

# ANARCHISM

## HOW NOT TO MAKE A REVOLUTION

SOME SEE ANARCHISM AS THE MOST RADICAL OF DOCTRINES. LENIN CALLED IT "THE POLITICS OF DESPAIR." WHO IS RIGHT? PAUL D'AMATO LOOKS AT ANARCHISM—ITS THEORY AND PRACTICE—AND FINDS THAT IT FALLS FAR SHORT OF ITS PROFESSED IDEALS.

**A**narchism, at first glance, seems to represent the most thorough rejection of all forms of oppression and domination. It is largely this "anti-authoritarian" sentiment that continues to attract young people to anarchist ideas.

Anarchism has always been a broad church. Engels once described anarchists as "so unique that no two of them can agree with each other."<sup>1</sup> The anarchist movement has included extreme individualists who oppose all forms of organization as "tyranny," to anarcho-syndicalists whose views approach those of Marxism. It has embraced lifestyle-oriented vegetarians and advocates of the "propaganda of the deed," whether those deeds be individual acts of terrorism intended to "spark" wider rebellion, or, more prevalent today, well-choreographed publicity stunts intended to shock and amaze, like one recently published in an anarchist "zine," which suggests coming to work in a suit of tin foil.<sup>2</sup>

Today's anarchism is a far cry from the syndicalists of the early part of this century. The Industrial Workers of the World in the U.S. and the Spanish National Confederation of Workers (CNT) in the 1930s looked to the power of collective working-class struggle to change society. Their rejection of politics was in large part a reaction—though a primitive and ineffectual one—against the reformist socialists who had adapted to capitalism and had abandoned working-class struggle for the perks of political office.

The anarchists of today—steeped in middle-class individualism—are the descendants of the revival of anarchism in the late 1960s among rebellious student youth. In the late 1970s and 1980s, anarchist ideas, though not always acknowledged as such, took hold especially in the environmental movement. Consensus decision-making (everyone should agree as opposed to majority rule), "no leaders, no followers," no centralism and various kinds of localism (small is beautiful)—these are direct imports from anarchism to the greens. Modern anarchism looks to lifestyle experiments and acts of symbolic protest, and is indifferent or hostile to working-class activity.

Despite the variety, there *are* common denominators that unite all kinds of anarchists: opposition to authority, opposition to all states, and opposition to any form of centralism. Moreover, aside from syndicalism, anarchism is marked by a very middle-class focus on the freedom and "autonomy" of the individual. This article will argue that anarchism is absolutely incapable of offering answers to the key questions it purports to address: how we explain the origins and character of exploitation and inequality in society and how we can end them.

### SPOT THE AUTHORITARIANS

There is a long-standing myth about the difference between Marxism and anarchism that casts Marx in the role of the evil harbinger of state tyranny and Proudhon and Bakunin—contemporaries of Marx and the founders of anarchism—as great

lovers of freedom. Marx, so the argument goes, worshipped the state and aimed to replace the tyranny of capitalism with another state tyranny just as oppressive. Bakunin and Proudhon were farsighted visionaries who saw in Marx's schema the future Stalinist state, and who counterposed to it free association, opposition to authority, and spontaneous action from below.

Here is just one example of the anarchist spin from Edward Hyams' 1979 biography of anarchism's founder, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon:

Marxism has given us societies in which the state has become the instrument of a bureaucratic tyranny. This is precisely what Proudhon said would happen if Marx's ideas were given practical force and expression.... The moral flaw in Marxism derives from the fact that Marx inherited his master Hegel's conviction that the state is a being superior not only to each individual but to the sum of all the individuals composing a society. This conviction, a direct and unavoidable consequence of a strict application of the Hegelian dialectic to politics, has inevitably made the Marxist state into a devouring monster.<sup>3</sup>

There you have it, Hegel leads to Stalinism!

