



# MARXISM & ANARCHISM

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## MARKISM AND ANARCHISM - ARE THEY COMPATIBLE?

by Eric J. Hobsbawm

The present revival of interest in anarchism is a curious and at first sight unexpected phenomenon. Even ten years ago it would have seemed in the highest degree unlikely. At that time anarchism, both as a movement and as an ideology, looked like a chapter in the development of the modern revolutionary and labour movements that had been definitely closed.

As a movement it seemed to belong to the pre-industrial period, and in any case to the era before the first world war and the October Revolution, except in Spain, where it can hardly be said to have survived the Civil War of 1936-9. One might say that it disappeared with the kings and emperors whom its militants had so often tried to assassinate. Nothing seemed to be able to halt, or even to slow down, its rapid and inevitable decline, even in those parts of the world in which it had once constituted a major political force - in France, Italy, Latin America. A careful searcher, who knew where to look, might still discover some anarchists even in the 1950s, and very many more ex-anarchists, easily recognisable by such signs as an interest in the poet Shelley. (It is characteristic that this most romantic school of revolutionaries has been more loyal than anyone else, including the literary critics of his own country, to the most revolutionary among English romantic poets.) When I tried to make contact, about this time, with activists in the Spanish anarchist underground in Paris, I was given a rendezvous at a cafe in Montmartre, by the Place Blanche, and somehow this reminder of long-lost era of bohemians, rebels and avantgarde, seemed only too characteristic.

As an ideology, anarchism did not decline so dramatically because it had never had anything like as much success, at least among intellectuals who are the social stratum most interested in ideas. There have probably always been eminent figures in the world of culture who called themselves anarchists (except, curiously enough, in Spain), but most of them seem to have been artists in the wider - or, like Pissarro and Signac, the narrower sense of the word. In any case, anarchism never had an attraction comparable to, say, Marxism, for intellectuals even before the October Revolution. With the exception of Kropotkin, it is not easy to think of an anarchist theorist who could be read with real interest by non-anarchists. There seemed, indeed, no real intellectual room for anarchist theory. The belief in a libertarian communism of self-governing co-operatives as the final aim of revolutionaries, it shared with Marxism. The old utopian socialists had thought more deeply and concretely about the nature of such communities than most anarchists. Even the strongest point in the anarchists' intellectual armoury, their awareness of the dangers of dictatorship and bureaucracy implicit in Marxism, was not peculiar to them. This type of critique was made with equal effect and greater intellectual sophistication both by 'unofficial' Marxists and by opponents of all kinds of socialism.

In brief, the main appeal of anarchism was emotional and not intellectual. That appeal was not negligible. Everyone who has ever studied, or had anything to do, with the real anarchist movement, has been deeply moved by the idealism, the heroism, the sacrifice, the saintliness which it so often produced, side by side with the brutality of the Ukrainian Makhnovshchina or the dedicated gunmen and church-burners of Spain. The very extremism of the anarchist rejection of state and organisation, the totality of their commitment to the overthrow of the present society, could not but arouse admiration; except perhaps among those who had to be active in politics by the side of anarchists, and found them almost impossible to work with. It is suitable that Spain, the country of Don Quixote, should have been their last fortress. The most touching epitaph I have heard on an anarchist terrorist, killed a few years ago by the police in Catalonia, was spoken by one of his comrades, without any sense of irony: "When we were young, and the Republic was founded, we were knightly but also spiritual. We have grown older, but not he. He was a guerillero by instinct. Yes, he was one of those Quixotes who come out of Spain."



Admirable, but hopeless. It was almost certainly the monumental ineffectiveness of anarchism which, for most people of my generation - the one which came to maturity in the years of the Spanish Civil War - determined our rejection of it. I still recall in the very earliest days of that war, the small town of Puigcerda in the Pyrenees, a little revolutionary republic, filled with free men and women, guns and an immensity of discussion. A few of trucks stood in the plaza. They were for the war. When anyone felt like going to fight on the Aragoness front, he went to the trucks. When a truck was full, it went to the front. Presumably, when the volunteers wanted to come back, they came back. The phrase 'C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre' should have been invented for such a situation. It was marvellous, but the main effect of this experience on me was, that it took me twenty years before I was prepared to see Spanish anarchism as anything but a tragic farce.

It was much more than this. And yet, no amount of sympathy can alter the fact that anarchism as a revolutionary movement has failed, that it has almost been designed for failure.

