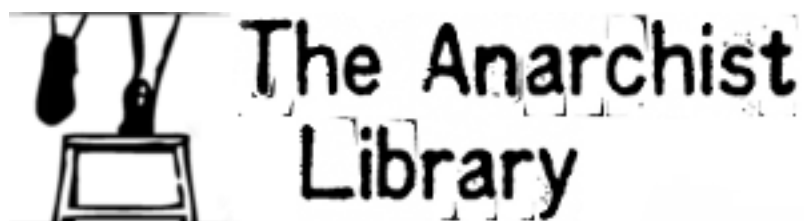


# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT ANARCHISM



West Michigan Anarchist Federation

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### ***What is Anarchism?***

Modern civilisation faces three potentially catastrophic crises: (1) social breakdown, a shorthand term for rising rates of poverty, homelessness, crime, violence, alienation, drug and alcohol abuse, social isolation, political apathy, dehumanisation, the deterioration of community structures of self-help and mutual aid, etc.; (2) destruction of the planet's delicate ecosystems on which all complex forms of life depend; and (3) the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons.

Orthodox opinion, including that of Establishment "experts," mainstream media, and politicians, generally regards these crises as separable, each having its own causes and therefore capable of being dealt with on a piecemeal basis, in isolation from the other two. Obviously, however, this "orthodox" approach isn't working, since the problems in question are getting worse. Unless some better approach is taken soon, we are clearly headed for disaster, either from catastrophic war, ecological Armageddon, or a descent into urban savagery — or all of the above.

Anarchism offers a unified and coherent way of making sense of these crises, by tracing them to a common source. This source is the principle of hierarchical authority, which underlies the major institutions of all "civilised" societies, whether capitalist or "communist." Anarchist analysis therefore starts from the fact that all of our major institutions are in the form of hierarchies, i.e. organisations that concentrate power at the top of a pyramidal structure, such as corporations, government bureaucracies, armies, political parties, religious organisations, universities, etc. It then goes on to show how the authoritarian relations inherent in such hierarchies negatively affect individuals, their society, and culture. In the first part of this FAQ (sections A to E) we will present the anarchist analysis of hierarchical authority and its negative effects in greater detail.

It should not be thought, however, that anarchism is just a critique of modern civilisation, just "negative" or "destructive." Because it is much more than that. For one thing, it is also a proposal for a free society. Emma Goldman expressed what might be called the "anarchist question" as follows: "The problem that confronts us today... is how to be one's self and yet in oneness with others, to feel deeply with all human beings and still retain one's own characteristic qualities." [Red Emma Speaks, pp. 158–159] In other words, how can we create a society in which the potential for each individual is realised but not at the expense of others? In order to achieve this, anarchists envision a society in which, instead of being controlled "from the top down" through hierarchical structures of centralised power, the affairs of humanity will, to quote Benjamin Tucker, "be managed by individuals or voluntary associations." [Anarchist Reader, p. 149] While later sections of the FAQ (sections I and J) will describe anarchism's positive proposals for organising society in this way, "from the bottom up," some of the constructive core of anarchism will be seen even in the earlier sections. The positive core of anarchism can even be seen in the anarchist critique of such flawed solutions to the social question as Marxism and right-wing "lib-

ertarianism" (sections F and H, respectively).

As Clifford Harper elegantly puts it, "[l]ike all great ideas, anarchism is pretty simple when you get down to it — human beings are at their best when they are living free of authority, deciding things among themselves rather than being ordered about." [Anarchy: A Graphic Guide, p. vii] Due to their desire to maximise individual and therefore social freedom, anarchists wish to dismantle all institutions that repress people:

"Common to all Anarchists is the desire to free society of all political and social coercive institutions which stand in the way of the development of a free humanity." [Rudolf Rocker, Anarcho-Syndicalism, p. 9]

As we'll see, all such institutions are hierarchies, and their repressive nature stems directly from their hierarchical form.

