

---

John P. Clark, "What Is Anarchism?" in J. Roland Pennock, & John W. Chapman, eds., *Anarchism: Nomos XIX*. New York: New York University Press, 1978. This article is more analytical than critical and was written over 35 years ago, but it still makes some useful points. (JPC)

---

# WHAT IS ANARCHISM?

JOHN P. CLARK

Much of the recent philosophical discussion of anarchism exhibits a disturbing lack of clarity because of widespread failure on the part of political theorists to define terms such as "anarchy," "anarchist," and "anarchism" with sufficient care. This failure results, I believe, from neglect of a number of topics relevant to the subject, including (to mention the most important of these) the nature of classical anarchist theory, the history of the anarchist movement, and numerous endeavors to apply anarchist theory and practice to contemporary realities. In this essay an attempt will be made to formulate a definition which takes into account all significant aspects of anarchism: both theory and practice, both past historical forms and contemporary manifestations. At the same time, those concepts of anarchism which disregard any of these important elements, or which misrepresent the anarchist position, will be criticized.

## I. OVERSIMPLIFICATIONS OF ANARCHISM

According to George Woodcock, one of the most judicious historians of anarchism, "the first thing to guard against" in discussing the topic is simplicity.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, most commentators on the subject, far from guarding against oversimplification, eagerly grasp at the most simplistic and nontechnical senses of the term, and seem to have little interest in analyzing the phenomenon to which it refers. Thus, it is not unusual for scholars to gather no more evidence about the nature of anarchism than the derivation of the term, after which they can ascend to the heights of abstraction, paying attention neither to social history nor to the history of ideas. Since anarchy means "without rule," it is said, an anarchist is one who advocates a society in which ruling is abolished, and anarchism is the theory that such a society is necessary. In almost every case the conclusion drawn from this superficial analysis is that such a goal is obviously beyond our reach, and that anarchism should therefore be dismissed as naive utopianism. This will not do. As I hope to show, such an approach fails abysmally to do justice to anarchism, as, in fact, does any definition which attempts to define the term by one simple idea. I would like to discuss such simple definitions further before pointing out additional difficulties in analyzing anarchism.

The assumption which underlies the sort of definition I am criticizing is that anarchism can be identified through one essential characteristic that distinguishes it from all other social and political positions. Most definitions of this type characterize anarchism in terms of some principle or some institution that it opposes. One such definition would see anarchism as a movement that is defined by its complete rejection of government. A great deal of evidence from the anarchist tradition could be pointed out in support of this view. Thus, in his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on anarchism, Kropotkin defines it as "a principle or theory of life and conduct in which society is conceived without government."<sup>2</sup> Emma Goldman, in her essay, "Anarchism," defines it as "the theory that all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary."<sup>3</sup> A well-known contemporary anarchist, Colin Ward (editor of the first series of the journal *Anarchy*), defines anarchy as "the absence of government,"<sup>4</sup> and anarchism as "the idea that it is possible and desirable for society to organize

itself without government."<sup>5</sup> In some definitions, that which is rejected is identified, not as government, but rather as the power that controls government. In support of this position, one could cite Proudhon, who defines anarchy as "the absence of a ruler or a sovereign."<sup>6</sup> A number of writers would take the essence of anarchism to be its attack on the state, which is often distinguished from government, as will be discussed in detail later. This can be supported by Bakunin's statement that "the system of Anarchism . . . aims at the abolition of the State,"<sup>7</sup> to mention just one of many such statements by major anarchist theorists. Woodcock asserts that "the common element uniting all its forms" is its aim of "the replacement of the authoritarian state by some form of non-governmental cooperation between free individuals."<sup>8</sup> Other writers hold that it is not merely the state or political authority, but in fact authority itself which anarchism opposes. Sebastien Faure proclaims that "whoever denies authority and fights against it is an anarchist."<sup>9</sup> Malatesta accepts the view that anarchy means "without government" but he expands the definition to mean "without any constituted authority."<sup>10</sup> Recently, Ward has said that anarchists oppose the "principle of authority,"<sup>11</sup> while Runkle, in his attack on anarchism, maintains that it "opposes authority in all its forms."<sup>12</sup> While Daniel Guerin is in most cases a perceptive commentator on anarchism, at one point he characterizes it in a way which is reminiscent of the most superficial and uncritical views. He goes so far as to suggest that the anarchist is one who "rejects society as a whole."<sup>13</sup> A negative characterization which is probably the most adequate of all, if any is to be taken in isolation, is made by Malatesta, who holds that anarchists desire "the complete destruction of the domination and exploitation of man by man."<sup>14</sup> Recently, Murray Bookchin has described anarchism in terms of its opposition to all forms of domination and all types of hierarchical organization.<sup>15</sup>

While fewer theorists (and especially nonanarchists) have attempted to define anarchism in terms of its positive side, there are examples of generalizations about its proposals. It might be seen, for example, as a theory of voluntary association. Kropotkin describes anarchism as seeking social order "by free agreements between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption."<sup>16</sup> Proudhon says that in anarchism "the notion of Government is succeeded by that of Contract."<sup>17</sup> This idea of voluntary association is also included in Woodcock's reference, cited above, to "cooperation between free individuals."<sup>18</sup> Anarchism might also be defined as a theory of decentralization. Paul Goodman notes that if anarchy means "lack of order and planning," then "most Anarchists, like the anarcho-syndicalists or the community-anarchists, have not been 'anarchists' either, but decentralists."<sup>19</sup> A closely related concept descriptive of anarchism is federalism. Bakunin holds that anarchism proposes "an organization from below upward, by means of a federation."<sup>20</sup> Another way of defining anarchism is by its advocacy of freedom. Runkle holds that "the essence of anarchism is individual liberty."<sup>21</sup> A more specific but related conception is suggested by Bookchin, who describes the goal as "a situation in which men liberate not only 'history,' but all the immediate circumstances of their everyday lives."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, anarchism can be described not only as a theory that opposes such things as government, the state, authority, or domination, but also as a theory that proposes voluntarism, decentralization, or freedom. Yet to define anarchism in terms of its opposition or support for any or all of these would be inadequate. In fact, the anarchists who have been cited, while they sometimes present ill-considered, simplistic definitions, are aware of the complexity of the theory that they espouse, and their works, when taken as a whole, point to the necessity of a more comprehensive definition.<sup>23</sup>