As Gerald Brenan, the author of the best book on modern Spain, has put it; a single strike of (socialist) miners in the Asturias shook the Spanish Government more than seventy years of massive anarchist revolutionary activity, which presented little more than a routine police problem. (Indeed, subsequent research has shown that in the era of maximum bomb-throwing in Barcelona, there were probably not a hundred policemen looking after public order in that city, and their number was not notably reinforced). The ineffectiveness of anarchist revolutionary activities could be documented at length, and for all countries in which this ideology played an important role in politics. This is not the place for such a documentation. My point is simply to explain why the revival of interest in anarchism today seems so unexpected, surprising and - if I am to speak frankly - unjustified.

Unjustified, but not inexplicable. There are two powerful reasons which explain the vogue for anarchism: the crisis of the world communist movement after Stalin's death and the rise of revolutionary discontent among students and intellectuals, at a time when objective historical factors in the developed countries do not make revolution appear very probable.

For most revolutionaries the crisis of communism is essentially that of the USSR and the regimes founded under its auspices in Eastern Europe; that is to say of socialist systems as understood in the years between the October Revolution and the fall of Hitler. Two aspects of these regimes now seemed more vulnerable to the traditional anarchist critique than before, because the October Revolution was no longer the only successful revolution made by communists, the USSR was no longer isolated, weak and constantly threatened with destruction, and because the two most powerful arguments for the USSR - its immunity to the economic crisis of 1929 and its resistance to Fascism - lost their force after 1945. Stalinism, that hypertrophy of the bureaucratized dictatorial state, seemed to justify the Bakuninite argument that the dictatorship of the proletariat would inevitably become simple dictatorship, and that socialism could not be constructed on such a basis. At the same time the removal of the worst excesses of Stalinism made it clear that even without purges and labour camps the kind of socialism introduced in the USSR was very far from what most socialists had had in mind before 1917, and the major objectives of that country's policy, rapid economic growth, technological and scientific development, national security etc., had no special connections with socialism, democracy or freedom. Backward nations might see in the USSR a model of how to escape from their backwardness, and might conclude from its experience and from their own that the methods of economic development pioneered and advocated by capitalism did not work in their conditions, whereas social revolution followed by central planning did, but the main object was 'development'. Socialism was the means to it and not the end. Developed nations, which already enjoyed the material level of production to which the USSR still aspired, and in many cases far more freedom and cultural variety for their citizens, could hardly take it as their model, and when they did (as in Czechoslovakia and the GDR) the results were distinctly disappointing.



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Here again it seemed reasonable to conclude that this was not the way to build socialism. Extremist critics - and they became increasingly numerous - concluded that it was not socialism at all, however, distorted or degenerate. The anarchists were among those revolutionaries who had always held this view, and their ideas therefore became more attractive. All the more so as the crucial argument of the 1917-1945 period, that Soviet Russia, however imperfect, was the only successful revolutionary regime and the essential basis for the success of revolution elsewhere, sounded much less convincing in the 1950s and hardly convincing at all in the 1960s.

The second and more powerful reason for the vogue of anarchism has nothing to do with the USSR, except insofar as it was fairly clear after 1945 that its government did not encourage revolutionary seizures of power in other countries. It arose out of the predicament of revolutionaries in non-revolutionary situations. As in the years before 1914, so in the 1950s and early 1960s western capitalism was stable and looked like remaining stable. The most powerful argument of classic marxist analysis, the historic inevitability of proletarian revolution, therefore lost its force; at least in the developed countries. But if history was not likely to bring revolution nearer, how would it come about?

Both before 1914 and again in our time anarchism provided an apparent answer. The very primitiveness of its theory became an asset. Revolution would come because revolutionaries wanted it with such passion, and undertook acts of revolt constantly, one of which would, sooner or later, turn out to be the spark which would set the world on fire. The appeal of this simple belief lay not in its more sophisticated formulations, though such extreme voluntarism could be given a philosophical basis (the pre-1914 anarchists often tended to admire Nietzsche as well as Stirner) or founded on social psychology, as with Sorel. (It is a not altogether accidental irony of history that such theoretical justifications of anarchist irrationalism were soon to be adapted into theoretical justifications of fascism). The strength of the anarchist belief lay in the fact that there seemed to be no alternative other than to give up the hope of revolution.

Of course neither before 1914 nor today were anarchists the only revolutionary voluntarists. All revolutionaries must always believe in the necessity of taking the initiative, the refusal to wait upon events to make the revolution for them. At times when - as in the Kautsky era of Social Democracy and the comparable era of postponed hope in the orthodox communist movement of the 1950s and 1960s, a dose of voluntarism is particularly salutary. Lenin was accused of Blanquism, just as Guevara and Regis Debray have been, with somewhat greater justification. At first sight such non-anarchist versions of the revolt against 'historic inevitability' seem much more attractive since they do not deny the importance of objective factors in the making of revolution, of organisation, discipline, strategy and tactics.