The second founder of anarchism, the Russian Michael Bakunin, heaped invective on Marx for his supposed "authoritarian," "state" socialism:

They [Marx and his followers] are worshippers of State power, and necessarily also prophets of political and social discipline and champions of order established from the top downwards.... They are for government, we, for our part, are anarchists.<sup>4</sup>

This now standard anarchist slander—Proudhon+Bakunin=liberty and freedom, Marx+Engels=state tyranny—won't stand up to scrutiny.

To start with, Proudhon and Bakunin held views which were unmistakably reactionary and extremely "authoritarian." As Proudhon put it, "democracy disgusts me." Proudhon, a provincial printer who hated urban life, despised working-class self-activity. He opposed strikes and supported the police breaking them up. He also opposed working-class revolution. As a member of the French legislative assembly in 1848, he supported the crushing of the June uprising of Parisian workers (though he did later apologize for this "mistake"), and later supported the presidential candidacy of General Cavaignac, the man responsible for violently putting down the June uprising ("[T]he state is a bourgeois institution," he opined, "therefore its chief in good logic should be a bourgeois."). Later, Proudhon wrote a pamphlet in support of the future dictator Louis Napoleon Bonaparte III, and was an apologist for Russian Tsarism ("Do not forget that the despotism of the Tsar is necessary to civilization."). Proudhon was a bigoted racist who justified slavery on grounds that Blacks were an inferior race. He used anarchist arguments for federalism to justify support for the slave South during the Civil War. Moreover, Proudhon was, in addition to being a French nation-

al chauvinist, a reactionary sexist. “Man’s primary condition,” he wrote, “is to dominate his wife and be the master.”<sup>5</sup>

Bakunin, the great libertarian, was anti-German, virulently anti-Semitic, fond of intrigue and secret conspiracy, and an advocate of methods so authoritarian as to make a Stalinist blush. He wrote, for example, in an 1871 circular letter to supporters:

Well now, this whole Jewish world which constitutes a single exploiting sect, a sort of bloodsucker people, a collective parasite...this world is presently, at least in great part, at the disposal of Marx on the one hand and of the Rothschilds on the other... Jewish solidarity, that powerful solidarity that has maintained itself through all history, united them.<sup>6</sup>

Most secret societies in Europe at least had the merit of focusing their organizing efforts against the despotic rulers of Europe. Not Bakunin. He and his followers joined the First International Workingmen’s Association and proceeded to devote their time to painting Marx as its dictator, and working surreptitiously—through a secret “alliance” inside the International—to undermine the International itself. Instead of the open democratic procedures of the International (which allowed a wide degree of autonomy for the different locals), Bakunin proposed that the “spontaneous” revolutionary action of the masses should be supplemented by the invisible direction of a handful of self-selected revolutionaries—Bakunin’s own secret “alliance”:

But for the very establishment of the...triumph of revolution over reaction, *the unity of revolutionary thought and action must find an agent in the thick of the popular anarchy...* That agent must be *the secret universal association of international brothers.*<sup>7</sup>

Bakunin’s program then goes on to argue that this secret society will become “a kind of revolutionary general staff” that need only consist of a small group: “A hundred powerfully and seriously allied revolutionaries are enough for the international organization of the whole of Europe.”<sup>8</sup> Like “invisible pilots in the thick of the popular tempest,” Bakunin wrote to a supporter, “we must steer it [the revolution] not by any open power but by the collective dictatorship of all the allies—a dictatorship without insignia, titles, or official rights, and all the stronger for having none of the paraphernalia of power.”<sup>9</sup>

Authoritarian indeed!—a tiny handful of self-selected initiates secretly, and therefore completely unaccountably, steering the “spontaneous” revolution from behind the scenes. Yet the anarchists extol Bakunin as a libertarian and denounce Marx, who introduced as Rule #1 of the International “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.”

#### THE MYTH OF STATE SOCIALISM

The other half of the anarchist myth is that Marx and Engels were “state” socialists or “authoritarian” socialists. Yet it was Marx and Engels who organized the fight in the socialist movement against those who believed that socialism was about taking over the state, or that socialism could be equated with state ownership or control of production. The only addition to the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels made came after witnessing the Paris Commune of 1871. They added that the working class “cannot lay hold of the ready-made state machine,” but must destroy it and replace it with its own mass institutions of workers’ democracy, based on revocable delegates chosen by workers themselves.