Of all those who have attempted to define anarchism, to my knowledge only one, Woodcock, clearly and concisely indicates the elements that will be taken here to constitute a minimum definition of anarchism. According to Woodcock, "historically, anarchism is a doctrine which poses a criticism of existing society; a view of a desirable future society; and a means of passing from one to the other."<sup>24</sup> In this discussion, the nature of these three criteria

for anarchist theory will be elaborated upon, and a fourth, which is only implied by Woodcock, will be added. At this point, it will merely be pointed out that any definition which reduces anarchism to a single dimension, such as its critical element, must be judged seriously inadequate.

## **II. MISINTERPRETATIONS OF ANARCHISM**

Not all misunderstanding of the nature of anarchism results from oversimplification. As was mentioned earlier, one of the most serious faults of most discussions of anarchism is neglect of historical anarchist thought and practice. The paradoxical result is that we find political theorists attacking an anarchism that has existed primarily as a fiction in the minds of its opponents, and we find philosophers defending an anarchism that would be unrecognizable to the vast majority of anarchists throughout history (including the present). For example, Benjamin Barber, in his essay "Poetry and Revolution: The Anarchist as Reactionary," repeats the cliché of the irrationally Utopian nature of anarchism. "The anarchists" he says, "manage to stand the naturalistic fallacy on its head: not that natural man, as he is, is what he ought to be; but that Utopian man, as the anarchist conceives he ought to be, is in fact what man is."<sup>25</sup> Barber contends further that anarchism has no idea of political realities, and is concerned instead with a romanticist exhortation to revolution. "It must reject political theory itself in favor of poetry and revolution."<sup>26</sup> Isaac Kramnick develops Barber's viewpoint further in his article "On Anarchism and the Real World: William Godwin and Radical England." Kramnick holds that "what replaces politics for the anarchist is either education or theater,"<sup>27</sup> and that, again, anarchists are totally out of touch with reality.<sup>28</sup> Runkle, in his book *Anarchism: Old and New*, asserts that "the student left, the radical right, and existentialism seem, at least superficially, to be contemporary forms of anarchism."<sup>29</sup> Runkle devotes half his book to the development of this view, which he correctly sees as superficial.

The writings of Barber, Kramnick, and Runkle exhibit very well the consequences of an ignorance of many elements of the anarchist tradition, and of the selective use of evidence about that tradition to construct misleading generalizations. Barber's charge of utopianism overlooks the many concrete and practical proposals that anarchists have presented, while his belief that the anarchist view of human nature is naively optimistic is a perennial half-truth that deserves to be critically examined. Kramnick's view that anarchist strategy has been limited primarily to education and theatrics shows an almost inconceivable disregard for the history of the anarchist movement. Finally, Runkle's careless attribution of relations between anarchism and recent political and philosophical tendencies is coupled with an apparent unawareness of the existence of a true "new anarchism," which has sought to synthesize the insights of classical anarchism with developments such as advanced technology and ecological theory.

While these various attacks on anarchism do a great deal to confuse the issue, some of its philosophical defenders succeed only in increasing the chaos. The work that has done most to retard meaningful analysis and criticism of the anarchist position is Wolff's *In Defense of Anarchism*.<sup>30</sup> As his critics have rightly pointed out, Wolff's argument that autonomy and moral authority are incompatible constitutes neither a defense of anarchism as a political theory nor a proof of the unjustifiable nature of the state and government.<sup>31</sup> Whatever support Wolff's ethical position might give to anarchism is effectively undermined by his statement that he sees no practical proposals that follow from his theoretical acceptance of anarchism.<sup>32</sup> Anarchists have differed greatly on the issue of the degree of activism demanded by their position, but never before to my knowledge has any theorist claiming to be an anarchist presented no proposals for action at all.

## **III. ANARCHISM AND GOVERNMENT**

The widespread misunderstanding of the nature of anarchism points to the need for a clear definition of the term,

and this will be attempted shortly. First, however, two subjects about which there is particularly widespread confusion must be considered. The first of these concerns the anarchist view of government. As has been indicated, many writers about anarchism have taken opposition to government to be the most distinctive characteristic of the theory. This is, in fact, probably the most popular means of defining the term. Much of the present discussion brings into question the adequacy of a definition of anarchism that conceives of it exclusively in terms of its relation to one social institution, even if that institution is held to be the most important one. However, there is further reason for questioning such a characterization: the distinction that some anarchists have themselves made between government and the state. While there runs through all anarchist writings an unmitigated contempt for the state, the anarchist position on government is far from unequivocal hostility.

A case in point is the thought of the American individualist anarchist, Albert Jay Nock. In Nock's book *Our Enemy the State*, he distinguishes sharply between the state and government. Government, he says, consists of "strictly negative intervention" to secure the natural rights of the individual.<sup>33</sup> By this he means protection of life, liberty, and property in the strictest Lockean sense. When society acts to prevent one individual from aggressing against a second individual who has acted peacefully, such government is perfectly justifiable. It is important to realize that Nock is not supporting governmental protection of huge concentrations of wealth, property, or economic power. In fact he argues quite vehemently that unless special interests are given favorable treatment and protection through political means, there can be no amassing of vast wealth. Much of his book, which shows individualist anarchism at its best, is dedicated to an analysis of state power in American history, and to a demonstration of the ways in which the state has supported certain mercantile interests, especially through land grants and protective tariffs. The state, according to Nock, arises when political means are used for the protection of exclusive interests. Following Franz Oppenheimer, he contends that the state originated historically as the tool of a dominant class.<sup>34</sup> According to this view, state power began with the conquest of a weaker (probably agrarian) tribe by a stronger (probably herding) tribe, the latter of which established a system of class rule in order to use the former for its labor power. The state, Nock says, has always maintained this class character, and state power has always been seen by special interests as an alluring means of gaining advantage over other groups in society.