Anarchism is a socio-economic and political theory, but not an ideology. The difference is very important. Basically, theory means you have ideas; an ideology means ideas have you. Anarchism is a body of ideas, but they are flexible, in a constant state of evolution and flux, and open to modification in light of new data. As society changes and develops, so does anarchism. An ideology, in contrast, is a set of "fixed" ideas which people believe dogmatically, usually ignoring reality or "changing" it so as to fit with the ideology, which is (by definition) correct. All such "fixed" ideas are the source of tyranny and contradiction, leading to attempts to make everyone fit onto a Procrustean Bed. This will be true regardless of the ideology in question — Leninism, Objectivism, "Libertarianism," or whatever — all will have the same effect: the destruction of real individuals in the name of a doctrine, a doctrine that usually serves the interest of some ruling elite. Or, as Michael Bakunin puts it:

"Until now all human history has been only a perpetual and bloody immolation of millions of poor human beings in honour of some pitiless abstraction — God, country, power of state, national honour, historical rights, judicial rights, political liberty, public welfare." [God and the State, p. 59]

Dogmas are static and deathlike in their rigidity, often the work of some dead "prophet," religious or secular, whose followers erect his or her ideas into an idol, immutable as stone. Anarchists want the living to bury the dead so that the living can get on with their lives. The living should rule the dead, not vice versa. Ideologies are the nemesis of critical thinking and consequently of freedom, providing a book of rules and "answers" which relieve us of the "burden" of thinking for ourselves.

In producing this FAQ on anarchism it is not our intention to give you the "correct" answers or a new rule book. We will explain a bit about what anarchism has been in the past, but we will focus more on its modern forms and why we are anarchists today. The FAQ is an attempt to provoke thought and anal-

ysis on your part. If you are looking for a new ideology, then sorry, anarchism is not for you.

While anarchists try to be realistic and practical, we are not "reasonable" people. "Reasonable" people uncritically accept what the "experts" and "authorities" tell them is true, and so they will always remain slaves! Anarchists know that, as Bakunin wrote:

"[a] person is strong only when he stands upon his own truth, when he speaks and acts from his deepest convictions. Then, whatever the situation he may be in, he always knows what he must say and do. He may fall, but he cannot bring shame upon himself or his causes." [quoted in Albert Meltzer, I couldn't Paint Golden Angels, p. 2]

What Bakunin describes is the power of independent thought, which is the power of freedom. We encourage you not to be "reasonable," not to accept what others tell you, but to think and act for yourself!

One last point: to state the obvious, this is not the final word on anarchism. Many anarchists will disagree with much that is written here, but this is to be expected when people think for themselves. All we wish to do is indicate the basic ideas of anarchism and give our analysis of certain topics based on how we understand and apply these ideas. We are sure, however, that all anarchists will agree with the core ideas we present, even if they may disagree with our application of them here and there.

What is anarchism?

Anarchism is a political theory which aims to create anarchy, "the absence of a master, of a sovereign." [P-J Proudhon, What is Property , p. 264] In other words, anarchism is a political theory which aims to create a society within which individuals freely co-operate together as equals. As such anarchism opposes all forms of hierarchical control — be that control by the state or a capitalist — as harmful to the individual and their individuality as well as unnecessary.

In the words of anarchist L. Susan Brown:

"While the popular understanding of anarchism is of a violent, anti-State movement, anarchism is a much more subtle and nuanced tradition than a simple opposition to government power. Anarchists oppose the idea that power and domination are necessary for society, and instead advocate more co-operative, anti-hierarchical forms of social, political and economic organisation." [The Politics of Individualism, p. 106]

However, "anarchism" and "anarchy" are undoubtedly the most misrepresented ideas in political theory. Generally, the words are used to mean "chaos" or "without order," and so, by implication, anarchists desire social chaos and a return to the "laws of the jungle."