Marx rejected the politics of the German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle, who viewed the working class as a sort of stage-army that would help him into office where he and his cohorts would implement socialism through the state. Marx attacked Lassalleans

for their “servile belief in the state.”<sup>10</sup> Engels, too, made crystal clear that he and Marx’s conception of socialism had nothing at all to do with state ownership of property:

Certainly, if the taking over by the state of the tobacco industry is socialistic, then Napoleon and Metternich must be numbered among the founders of socialism. If the Belgian state, for quite ordinary political and financial reasons, itself constructed its chief railway lines; if Bismarck, not under any economic compulsion, took over for the state the chief Prussian lines, simply to be the better able to have them in hand in case of war...and especially to create for himself a new source of income independent of parliamentary votes—this was, in no sense, a socialistic measure, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously.<sup>11</sup>

The founders of Marxism were *from the beginning* staunch opponents of any kind of socialism that was achieved *on behalf* of the working class, rather than by workers themselves. They were severely critical of any movement—like those of the Blanquists in France—that thought only a small group of self-selected revolutionaries was needed to carry out a successful revolution. For them, the socialist revolution could only be achieved as “a movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority.”

The Communist League, an organization which Marx and Engels had just managed to win over to their views, declared in 1847: “We are not among those communists who are out to destroy personal liberty, who wish to turn the world into one huge barrack or into a gigantic workhouse... [w]e have no desire to exchange freedom for equality. We are convinced that in no social order will personal freedom be so assured as in a society based upon communal ownership.”<sup>12</sup>

Socialism was about taking the abundant fruits of capitalist production and reorganizing the social relations of production in order not only to meet human needs, but to allow workers the free time denied them by capitalist production to fully develop their creative faculties. Whereas anarchism counterposes the individual to the collective, Marxism argues that only through the collective, democratic control of production and wealth can there be the full development of individual creativity and talent.

#### THE CONTRADICTIONS OF “ANTI-AUTHORITARIANISM”

The core of anarchism is a rejection of all forms of authority, a position summed up in the *Anarchist FAQ*. After referring to the growing crisis of poverty, homelessness, crime, ecological disaster, and threat of nuclear annihilation, the *FAQ* explains:

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 “civilized” 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. organizations that concentrate power at the top of a pyramidal structure, such as corporations, government bureaucracies, armies, political parties, religious organizations, universities, etc.<sup>13</sup>

The problem with this position is, first of all, that it isn’t a theory. As Engels once commented in a letter to a friend, “authority=state=absolute evil” “sounds extremely radical and can be learnt by heart in a few minutes,” but explains absolutely nothing. The analysis is shallow and idealist: the state arose out of an idea, a principle, the “principle of hierarchy.” But where did this principle come from? How and why did this “principle” and not some other come to be imposed?

For Marx and Engels, the important thing was not what was in people’s heads—that itself had to be explained. If human

societies did not always live with states or class division, how did they arise? It doesn't advance us very far to say: because of the "principle of hierarchical authority." That's like saying a war broke out because of "the principle of armed aggression."

For Marx and Engels, changes in human behavior could only be explained by looking at the real material conditions of people's lives, of which the most basic and important, upon which all of society rested, was the social relations that people entered into in order to meet their basic survival needs, to make a living. They argued that the state arose, and continues, as a product of the division of society into irreconcilable classes—its role is to uphold by force if necessary the appropriation of the social surplus by a minority, ruling class, which controls production, and the subordination of an exploited class of laborers. Class divisions themselves arose not out of a "principle of class division," but out of the changing material conditions of human production—the rise of an agricultural surplus:

So long as the really working population were so much occupied with their necessary labor that they had no time left for looking after the common affairs of society...so long was it necessary that there should constantly exist a special class, freed from actual labor, to manage these affairs; and this class never failed, for its own advantage, to impose a greater and greater burden of labor on the working masses. Only the immense increase of the productive forces attained by modern industry has made it possible to distribute labor among all members of society without exception, and thereby to limit the labor-time of each individual member to such an extent that all have enough free time left to take part in the general...affairs of society. It is only now, therefore, that every ruling and exploiting class has become superfluous and indeed a hindrance to social development.<sup>14</sup>

Anarchists view society in terms of authority vs. anti-authority, a battle that rages above history, above real conditions; a struggle based not on social conditions, but on the willpower of revolutionaries. This begs the questions: why has a minority oppressed and exploited a majority for much of human history? and why didn't the "idea" of freedom, if it is not dependent on social conditions, take hold 50, 100, or even 1,000 years ago? Marx hit the nail on the head when he said of Bakunin:

A radical social revolution is bound up with definite historical conditions or economic development...He [Bakunin] understands absolutely nothing of social revolution, only its political rhetoric.... Now since all previous economic formations, whether developed or undeveloped, have entailed the enslavement of the worker (whether as wage laborer, peasant, etc.) he imagines that *radical revolution* is equally possible in all these formations.... *Willpower*, not economic conditions, is the basis of his social revolution.<sup>15</sup>

This voluntarism in anarchism leads it in practice to detaching means from ends. For if social conditions are irrelevant, it matters little what means are employed and by whom to achieve "freedom." Individual acts of rebelliousness are as good as mass movements. Indeed, the individualism of anarchism, its aversion to collective democracy, means that often anarchists *prefer* the small actions of an "enlightened" few over mass action.

The anarchist "principle" of "anti-authority" sounds very radical. But it is completely inoperable in practice. For if, as anarchists accept, we live in a society based upon violence, coercion, and authority, how will it be possible to do away with such a society? An anarchist who applies this principle consistently will find himself or herself completely paralyzed in the face of the violence, coercion, and authority of existing society. It is similar to pacifism. A

consistent pacifist must oppose all violence. Therefore, logically, a Guatemalan peasant who arms himself to fight off the government death squads is no better than the government who sent out the death squads. As socialists we say: you cannot equate the violence of the oppressor with the violence of the oppressed. If you do, you end up siding with the oppressor. It is the same with "anti-authoritarianism." A consistent application of this principle means opposing, in practice, any effective movement to transform society—whether it involve the "authority" of a strike committee, of a demonstration to stop fascist or racist violence, or of a picket line to stop strikebreakers. As socialists we say: you can't equate the authority of a mass workers' movement attempting to change society and to end violence and oppression, with that of the ruling class. The authority of a workers' committee is different from that of a foreman or a cop.

Ultimately, argues Engels, a blanket condemnation of all authority means rejection of revolution:

All socialists are agreed that the political state, and with it political authority, will disappear as a result of the coming social revolution, that is, that public functions will lose their political character and be transformed into the simple administrative functions of watching over the true interests of society. But the anti-authoritarians demand that the authoritarian political state be abolished at one stroke, even before the social conditions that gave birth to it have been destroyed. They demand that the first act of the social revolution shall be the abolition of authority. Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution? A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon—authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries.<sup>16</sup>

Any successful revolution will not end the day the state, with its police, army, courts, and bureaucracy, is overthrown. Workers would still need an "authority" of their own to put down and keep the old order from coming back into power. What kind of state would this be? Marx and Engels answered: a state of the majority to suppress the exploiting minority, a workers' government, composed of elected workers' delegates. As an example they pointed to the Paris Commune of 1871, when the workers of Paris armed themselves, chased the rich out of the city, and set up the Commune, based on revocable delegates paid no higher than the average workers' wage. They didn't "take over" the existing state but replaced it with their own democratic workers' government.