Nock's use of the term "government" is quite atypical of that of anarchists in general, since most have not hesitated to use the term to refer to the abuses they attribute to the state. However, his ideas are seen to fit well into the mainstream of anarchist thought when examined in terms of the scale of the two systems he compares. He contends that if the state were replaced by "government" (in his unusual, limited sense of the term), this would result in something very close to Jefferson's proposal for "ward" government. Under such a system, the fundamental political unit would be the local township (for which I think we might also substitute the urban neighborhood), which would be "the repository and source of political authority and initiative."<sup>35</sup> Action on a larger scale should be carried out, Nock says, through a voluntary federation of communities for their common purposes. He believes that the essential protective functions of government can be achieved through such a system, while avoiding the dangers of exploitation that exist in a centralized, large-scale state.

While Nock is not one of the most widely known anarchist theorists (although he is one of the most eloquent of the individualists), ideas similar to his can be found in the writings of the foremost exponent of anarchist communism, Kropotkin. While it is true that Kropotkin holds that anarchism aims at the production of a society "without government,"<sup>36</sup> nevertheless he sometimes praises a condition of society in which some elements of government remain, while the state is not present. In his essay *The State: Its Historic Role*, Kropotkin distinguishes sharply between the state and government. "Since there can be no State without government, it has sometimes been said that one must aim at the absence of government and not the abolition of the state."<sup>37</sup> Kropotkin correctly sees this strategy as unrealistic in relation to practical political possibilities. The state in particular should be the object of

immediate attention, for it entails not only political power but additional elements, such as large territorial areas, centralization and the concentration of power in the hands of a few, hierarchical relationships, and class domination.<sup>38</sup> To such an institution, Kropotkin contrasts the medieval city, which he takes to be the best polity developed historically.<sup>39</sup> While these cities were not part of the nation-state, they certainly had governments; but far from lamenting their existence, Kropotkin has great praise for these governmental institutions. He enthusiastically approves of their assemblies, elected judges, and local militias, which are in accord with his own ideas about decentralized, participatory institutions. He also praises their belief in arbitration as opposed to authority without consent, and the subordination of military power to civil authority.<sup>40</sup> Thus, while he always kept in mind the ultimate goal of dispensing with government entirely, he was realistic enough to see that from an anarchist perspective decentralized community government was a considerable advance beyond the empires of ancient times, and would constitute progress beyond the modern nation-state. In view of this more complex view of government, it can be seen that a simple conception of anarchism as "opposition to government" does not accurately represent its position.

#### **IV. GOALS AND STRATEGIES IN ANARCHISM**

There is a further problem which, perhaps more than any other, underlies the widespread confusion about the nature of anarchism. It deals with the distinction between anarchism's vision of the ideal society and its view of immediate action. Stated differently, it is the question of the relation between Utopian goals and practical possibilities. Several difficulties arise in regard to this question. Some would define an anarchist entirely in terms of the acceptance of a noncoercive, nonauthoritarian Utopia as the moral ideal. Thus, one who can describe what the ideal society might be like, express a belief that it might in some way be possible, and judge this ideal to be the only system which can be fully justified morally is called an anarchist.

I believe that this is a rather bad misuse of terminology, if traditional distinctions are to be maintained and contradiction avoided. Under such a definition it is clear that many (perhaps most) Marxists would qualify as anarchists, since they accept the ideal of the withering away of the state.<sup>41</sup> As many anarchists (for example, Bakunin) have pointed out, it is on the question of practical strategies that anarchists and Marxists part company, rather than on their visions of the ideal society. In many ways, Kropotkin's description of communism is similar to that of Marx and Engels. The anarchist's point is not necessarily that the Marxists' goal is wrong, but that given the methods they advocate, they can be certain never to reach it. Methods of achieving change must therefore be considered if anarchism is not to be confused with Marxism (not to mention other socialist, and perhaps even liberal, positions that could, without contradiction, set up the same long-range goal).

It is true that we often come across articles on Marx's anarchism, but we find that they do not reveal new information showing that Marx advocated decentralization, self-management, and voluntary association, nor that he was a secret admirer of Bakunin. Rather, they discuss one limited aspect of his position: his view of the final Utopia. Robert Tucker's discussion of Marxism and anarchism in *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea* may be taken as an example. Tucker holds that Marxism is anarchist in the sense mentioned, but "if we consider Anarchism not as an abstract political philosophy but as a revolutionary movement associated with a political philosophy, then we are confronted with the fact that Marxism was deeply at odds with it."<sup>42</sup> This view of the matter is much superior to those which exhibit no awareness of the relevance of anarchism to social realities. Yet it is still inadequate, for there is no need to look for two anarchisms-- one a political theory, and the other a social practice. Tucker does this when he asks how it is "that classical Marxism, while embracing anarchism as a political philosophy, disagreed with Anarchism as a socialist ideology."<sup>43</sup> This shows a misunderstanding of the relation between theory and practice in anarchism. It is essential to anarchism that ends not be separated from means, and there can be no "anarchism" in a

full sense which does not as an integral part of its theoretical framework make distinctive proposals concerning practice, and take account of real historical conditions. Anarchist political philosophy implies anarchist activity in society.