This process of misrepresentation is not without historical parallel. For example, in countries which have considered government by one person (monarchy) necessary, the words “republic” or “democracy” have been used precisely like “anarchy,” to imply disorder and confusion. Those with a vested interest in preserving the status quo will obviously wish to imply that opposition to the current system cannot work in practice, and that a new form of society will only lead to chaos. Or, as Errico Malatesta expresses it:

“since it was thought that government was necessary and that without government there could only be disorder and confusion, it was natural and logical that anarchy, which means absence of government, should sound like absence of order.” [Anarchy, p. 16]

Anarchists want to change this “common-sense” idea of “anarchy,” so people will see that government and other hierarchical social relationships are both harmful and unnecessary:

“Change opinion, convince the public that government is not only unnecessary, but extremely harmful, and then the word anarchy, just because it means absence of government, will come to mean for everybody: natural order, unity of human needs and the interests of all, complete freedom within complete solidarity.” [Op. Cit., pp. 16]

What does “anarchy” mean?

The word “anarchy” is from the Greek, prefix an (or a), meaning “not,” “the want of,” “the absence of,” or “the lack of”, plus archos, meaning “a ruler,” “director”, “chief,” “person in charge,” or “authority.” Or, as Peter Kropotkin put it, Anarchy comes from the Greek words meaning “contrary to authority.” [Anarchism, p. 284]

While the Greek words anarchos and anarchia are often taken to mean “having no government” or “being without a government,” as can be seen, the strict, original meaning of anarchism was not simply “no government.” “An-archy” means “without a ruler,” or more generally, “without authority,” and it is in this sense that anarchists have continually used the word. For example, we find Kropotkin arguing that anarchism “attacks not only capital, but also the main sources of the power of capitalism: law, authority, and the State.” [Op. Cit., p. 150] For anarchists, anarchy means “not necessarily absence of order, as is generally supposed, but an absence of rule.” [Benjamin Tucker, *Instead of a Book*, p. 13] Hence David Weick’s excellent summary:

“Anarchism can be understood as the generic social and political idea that expresses negation of all power, sovereignty, domination, and hierarchical division, and a will to their dissolution... Anarchism is therefore more than anti-statism ... [even if] government (the state) ... is, appropriately, the central focus of anarchist critique.” [Reinventing Anarchy, p. 139]

For this reason, rather than being purely anti-government or anti-state, anarchism is primarily a movement against hierarchy. Why? Because hierarchy is the organisational structure that embodies authority. Since the state is the “highest” form of hierarchy, anarchists are, by definition, anti-state; but this is not a sufficient definition of anarchism. This means that real anarchists are opposed to all forms of hierarchical organisation, not only the state. In the words of Brian Morris:

“The term anarchy comes from the Greek, and essentially means ‘no ruler.’ Anarchists are people who reject all forms of government or coercive authority, all forms of hierarchy and domination. They are therefore opposed to what the Mexican anarchist Flores Magon called the ‘sombre trinity’ — state, capital and the church. Anarchists are thus opposed to both capitalism and to the state, as well as to all forms of religious authority. But anarchists also seek to establish or bring about by varying means, a condition of anarchy, that is, a decentralised society without coercive institutions, a society organised through a federation of voluntary associations.” [“Anthropology and Anarchism,” pp. 35–41, *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, no. 45, p. 38]

Reference to “hierarchy” in this context is a fairly recent development — the “classical” anarchists such as Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin did use the word, but rarely (they usually preferred “authority,” which was used as short-hand for “authoritarian”). However, it’s clear from their writings that theirs was a philosophy against hierarchy, against any inequality of power or privileges between individuals. Bakunin spoke of this when he attacked “official” authority but defended “natural influence,” and also when he said:

“Do you want to make it impossible for anyone to oppress his fellow-man? Then make sure that no one shall possess power.” [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 271]

As Jeff Draughn notes, “while it has always been a latent part of the ‘revolutionary project,’ only recently has this broader concept of anti-hierarchy arisen for more specific scrutiny. Nonetheless, the root of this is plainly visible in the Greek roots of the word ‘anarchy.’” [Between Anarchism and Libertarianism: Defining a New Movement]