"One thing especially," wrote Engels, "was proven by the Commune, viz., that the 'working class cannot lay hold of the ready-made state machine and wield it for its own purposes.'" Marx wrote in a letter in 1871: "the next attempt of the French Revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to smash it, and this is essential for every real people's revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting."<sup>17</sup>

#### INDIFFERENCE TO POLITICS

Anarchists' opposition to the state in most instances translates into opposition to all political activity, for participation in politics on any level constitutes "recognition" of the state. Political abstention—a hallmark of anarchism—leads, at best, to irrelevance in the political sphere and, at worst, to an accommodation to the existing state, something abstaining was supposed to get around.

The Italian Bakuninists, for example, refused even to partic-

ipate in a movement to fight for universal suffrage. They refused to participate in a mass meeting with bourgeois Republicans in 1872 calling for the right to vote because, they argued, “*universal suffrage* is a political *farce*, perhaps well-intentioned; but [still] a farce.”<sup>18</sup> This, again, is another example of where the apparently super-leftism of anarchism turns into its opposite, an accommodation to the right.

Engels took on the abstentionists, showing that such politics meant not *freeing* workers from the influence of bourgeois politics, but subordinating them to it:

Absolute abstention in political matters is impossible, so all the abstentionist journals are actually engaging in politics. The only point is how this should be done and what policy should be adopted.... Experience of real life, political oppression which is imposed on them by existing governments....force the workers to engage in politics whether they like it or not. To preach abstention to them would be to drive them into the arms of bourgeois politics. Particularly after the Paris Commune, which has placed political action by the proletariat on the agenda, abstention is quite impossible.

We want the abolition of classes. How can this be achieved? By the political dominion of the proletariat. And when this has been universally acknowledged, we are told not to meddle in politics! All the abstentionists call themselves revolutionaries, and even revolutionaries above all. But revolution is the supreme political act; he who desires it must desire also the means, the political action that prepares it, that gives the workers their education in revolution.... But the politics that must be conducted are workers’ politics; the workers’ party must be not merely an appendage of some of the bourgeois parties, but a fully independent party which has its goal and its own policy.<sup>19</sup>

#### ANARCHISM IN PRACTICE: HOW NOT TO MAKE A REVOLUTION

Wherever anarchists have not simply abstained from struggle for the sake of purity, they have been forced to severely compromise their ideas. In Spain, for example, a radical bourgeois revolt in 1873 gave Bakunin and his followers a chance to reveal their talents as revolutionaries. The revolt swept through practically every major city in Spain. In a matter of days, armed insurgents, many of them workers, took over these cities and established local “communes.”

As participants in—in some cases, leaders of—the revolt, the Bakuninists proceeded to compromise most of their principles. Instead of abolishing the state, wherever the anarchists held sway they established tiny, local states in which anarchists participated as leaders. Insofar as they maintained their principles of federalism and local autonomy, they helped to disorganize and weaken the revolutionary forces. The lack of centralization in the movement allowed the Spanish army to march unhindered from town to town, smashing each revolt individually.

“Nothing remains of the so-called principles of anarchy,” wrote Engels in a pamphlet on the uprising, “free federation of independent groups, etc., but the boundless and senseless fragmentation of the revolutionary resources, which enabled the government to conquer one city after another with a handful of soldiers, practically with virtually no resistance.”<sup>20</sup>

The Spanish revolution of 1936 represented the high tide of anarchism’s influence. The anarchist-dominated National Confederation of Workers (CNT) embraced a huge section of Spanish workers, inspired by its vision of militant direct action. Even after the CNT exhausted itself in several abortive uprisings in the early 1930s, it was able to retain a mass following among workers. The CNT preached abstention from voting, leading in 1934 to the election of a right-wing government. Its members, reacting to the right’s victory, swung behind the election of a popular front



Woman militia member during the Spanish Civil War

government in 1936. When General Francisco Franco led a military revolt against the popularly elected republic, the workers of Spain, especially Barcelona, rose up in self-defense. They armed themselves, seizing land and factories and, at least initially, thwarted Franco’s assault through much of Spain. In Barcelona, workers effectively controlled the city. But the anarchist leadership, heedful of their principles, rejected taking power. Two French left-wing historians of the Spanish Revolution, Broué and Temime, tell the story of the Catalan anarchist leaders’ meeting with Companys, the President of Catalonia:

President Companys congratulated them on their victory: “You are the masters of the town and of Catalonia, because you defeated the fascist soldiers on your own.... You have won and everything is in your power. If you do not need me, if you do not want me as president, say so now, and I shall become just another soldier in the anti-fascist struggle”...