It should be apparent from the discussion thus far that the interpretation of anarchism as the belief that Utopia can be achieved immediately is erroneous. Because anarchists have accepted the ideal of a noncoercive, nonauthoritarian society, some have assumed that they automatically must reject anything short of the ideal as unjustifiable, and therefore deserving of immediate destruction. The result is that anarchism is sometimes seen as implying a desire to destroy all established social institutions, preferably through violence. Yet none of the major anarchist theories from Godwin to the present has held such an extreme view, and no anarchist popular movement has presented such a proposal as part of its program. In spite of such lack of evidence, we often find even students of political theory confusing anarchism and nihilism, and scholars attending conferences on political philosophy questioning whether anarchist theory has any necessary link with bomb-throwing.

## V. A DEFINITION OF ANARCHISM

In hopes of clarifying the meaning of anarchism, I would like to propose a definition that is specific enough to be recognizable as a reasonable characterization of historical anarchism and to distinguish it from political positions that have not traditionally been denominated "anarchist," and that is also general enough to take account of the wealth of diversity contained within the anarchist tradition. It is hoped that this definition will lay the groundwork for further clarification of the concept by others.

There are four elements to this proposed definition, and I believe that for one to be described as an anarchist in a full sense, all four criteria should be met. The founders of anarchist theory (Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin) all fit this paradigm, and the principles embodied therein are implicit in the programs of the anarcho-syndicalist and anarcho-communist movements, which constitute the mainstream of historical anarchist activism. Individualist anarchism in most forms also falls under the definition (although there are a few borderline cases).

In order for a political theory to be called "anarchism" in a complete sense, it must contain:

- 1. a view of an ideal, noncoercive, nonauthoritarian society;**
- 2. a criticism of existing society and its institutions, based on this antiauthoritarian ideal;**
- 3. a view of human nature that justifies the hope for significant progress toward the ideal; and**
- 4. a strategy for change, involving immediate institution of noncoercive, nonauthoritarian, and decentralist alternatives.**

This definition would allow for use of the term "anarchist" in both a strong and in several weaker senses. Obviously, an anarchist in the strongest sense would exhibit all four characteristics. Yet, one, for example, who advocated anarchistic tactics without an explicit commitment to the anarchist ideal, or one who accepted the ideal but proposed different strategies, could only be called an "anarchist" in a more limited sense.

## VI. THE IDEAL OF ANARCHISM

"Anarchy" is the term usually applied to the ideal society for which the anarchist strives, and believes to be fully moral. It is true that many anarchists are rather vague about the nature of this ideal. This is the case for several reasons. One, which De George mentions, is that free, autonomous individuals will work out solutions that we can

hardly, in the context of present society, foresee. Furthermore, the anarchist does not want to bind anyone to one vision of the ideal, since the acceptance of pluralism implies that various groups will create numerous variations on the general goal. However, this argument concerning the authoritarianism inherent in such prescriptions can be overstated. There is certainly no contradiction in the idea of an anarchist setting forth a fairly specific description of a society would live up to the anarchist criteria for moral justification, so long as it is clear that the model is subject to criticism and modification, and that other models might be found to conform at least as adequately to those criteria. As has been mentioned, the criteria are that such a society be noncoercive and nonauthoritarian, and that all forms of domination be eliminated. To describe such a society, one would have to show how institutions might be designed that would, at a minimum, eliminate the need for the use of physical force, government, and the state. In view of the third criterion, this ideal must be at least plausible in relation to the anarchist conception of human nature, which includes speculation about what people are capable of becoming, in addition to a description of what they are. The most convincing anarchist theories, while accepting the noncoercive, nongovernmental, and, of course, nonstatist nature of anarchy, deduce further characteristics of a society that has abolished domination. Examples often mentioned by anarchists include economic, social, racial, sexual, and generational equality, mutual aid, cooperation, and communalism.

The working out of a consistent view of anarchy is an important problem for the anarchist theorist. However, it is necessary to realize that work on this problem makes a theorist an "anarchist" only in a very limited sense, as has already been noted. Thus, the Marxist political philosopher might take on this task as an integral part of the development of a theory of transition from capitalism and socialism to full communism. It might also be undertaken by a Utopian novelist who enjoys dreaming about ideal societies, or by a political philosopher who has a merely academic interest in the nature of the morally justifiable society.

## **VII. THE ANARCHIST CRITIQUE OF THE PRESENT**

An anarchist has a distinctive view of the present state of things. This view is, in a sense, the link between the vision of the ideal and those political and social proposals that are typical of anarchism. It consists of a distinctive critique of existing social institutions, the core of which deals with coercion and authoritarianism. The anarchist finds many institutions to be unacceptable from a moral standpoint because they are based on force and externally imposed authority. It is, of course, the state and centralized political authority that receive the most destructive analysis on these grounds. It is therefore reasonable to accept as fulfilling this criterion any theory that on an antiauthoritarian basis questions the moral foundations of the state and government. However, it must be noted that the anarchist almost always proceeds to a further analysis of social institutions. Anarchism has not stopped with a criticism of political organization, but has investigated the authoritarian nature of economic inequality and private property, hierarchical economic structures, traditional education, the patriarchal family, class and racial discrimination, and rigid sex- and age-roles, to mention just a few of the more important topics. In some varieties of anarchism, institutions such as private property and patriarchy are condemned at least as severely as is the state.

It is hardly necessary to dwell on this criterion, since it is the one that has received the most attention, as was mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Most commentators on anarchism are well aware of the anarchist opposition to the forms of political organization existing in the modern nation-state. To a lesser degree, they grasp the anarchist critique of other authoritarian social institutions. What they often do not comprehend is the way in which this opposition to present social conditions fits into the anarchist position as a whole.

## **VIII. THE ANARCHIST VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE**

A central element of anarchism is its view of human nature. The anarchist believes that there are qualities of human beings which enable them to live together in a condition of peace and freedom. Most anarchists go further and describe the human capacity for mutual aid, cooperation, respect, and communal relationships, which are seen as the basis for expectation of social progress. While most anarchists hold a belief in such human solidarity, it is significant that some individualists reject it. Instead, they base their proposals for social organization on contract; on rational self-interest; and, in the extreme case of Stirner, on ruthless egoism.<sup>44</sup> In both social and individualist anarchism, however, there exists the view that people have a great potential for voluntaristic action, and ability to overcome the use of violence and coercion.