We stress that this opposition to hierarchy is, for anarchists, not limited to just the state or government. It includes all authoritarian economic and social relationships as well as political ones, particularly those associated with capitalist property and wage labour. This can be seen from Proudhon’s argument that “Capital ... in the political field is analogous to government ... The economic idea of capitalism, the politics of government or of authority, and the theological idea of the Church are three identical ideas, linked in various ways. To attack one of them is equivalent to attacking all of them ... What capital does to labour, and the State to liberty, the Church does to the spirit. This trinity of ab-



solutism is as baneful in practice as it is in philosophy. The most effective means for oppressing the people would be simultaneously to enslave its body, its will and its reason." [quoted by Max Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism*, pp. 43–44] Thus we find Emma Goldman opposing capitalism as it meant "that man [or woman] must sell his [or her] labour" and, therefore, "that his [or her] inclination and judgement are subordinated to the will of a master." [Red Emma Speaks, p. 50] Forty years earlier Bakunin made the same point when he argued that under the current system "the worker sells his person and his liberty for a given time" to the capitalist in exchange for a wage. [Op. Cit., p. 187]

Thus "anarchy" means more than just "no government," it means opposition to all forms of authoritarian organisation and hierarchy. In Kropotkin's words, "the origin of the anarchist inception of society ... [lies in] the criticism ... of the hierarchical organisations and the authoritarian conceptions of society; and ... the analysis of the tendencies that are seen in the progressive movements of mankind." [Op. Cit., p. 158] For Malatesta, anarchism "was born in a moral revolt against social injustice" and that the "specific causes of social ills" could be found in "capitalistic property and the State." When the oppressed "sought to overthrow both State and property — then it was that anarchism was born." [Errico Malatesta: *His Life and Ideas*, p. 19]

Thus any attempt to assert that anarchy is purely anti-state is a misrepresentation of the word and the way it has been used by the anarchist movement. As Brian Morris argues, "when one examines the writings of classical anarchists... as well as the character of anarchist movements... it is clearly evident that it has never had this limited vision [of just being against the state]. It has always challenged all forms of authority and exploitation, and has been equally critical of capitalism and religion as it has been of the state." [Op. Cit., p. 40]

And, just to state the obvious, anarchy does not mean chaos nor do anarchists seek to create chaos or disorder. Instead, we wish to create a society based upon individual freedom and voluntary co-operation. In other words, order from the bottom up, not disorder imposed from the top down by authorities. Such a society would be a true anarchy, a society without rulers.

While we discuss what an anarchy could look like in section I, Noam Chomsky sums up the key aspect when he stated that in a truly free society "any interaction among human beings that is more than personal — meaning that takes institutional forms of one kind or another — in community, or workplace, family, larger society, whatever it may be, should be under direct control of its participants. So that would mean workers' councils in industry, popular democracy in communities, interaction between them, free associations in larger groups, up to organisation of international society." [Anarchism Interview] Society would no longer be divided into a hierarchy of bosses and workers, governors and governed. Rather, an anarchist society would be based on free association in participatory organisations and run from the bottom up. Anarchists, it should be noted, try to create as much of this society today,

in their organisations, struggles and activities, as they can.

### ***What does "anarchism" mean?***

To quote Peter Kropotkin, Anarchism is "the no-government system of socialism." [Anarchism, p. 46] In other words, "the abolition of exploitation and oppression of man by man, that is the abolition of private property [i.e. capitalism] and government." [Errico Malatesta, *Towards Anarchism*, p. 75]

Anarchism, therefore, is a political theory that aims to create a society which is without political, economic or social hierarchies. Anarchists maintain that anarchy, the absence of rulers, is a viable form of social system and so work for the maximisation of individual liberty and social equality. They see the goals of liberty and equality as mutually self-supporting. Or, in Bakunin's famous dictum:

"We are convinced that freedom without Socialism is privilege and injustice, and that Socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality." [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 269]

The history of human society proves this point. Liberty without equality is only liberty for the powerful, and equality without liberty is impossible and a justification for slavery.

