964; reprinted in *Anarchy* 49, London, March 1965). Towards a Liberatory Technology, by Lewis Herber, (*Anarchy* 78, August 1967) develops this idea further and emphasizes the adaptability of the new technology to decentralized popular and communitarian control. But there is another side to this coin: just as technological developments now make a libertarian society possible, they make any other perspective utterly dreadful to contemplate, for the power elite of any authoritarian regime, be it socialist, capitalist, or whatever must always seek to mold its subject populace into docile acceptance of its rule. Can any State be trusted then, with the burgeoning developments in biochemistry and genetics that are now rapidly providing the means to erase from the human psyche desire for freedom and individuality?

Anarchists say NO.

If you're inclined to agree with that, read up on anarchism; get in touch with your local anarchists; see what you can (and want to!) do to promote the spread of libertarian consciousness, the dissolution of State power, the growth of wholly voluntary associations to provide for the needs and desires of free people.

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