This view is the basis for the frequent criticism of anarchism that it is excessively optimistic about human nature. For anarchism to be a coherent theory, it must have a conception of human nature which forms the basis for speculation about the ideal for society and which gives a foundation for those practical proposals that are necessary if the ideal is to have political and social relevance. However, it is false that all the views of human nature that have been put forth by anarchists have been in any meaningful way "optimistic," and that this quality is a necessary characteristic of the theory. It might be argued, in fact, that in some ways anarchists hold a quite realistic if not pessimistic view of human nature. It is the belief that power corrupts and that people easily become irresponsible in their exercise of it that forms the basis for much of their criticism of political authority and centralized power. Power must be dispersed, they say, not so much because everyone is always so good, but because when it is concentrated some people tend to become extremely evil. The point is made, not only in regard to political power, but also to a variety of other sorts, ranging from concentrated economic power on the level of society to concentrated patriarchal power on the level of the family.

There is, of course, abundant evidence of optimism in the anarchist tradition. Some of the greatest anarchist philosophers (e.g., Kropotkin) have at times expressed a rather naive belief in the capacity of people to act benevolently and to cooperate. Yet such optimism should certainly not be taken as part of the definition of anarchism, as it is by those who dismiss it as "utopian socialism," in the derogatory sense of that term. There is much in the anarchist tradition which would point to a rejection of all dogmatic views of human nature (whether "optimistic," "pessimistic," or "realistic"), and to the acceptance of environmentalism. Godwin's thought is explicitly based on this outlook, and it is implicit in Bakunin's deterministic materialism. In such a view, people are inherently neither good nor evil, but rather they behave and think in radically different ways under different circumstances. The problem for anarchists is to create the social conditions under which the libertarian rather than the authoritarian (or, in some cases, the cooperative rather than the competitive) capacities of people are realized. What all anarchist positions have in common is that they accept this libertarian potential as a constituent of human nature.

## **IX. THE ANARCHIST PROGRAM FOR CHANGE**

The final defining characteristic of anarchism is its practical proposals for change. An anarchist has a distinctive program for action in the present, which constitutes a strategy for movement in the direction of the ideal, which is a response to the failure of existing institutions, and which is consistent with the anarchist view of human potentialities. Anarchism can have no meaning as a social and political theory if it says nothing about praxis, and it can have no clear meaning if it is defined in ways which would confuse its proposals with those of theories known by other names. Thus, as has been mentioned, theories that say nothing about strategies for change, or which advocate centralist, authoritarian, or bureaucratic policies cannot meaningfully be labeled "anarchist," if the theory that has been known by that name since Proudhon (and which has roots, some claim, as far back in history as the

thought of Lao-tzu and Diogenes the Cynic, and in the practice of tribal society) is to be considered relevant.

The distinctive characteristic of anarchist programs is that they institute an immediate movement in the direction of voluntarism and antiauthoritarianism. Examples of typical anarchist programs include decentralization of political authority; worker self-management of workplaces; extension of freedom of thought and expression; expansion of sexual freedom; voluntary education; decentralization of economic structures; cooperatives; open access to media; free schools; open education and deschooling; neighborhood government, noninstitutional psychotherapy; nondominating family and personal relationships; and elimination of arbitrary distinctions based on sex, race, age, linguistic usage, and so forth. Such anarchist proposals are practical in two senses. The most ambitious of those mentioned are within the power of a society to institute, were anarchist ideology to become widely accepted within the society (as happened historically during the Spanish Revolution of 1936-39).<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, it is within the reach of anarchists in many societies in which anarchist theory is not yet widely accepted to put some of the proposals into immediate practice among themselves, as an alternative to the dominant institutions. In fact, the greatest energy of anarchists themselves (as opposed to writers about anarchism) has been put into this task, rather than into speculation about minute details of an ideal society.

It should now be clear how erroneous the view is which reduces the anarchist program to an uncritical demand for the immediate abolition of government. What has confused many superficial observers is the demand by anarchists that the state be abolished. In most cases they do not, however, propose that the nation-state be replaced by an ideal anarchic society, but rather by a decentralized system, in which federation from below increasingly displaces centralized authority. It is certainly held to be desirable that the primary groups which federate be as voluntary as is practically possible, but there is no dogmatic demand that all vestiges of government, even in a decentralized form, be immediately destroyed. The guiding principle, to be applied according to historical conditions, is the replacement of coercive and authoritarian institutions by voluntary and libertarian ones.

A consideration of anarchist proposals as analyzed here shows that they differ markedly from those typical of other political ideologies. These proposals emphasize decentralization and voluntarism, while the Marxist, the non-Marxian socialist, the welfare statist, and the modern liberal have quite obviously come to rely increasingly on the state, centralized political authority, and hierarchical bureaucracy as a means toward social change. The anarchist differs from the classical liberal (who has been reincarnated in some elements of American conservatism) in that the former rejects the use of government to protect any interests, including those based on private ownership of the means of production and class differences, while the classical liberal accepts the limited state as a means by which to preserve capitalism. In spite of these distinctions, there are no clear boundaries between the political positions mentioned, and they tend to merge at some points. Thus, leftist Marxism merges into anarcho-syndicalism. Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, in their well-known book on the 1968 French revolt, call their position *Linksradicalismus* or *le gauchisme*, and describe it as being both Marxist and anarchist.<sup>46</sup> When leftist Marxists call for workers' councils and attack elitism and bureaucracy, it becomes difficult to distinguish them from the anarcho-syndicalists, who present similar proposals based on a similar class analysis.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, the position of the individualists merges with that of classical liberals. As Benjamin Tucker, the great American individualist, claimed, "genuine [i.e., individualist] Anarchism is consistent Manchesterism."<sup>48</sup> The individualist anarchists hoped that the abolition of state interference would lead to a free and relatively equal society based on the labor theory of value. In this they have much in common with Locke, Adam Smith, Jefferson, and, above all, Spencer.<sup>49</sup> In view of such similarities, it must be concluded that while most of those who fall within the definition of "anarchist" presented here hold a position which is distinctive, and which constitutes an alternative to the standard political options, it is nevertheless the case that some who fulfill the criteria have viewpoints which are quite close to those of others who fit within other identifiable political traditions. There is no reason why terms in political theory such as "anarchist"

and "Marxist" should be mutually exclusive in their denotation, even though their connotations differ considerably.