While there are many different types of anarchism (from individualist anarchism to communist-anarchism — see section A.3 for more details), there has always been two common positions at the core of all of them — opposition to government and opposition to capitalism. In the words of the individualist-anarchist Benjamin Tucker, anarchism insists "on the abolition of the State and the abolition of usury; on no more government of man by man, and no more exploitation of man by man." [cited by Eunice Schuster, *Native American Anarchism*, p. 140] All anarchists view profit, interest and rent as usury (i.e. as exploitation) and so oppose them and the conditions that create them just as much as they oppose government and the State.

More generally, in the words of L. Susan Brown, the "unifying link" within anarchism "is a universal condemnation of hierarchy and domination and a willingness to fight for the freedom of the human individual." [The Politics of Individualism, p. 108] For anarchists, a person cannot be free if they are subject to state or capitalist authority. As Voltairine de Cleyre summarised:

"Anarchism ... teaches the possibility of a society in which the needs of life may be fully supplied for all, and in which the opportunities for complete development of mind and body shall be the heritage of all ... [It] teaches that the present unjust organisation of the production and distribution of wealth must finally be completely destroyed, and replaced by a system which will insure to each the liberty to work, without first seeking a master to whom he [or she] must surrender a tithe of his [or her] product,

which will guarantee his liberty of access to the sources and means of production... Out of the blindly submissive, it makes the discontented; out of the unconsciously dissatisfied, it makes the consciously dissatisfied ... Anarchism seeks to arouse the consciousness of oppression, the desire for a better society, and a sense of the necessity for unceasing warfare against capitalism and the State." [Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth, pp. 23–4]

So Anarchism is a political theory which advocates the creation of anarchy, a society based on the maxim of "no rulers." To achieve this, "[i]n common with all socialists, the anarchists hold that the private ownership of land, capital, and machinery has had its time; that it is condemned to disappear: and that all requisites for production must, and will, become the common property of society, and be managed in common by the producers of wealth. And... they maintain that the ideal of the political organisation of society is a condition of things where the functions of government are reduced to minimum... [and] that the ultimate aim of society is the reduction of the functions of government to nil — that is, to a society without government, to an-archy" [Peter Kropotkin, Op. Cit., p. 46]

Thus anarchism is both positive and negative. It analyses and critiques current society while at the same time offering a vision of a potential new society — a society that fulfils certain human needs which the current one denies. These needs, at their most basic, are liberty, equality and solidarity, which will be discussed in section A.2.

Anarchism unites critical analysis with hope, for, as Bakunin (in his pre-anarchist days) pointed out, "the urge to destroy is a creative urge." One cannot build a better society without understanding what is wrong with the present one.

However, it must be stressed that anarchism is more than just a means of analysis or a vision of a better society. It is also rooted in struggle, the struggle of the oppressed for their freedom. In other words, it provides a means of achieving a new system based on the needs of people, not power, and which places the planet before profit. To quote Scottish anarchist Stuart Christie:

"Anarchism is a movement for human freedom. It is concrete, democratic and egalitarian ... 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 soci-

ety, 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 ... 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 ...

"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 unshakeable 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 practically whatever they can, and also to assist within it the highest possible levels of both 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." [My Granny made me an Anarchist, pp. 162–3]

Anarchism, anarchists argue, is simply the theoretical expression of our capacity to organise ourselves and run society without bosses or politicians. It allows working class and other oppressed people to become conscious of our power as a class, defend our immediate interests, and fight to revolutionise society as a whole. Only by doing this can we create a society fit for human beings to live in.

It is no abstract philosophy. Anarchist ideas are put into practice everyday. Wherever oppressed people stand up for their rights, take action to defend their freedom, practice solidarity and co-operation, fight against oppression, organise themselves without leaders and bosses, the spirit of anarchism lives. Anarchists simply seek to strengthen these libertarian tendencies and bring them to their full fruition. As we discuss in section J, anarchists apply their ideas in many ways within capitalism in order to change it for the better until such time as we get rid of it completely. Section I discusses what we aim to replace it with, i.e. what anarchism aims for.



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