Nevertheless, and paradoxically, the anarchists may today have an occasional advantage over these more systematic revolutionaries. It has recently become fairly clear that the analysis on which most intelligent observers based their assessment of political prospects in the world must be badly deficient. There is no other explanation for the fact that several of the most dramatic and far-reaching developments in world politics during the past year have been merely unpredicated, but so unexpected as to appear almost incredible at first sight. The events of May 1968 in France are probably the most striking example. When rational analysis and prediction leads so many astray, including even most marxists, the irrational belief that anything is possible at any moment may seem to have some advantages. After all, on May 1st, not even in Peking or Havana did anyone seriously expect that within a matter of days barricades would rise in Paris, soon to be followed by the greatest general strike in living memory. On the night of May 9th it was not only the official Communists who opposed the building of barricades, but a good many of the Trotskyist and Maoist students also, for the apparently sound reason that if the police really had orders to fire, the result would be a brief but substantial massacre. Those who went ahead without hesitation were the anarchists, the anarchisers, the 'situationnistes'.



There are moments when simple revolutionary or Napoleonic phrases like 'de l'audacem, encore de l'audace' or 'on s'engage et puis on voit' work. This was one of them. One might even say that this was an occasion when only the blind chicken was in a position to find the grain of corn.

No doubt, statistically speaking, such moments are bound to be rare. The failure of Latin American guerilla movements, and the death of Guevara are reminders that it is not enough to want a revolution, however passionately, or even to start guerilla was. No doubt the limits of anarchism became evident within a few days, even in Paris. Yet the fact that once or twice pure voluntarism has produced results cannot be denied. Inevitably it has increased the appeal of anarchism.

Anarchism is therefore today once again a political force. Probably it has no mass basis outside the movement of students and intellectuals, and even within that movement it is influential rather as a persistent current of 'spontaneity' and activism rather than through the relatively few people who claim to be anarchists. The question is therefore once again worth asking: what is the value of the anarchist tradition today?

In terms of ideology, theory and programmes, that value remains marginal. Anarchism is a critique of the dangers of authoritarianism, and bureaucracy in states, parties and movements, but this is primarily a symptom that these dangers are widely recognised. If all anarchists had disappeared from the face of the earth, the discussion about these problems would go on much as it does. Anarchism also suggests a solution in terms of direct democracy and small self-governing groups, but I do not think its own proposals for the future have so far been either very valuable or very fully thought out. To mention only considerations. First, ~~ix~~ small self-governing direct democracies are unfortunately not necessarily libertarian. They may indeed function only because they establish a consensus so powerful that those who do not share it voluntarily refrain from expressing their dissent; alternatively, because those who do not share the prevailing view leave the community, or are expelled. There is a good deal of information about the operation of such small communities, which I have not seen realistically discussed in anarchist literature. Second, both the nature of the modern social economy and of modern scientific technology raise problems of considerable complexity for those who see the future as a world of self-governing small groups. These may not be insoluble, but unfortunately they are certainly not solved by the simple call for the abolition of the state and bureaucracy, nor by the suspicion of technology and the natural sciences which so often goes with modern anarchism. \*It is possible to construct a theoretical

\*An illustration of this complexity may be given from the history of anarchism. I take it from J. Martinez Alier's invaluable study of landless labourers in Andalusia in 1964-5. From the author's careful questioning it is clear that the landless labourers of Cordova, traditionally the mass basis of Spanish rural anarchism, have not changed their ideas since 1936 - except in one respect. The social and economic activities of even the Franco regime have convinced them that the State cannot simply be rejected, but has some positive functions. This may help to explain why they no longer seem to be anarchists.

model of libertarian anarchism which will be compatible with modern scientific technology, but unfortunately it will not be socialist. It will be much closer to the views of Mr. Goldwater (and his economic adviser Professor Milton Friedman of Chicago) than to the views of Kropotkin. For (as Bernard Shaw pointed out long ago in his pamphlet on the Impossibilities of Anarchism), the extreme versions of individualist liberalism are logically as anarchist as Bakunin.

It will be clear that in my view anarchism has no significant contribution to socialist theory to make, though it is a useful critical element. If socialists want theories about the present and the future, they will still have to look elsewhere, to Marx and his followers, and probably also to the earlier utopian socialists, such as Fourier. To be more precise: if anarchists want to make a significant contribution they will have to do much more serious thinking than most of them have recently done.