## **X. IS ANARCHISM UTOPIAN?**

I believe that, the definition of anarchism that has been presented and discussed can help avoid certain errors about the anarchist position. One of these is the charge that anarchists must be or always have been Utopians. Some have attempted to demonstrate that anarchists are Utopians by including the quality of utopianism in the definition of anarchism. I would suggest a different approach to the question. If we wish to find out whether anarchism is Utopian, insofar as that term implies some sort of neglect for reality, we should examine the theories and practical proposals of those who have been conventionally called, and who have called themselves, anarchists. If we do, I do not believe that we will come to De George's conclusion that the anarchist's "threshold of acceptance is so high, his faith in the rationality and morality of the ordinary person so little in accord with what many people experience in their dealings with their fellow man, and his scheme for bringing about his desired anarchist society is as vague that he is not a political realist but an idealistic Utopian."<sup>50</sup>

I see no reason why anarchism should be defined as to exclude people who can practically accept, if not be entirely satisfied with, limited progress toward the ideal. Many great anarchists have, in fact, been such "pragmatic libertarians" (for example, Proudhon among the classical anarchists, and Paul Goodman among the recent ones). Thus, Goodman defends "piecemeal change" in his article "The Black Flag of Anarchism." This article drew a ranting, simplistic, and blatantly ad hominem reply from Mark Rudd, who interprets anarchism as conservative because it attempts to change a variety of institutions instead of putting all its efforts into toppling the economic structure (assumed to be the sole basis for all the ills of society) at once.<sup>51</sup> Criticism like Rudd's makes De George's first accusation sound strange and suggests that they might each be missing something important about the nature of anarchism.

Problems also arise in connection with De George's second point. As has been noted, anarchists do not have an exclusively optimistic view of human nature. It has, in fact, become popular recently for liberals and unsympathetic socialists to condemn anarchism for the opposite quality: a lack of faith in the capacities of ordinary people. Barber, for example, accuses anarchists of having contempt for the masses and being elitists. Not being totally oblivious to history, he is forced to recognize that anarchists have indeed defended people's ability to determine their own destiny. Rather than questioning the accuracy of his previous contention, or considering the possibility that he is describing two conflicting factions within anarchism, he concludes that anarchists are "egalitarian elitists."<sup>52</sup> Kramnick, who relies heavily on Barber's analysis, goes a step further and depicts anarchism as unmitigated elitism. Through the method of selective quotation (when he bothers to cite evidence at all), he attempts to show that anarchists are extremely pessimistic about the abilities of the average person.<sup>53</sup> While such criticism does little to increase understanding of anarchism, it at least serves to point out that element of anarchist thought which exhibits skepticism about human goodness.

Finally, it should be noted that anarchists are not as vague about their proposals as De George thinks they are, and in fact, must be. Paul and Percival Goodman, for example, present numerous proposals (based on an anarchist outlook) for community planning in their book *Communitas*.<sup>54</sup> Richard Sennett's viewpoint in *The Uses of Disorder*, the second part of which he calls "a new anarchism," is highly suggestive in terms of urban policy issues.<sup>55</sup> A. S. Neill's *Summerhill* presents an educational philosophy which has been closely identified with anarchism, and which has been applied not only at his school for over fifty years but at numerous others which it has influenced.<sup>56</sup> Description of large-scale application of the anarchist program in the collectivised factories and communal farms in which millions participated during the Spanish Revolution can be found in Dolgoff's *The*

Anarchist Collectives.<sup>57</sup> In view of such evidence (an abundance of which exists for those who care to investigate), the attribution of vagueness to anarchist proposals must be judged incomplete as a description of the actual performance of anarchism as a whole. Although some anarchists have been vague (whether out of principle or lack of imagination), others have not, especially in regard to immediate strategies for change. The desire not to impose one's will on others does not, as De George contends, demand vagueness. What it demands is that suggestions, which might be fully worked out, perhaps in terms of possible variations, should not be imposed through coercion, or accepted uncritically by the community.

## **XI. VARIETIES OF ANARCHISM**

I would like to discuss one final topic that might help clarify the nature of anarchism. This concerns the various schemes of classifying anarchist positions. One such scheme divides anarchism into those varieties which put the greatest emphasis on personal autonomy and individual freedom, and those which stress participation in communal and intentional groups. In this way a distinction can be made between individualist and social anarchism (although some figures, like Emma Goldman, seem to have an equally strong commitment to both individual freedom and social solidarity).

A more detailed classification based on theories of social organization divides anarchists into individualists, mutualists, syndicalists, and communists. Individualists (whose major theorists include Max Stirner, Josiah Warren, and Benjamin Tucker) are interested not so much in forming associations, as in enabling individuals to pursue their own ends without interference from others. They desire a society of self-reliant and largely self-sufficient individuals, achieving their ends through voluntary agreement, or contracts, with others. The mutualists, following Proudhon, see a greater need for social organization. Since economic and political power are concentrated, people must organize to defend their interests, and especially to eliminate such state-supported abuses as rent, profit, and interest. There is, for that reason, a need for mutual banks and producers' and consumers' cooperatives. The anarcho-syndicalists go one step further and propose large-scale organization of the working class into a single labor union as the essential means toward meaningful social change. Their typical tactic is the general strike, which is to be followed by the reorganization of the means of production on principles of self-management. They are much in the tradition of Bakunin's collectivism. Finally, anarchist communism takes the commune, town, or neighborhood as its basic unit. Decisions are to be made on the basis of communal needs, with production according to ability and distribution according to need. Kropotkin is the classical theorist of this variety of anarchism.

I would like to elaborate somewhat on the distinction between anarcho-syndicalism and anarcho-communism for two reasons. First, these are the two forms of anarchism which have been of the greatest historical importance and have produced the most debate among anarchists themselves concerning practical proposals. Secondly, many observers of anarchism do not realize the fundamental importance of this division to anarchist theory. De George, for example, holds that "the strongest present-day position" consists of "an amalgam" of the two positions mentioned. He takes Guerin as the best exemplar of this position.<sup>58</sup> I believe that Guerin has rendered an enormous service to Marxists, anarchists, and to those interested in either of these theories, in his attempts to effect a synthesis between the two traditions. His outstanding book on anarchism is a notable product of this endeavor. However, it is this synthesis of Marxism and anarchism that is the "amalgam" presented by Guerin, not the one mentioned by De George. There is still a fundamental opposition between the position taken by Guerin and that of anarcho-communists like Murray Bookchin, or of any of those who are in a meaningful sense "communitarian" or "community" anarchists.<sup>59</sup>

While it is true that communitarian anarchism has incorporated many elements of the anarcho-syndicalist position, the converse does not seem to be true. We find in present-day anarchism a perpetuation of a traditional division, in which the communitarians continue in the tradition of the communist anarchists (who did not deny the importance of the syndicalist emphasis on liberating the workplace), while others, like Guerin and Chomsky, preserve an essentially syndicalist approach.<sup>60</sup> The communitarian anarchists do not take the workplace or even the economy as the primary focus (as important as these may be), but rather the total community, with all its interrelated elements, such as work, play, education, communication, transportation, ecology, and so forth. They argue that to isolate problems of production from their social context might lead to the perennial Marxist error of combating economic exploitation while perpetuating and perhaps even expanding other forms of domination. Further, communitarian anarchists argue that the analysis of economics and class on which both classical Marxism and syndicalism are built is outdated, and that anarcho-syndicalism itself is therefore at least partially obsolete.<sup>61</sup> If anarchism is to be fully understood, the nature of this very important dispute must be understood: one alternative focuses on work, the other on life as a whole; one on economic relationships, the other on the totality of human relationships, and on the relationships between humanity and nature.

Although the subject cannot be discussed in detail here, it is my view that the anarcho-communist position as developed by Bookchin and others is the strongest contemporary anarchist position. In fact, it appears to be the sociopolitical position which is best capable of incorporating such developments in modern thought as the theory of the rise of neotechnic civilization,<sup>62</sup> the ecological view of human society and nature,<sup>63</sup> and, on the highest level of generality, the organic and process view of reality, based in part on modern science.<sup>64</sup> If anarchism is to be evaluated, it is this, its strongest and most highly developed form, which should be considered.

It is hoped that the definition presented and the distinctions delineated here can make a contribution to reducing the prevailing confusion concerning the nature of anarchism. If so, it will perhaps become increasingly possible for anarchism to be seen for what it is -- a complex and challenging social and political theory -- and to be judged according to its merits.

---

## NOTES

1. George Woodcock, *Anarchism* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 7.
2. Peter Kropotkin, *Revolutionary Pamphlets* (New York: Dover, 1970), p. 284.
3. Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 50.
4. Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973), p. 11.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
6. Steward Edwards, ed., *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1969), p. 89. With his usual penchant for paradox, Proudhon describes this condition as "a form of government."
7. G. P. Maximoff, ed., *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* (New York: Free Press, 1964), pp. 297-98.

8. Woodcock, p. 11.
9. Ibid., p. 7.
10. Errico Malatesta, *Anarchy* (London: Freedom Press, n.d.), p. 7.
11. Ward, p. 12.
12. Gerald Runkle, *Anarchism: Old and New* (New York: Delta, 1972), p. 3.
13. Daniel Guerin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), p. 13.
14. Paul Berman, ed., *Quotations from the Anarchists* (New York: Praeger, 1972), p. 28.
15. See *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley: Ramparts Press, 1971), especially the title essay.
16. Kropotkin, *Revolutionary Pamphlets*, p. 284.
17. Proudhon, p. 98.
18. Woodcock, p. 11.
19. Paul Goodman, *People or Personnel and Like a Conquered Province* (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 6.
20. Bakunin, p. 298.
21. Runkle, p. 3.
22. Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, p. 41.
23. It might be mentioned that a definition of anarchism which differs from both types mentioned is put forth recently by Robert Wolff. According to Wolff, the distinctive characteristic of what he calls an anarchist is that he or she "will never view the commands of the state as legitimate, as having binding moral force." In *Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 18. The uniqueness of this definition lies in the fact that it commits the anarchist neither to support for, nor to opposition to any social and political institution, at least in any obvious way. This point will be discussed further below.
24. Woodcock, p. 7.
25. Benjamin Barber, *Superman and Common Men: Freedom, Anarchy, and the Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1972), p. 18.
26. The text reads "revelation," but presumably this is a misprint. However, those who are interested in the relationship between anarchism and revelation are directed to the *Catholic Worker*.
27. Isaac Kramnick, "On Anarchism and the Real World: William Godwin and Radical England," *American*

Political Science Review 66 (March 1972), 114. I have dealt with Kramnick's contentions elsewhere in detail. See "On Anarchism in an Unreal World: Kramnick's View of Godwin and the Anarchists," American Political Science Review 69 (March 1975), 162-67, and also Kramnick's comment and my rejoinder, in the same issue. For a more detailed discussion of Godwin's contribution to anarchist thought, see my book, *The Philosophical Anarchism of William Godwin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

28. Kramnick, p. 128. Kramnick concludes that "utopian anarchism" is ultimately reactionary, since it has no effective strategy for change.