The contribution of anarchism to revolutionary strategy and tactics cannot be so easily dismissed. It is true that anarchists are as unlikely to make successful revolutions in future as they have been in the past. To adapt a phrase used by Bakunin of the peasantry: they may be invaluable on the first day of a revolution, but they are almost certain to be an obstacle on the second day. Nevertheless, historically their insistence on spontaneity has much to teach us. For it is the great weakness of revolutionaries brought up in any of the versions derived from classical Marxism, that they tend to think of revolutions as occurring under conditions which can be specified in advance, as things which can be, at least in outline, foreseen, planned and organised. But in practice this is not so.

Or rather, most of the great revolutions which have occurred and succeeded, have begun as 'happenings' rather than as planned productions. Sometimes they have grown rapidly and unexpectedly out of what looked like ordinary mass demonstrations, sometimes out of resistance to the acts of their enemies, sometimes in other ways - but rarely if ever did they take the form expected by organised revolutionary movements, even when these had predicted the imminent occurrence of revolution. That is why the test of greatness in revolutionaries has always been their capacity to discover the new and unexpected characteristics of revolutionary situations and to adapt their tactics to them. Like the surfer, the revolutionary does not create the waves on which he rides, but balances on them. Unlike the surfer - and here serious revolutionary theory diverges from anarchist practice - sooner or later he stops riding on the wave and must control its direction and movement.

Anarchism has valuable lessons to teach, because it has in practice rather than in theory - been unusually sensitive to the spontaneous elements in mass movements. Any large and disciplined movement can order a strike or demonstration to take place, and if it is sufficiently large and disciplined, it can make a reasonably impressive showing. Yet there is all the difference between the CGT's taken general strike of May 13th 1968 and the 10 millions who occupied their places of work a few days later without a national directive. The very organisational feebleness of anarchist and anarchising movements has forced them to explore the means of discovering or securing that spontaneous consensus among militants and masses which produces action. (Admittedly it has also led them to experiment with ineffective tactics such as individual or small group terrorism which can be practised without mobilising any masses, and for which, incidentally, the organisational defects of anarchism do not suit anarchists).

The student movements of the past few years have been like anarchist movements, at least in their early stages, insofar as they have consisted not of mass organisations but of small groups of militants mobilising the masses of their fellow-students from time to time. They have been obliged to make themselves sensitive to the mood of these masses, to the times and issues which will permit mass mobilisation. The process by which the American SDS has developed its action is such a dialogue between cadres and masses, in which proposals arise among the cadres, are talked over in free discussion to see whether they arouse the enthusiasm of the activists, then thrown among the masses and taken up or dropped according to their reactions. It is a flexible process, allowing almost total autonomy to each group, so that the American SDS nationally may sometimes seem little more than a coalition of independent local movements held together by a general mood of revolt, and a few broad targets of revolt - racialism, the Vietnam war -, but otherwise very different in Berkeley, in Harvard in Oberlin, in some remote Catholic college or in the Deep South. It is a primitive kind of movement, and its weaknesses are evident - a lack of theory, of agreed strategic perspectives, of quick tactical reaction on a national scale. At the same time it is doubtful whether any other form of mobilisation could have created, maintained and developed powerful a national student movement in the USA in the 1960s. Quite certainly this could not have been done by the disciplined small groups of revolutionaries in the old tradition -



Communist, Trotskyist or Maoist - who constantly seek to impose their specific ideas and perspectives on the masses and in doing so isolate themselves more often than they mobilise them.

These are lessons to be learned not so much from the actual anarchists of today whose practice is rarely impressive, as from a study of the historic experience of anarchist movements. They are particularly valuable in the present situation, in which new revolutionary movements have often had to be built on and out of the ruins of the older ones. For let us not be under any illusion. The impressive 'new left' of recent years is admirable, but in many respects it is not only new, but at the same time a regression to an earlier, weaker, less developed form of the socialist movement, unwilling or unable to benefit from the major achievements of the international working class and revolutionary movements in the century between the Communist Manifesto and the Cold War.

Tactics derived from anarchist experience are a reflection of this relative primitiveness and weakness, but in such circumstances they may be the best ones to pursue for a time. The important thing is to know when the limits of such tactics have been reached. What happened in France in May 1968 was less like 1917 than like 1830 or 1848. It is an inspiring to discover that, in the developed countries of Western Europe, any kind of revolutionary situation, however momentary, is possible once again. But it would be equally unwise to forget that of 1848 is at the same time the great example of a successful spontaneous European revolution, and of its rapid and unmitigated failure.

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