29. Runkle, p. 13. The idea of a professor of philosophy suggesting that existentialism might seem to be "a form" of anarchism appears ludicrous beyond belief, and that suggestion is a good hint as to the quality of his book. The relationship between anarchism and existentialism is, however, a topic which deserves serious study (as opposed to Runkle's sensationalistic exploitation). Strangely, in order to find out whether existentialism really is "a form" of anarchism, Runkle examines the thought of Sartre, who until his recent movement toward anarchism had long been much closer to Marxism. At the same time, Runkle overlooks the fact that two well-known existentialists, Martin Buber and Nikolai Berdyaev, have been anarchists. See Buber's *Paths in Utopia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), and Berdyaev's *Dream and Reality* (New York: Collier, 1962), especially the epilogue; *The Beginning and the End* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), Chapter viii; and *Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Scribners, 1944), Part III, Section IA.

30. Robert Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

31. See Jeffrey Reiman, *In Defense of Political Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

32. Interview with Robert Wolff, included in a radio broadcast entitled "The Black Flag of Anarchy" (Baltimore: Great Atlantic Radio Conspiracy, 1973). A catalogue of tapes on anarchism and related topics, including interviews with Wolff, Bookchin, and other well-known figures, is available from that group.

33. Albert Jay Nock, *Our Enemy the State* (New York: Free Life Editions, 1973), p. 22.

34. Nock, p. 20. See Franz Oppenheimer, *The State* (New York: Free Life Editions, 1975).

35. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

36. Kropotkin, *Revolutionary Pamphlets*, p. 284.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 27. Had he been more familiar with non-Western and tribal societies, he might have judged differently. See Dorothy Lee, *Freedom and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1959); Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1973); and any of the many works on stateless societies, including, perhaps most notably, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

40. Kropotkin, *Revolutionary Pamphlets*, pp. 26-27.
41. The authenticity of this ideal has been questioned by some. See Richard Adamiak, "The Withering Away of the State: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Politics* 32 (February 1970):
42. Robert Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 87.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 88. As a result, he feels he must use capitalization to distinguish between the two.
44. For a criticism of extreme individualist anarchism, see my book *Max Stirner's Egoism*, (London: Freedom Press, 1976).
45. For descriptions of revolutionary Spain, see Sam Dolgoff's *The Anarchist Collectives: Worker Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution (1936-39)* (New York: Free Life Editions, 1974), Vernon Richards's *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1972), and Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1975).
46. See their book mistranslated as *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* (London: Penguin 1968). The correct title, as anarchist reviewers have pointed out, should be something like *Leftism: A Cure for the Senile Disorder of Communism*, which, besides being less confusing, preserves the parody on Lenin's work *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.
47. De George holds that communist anarchists present a "Marxian analysis." Richard De George, "Anarchism and Authority," this volume, p. 000. This is partially true; however, such an analysis is more typical of anarcho-syndicalism, as will be discussed further.
48. Cited in Leonard Krimmerman and Lewis Perry, eds. *Patterns of Anarchy* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1966), p. 34.
49. The case is perhaps different with the "anarcho-capitalists" of the present, who live in an era of entrenched economic power. Since they have not explained how all can be placed in an equal bargaining position without abolishing present property relationships, it seems likely that what they propose is a system in which the affluent voluntarily associate to use force and coercion against the poor and weak in order to maintain class privilege. The abuses of the state are thus perpetuated after the state is allegedly abolished.
50. De George, p. 37.
51. Paul Goodman, "The Black Flag of Anarchy" (Corinth, Vermont: Black Mountain Press, n.d.). The article originally appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, July 14, 1968.
52. Barber, p. 25.
53. Kramnick, p. 114.
54. Paul and Percival Goodman, *Communitas* (New York: Random House, 1960).

55. Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York: Vintage, 1970).

56. A. S. Neill, *Summerhill* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1968).

57. See especially Bookchin's introductory essay, which is a brief but masterly treatment of the relationship between theory and practice, in historical context.

58. The statements here quoted from De George's original paper were omitted from his revised version. The discussion in this paragraph is nonetheless useful for the exposition of Clark's interpretation of anarchism. (The Editors.)

59. A good example is Karl Hess (a former Goldwater speechwriter, now a community anarchist), who lives in and works with the Adams-Morgan neighborhood community in Washington, D.C. See his articles "Washington Utopia: An Election Eve Dream," *Washington Post/Potomac* (3 November 1974), and "The System has Failed," *Penthouse* (August 1974), which are popular presentations of his communal and decentralist ideas. His Community Technology group publishes a newsletter on decentralized technology, "Science in the Neighborhood."

60. It is the latter who have a Marxian analysis, not so much the communitarians, as De George contends. On this question, see "Syndicalism and Anarchism" in *Freedom* 35 (26 October 1974), 4 and (2 November 1974), 6. The debate between Monatte and Malatesta concerning syndicalism and communism is reproduced. Even more important is George Woodcock's "Chomsky's Anarchism," *Freedom* 35 (16 November 1974), 4, in which the nature of the anarchism of Chomsky and Guerin is discussed in view of that historical division within anarchism.

61. Again, Bookchin's introduction to *The Anarchist Collectives* is relevant.

62. See Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1934), especially Chapter viii, "Orientation." The sections entitled "Basic Communism," "Socialize Creation," and "Political Control" are particularly relevant.

63. The most important recent works in this connection are Bookchin's *Limits of the City* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) and E. F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

64. The literature on this topic has yet to be written. However, several of the works mentioned above, including those by Lee, Bookchin, Mumford, and Schumacher present evidence related to the subject. See also Geoffrey Ostergaard and Melville Currell, *The Gentle Anarchists* (New York: Oxford University Press), which discuss Gandhian anarchism, which is based on an organic world view. Another source of organicist thinking in anarchism is the work of Kropotkin. See Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (Boston: Porter Sargent, n.d.), and Roel van Duyn, *Message of a Wise Kabouter* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1972).