The fate of the state and its hopes of restoration in the ensuing months depended on the acceptance or refusal of his services. As it turned out, the leaders of the CNT agreed to go on with the collaboration.... They agreed to Companys’s offer.<sup>21</sup>

The anarchist leader Santillán explained the CNT’s reasoning:

We could have remained alone....declared the Generalidad null and void, and imposed the true power of the people in its place, but we did not believe in dictatorship when it was being exercised against us, and we did not want it when we could exercise it ourselves only at the expense of others.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequently, not only did the anarchist leaders abdicate power to the existing government, they tossed their principles aside and became participants in a the “popular front” government that placated the capitalists and landowners and that systematically began disarming the working-class movement in the name of “antifascist” unity.

Leon Trotsky argued that the anarchists' denial of power meant yielding power to the existing state:

In and of itself, this self-justification that "we did not seize power not because we were unable but because we did not wish to, because we were against every kind of dictatorship," and the like, contains an irrevocable condemnation of anarchism as an utterly anti-revolutionary doctrine. To renounce the conquest of power is voluntarily to leave the power with those who wield it, the exploiters. The essence of every revolution consisted and consists in putting a new class in power, thus enabling it to realize its own program in life. It is impossible to wage war and to reject victory. It is impossible to lead the masses toward insurrection without preparing for the conquest of power.<sup>23</sup>

The response of anarchists to their failure in Spain is that "exceptional" circumstances forced them into impossible choices.

But revolutions are precisely "exceptional circumstances." Trotsky's answer to this excuse is not only accurate, but funny:

We have already heard from some anarchist theoreticians that at the time of such "exceptional" circumstances as war and revolution, it is necessary to renounce the principles of one's own program. Such revolutionists bear a close resemblance to raincoats that leak only when it rains, i.e., in "exceptional" circumstances, but during dry weather they remain waterproof with complete success.<sup>24</sup>

#### ANARCHO-ELITISM

Anarchist opposition to authority leads directly to an opposition to leaders, and, by extension, to an opposition to formal democratic procedures. But this leads anarchism from anti-authoritarianism into its mirror opposite: a view of revolt as the privileged act of the enlightened few. The American anarchist Emma Goldman—still very popular among anarchists today—puts the anarchist position most starkly:

The multitude, the mass spirit, dominates everywhere, destroying quality...

[T]he majority cannot reason; it has no judgment. Lacking utterly in originality and moral courage, the majority has always placed its destiny in the hands of others...

I therefore believe with Emerson that "the masses are crude, lame, pernicious in their demands and influence, and need not to be flattered, but to be schooled. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to drill, divide, and break them up..."

In other words, the living, vital truth of social and economic well-being will become a reality only through the zeal, courage, the non-compromising determination of intelligent minorities, and not through the mass.<sup>25</sup>

The conclusion for anarchists like Goldman is identical to that of conservatives—opposition to mass, democratic control from below; the working class can't and shouldn't rule. This extreme elitism is not an aberration of Goldman's, but addresses a contradiction at the heart of anarchism: for if a mass movement or organization aimed at concerted action does not operate on the democratic method of open debate and discussion, followed by majority rule and *centralized* implementation, how does a movement go forward? There are two possible outcomes: either there is no concerted action because the participants are each "doing their own thing," and the movement therefore dissolves or collapses in defeat; or decisions are made, but by individuals who are *not* elected and *not* accountable to anyone. Bakunin's elite band of "invisible" leaders is really a practical admission that all movements require leadership, whether anarchists like it or not. Only anarchist principles don't allow open, accountable leadership.

This is what certainly underlies the anarchist "propaganda of

the deed." This kind of activity includes individual acts of terrorism—like Alexander Berkman's attempted assassination of the hated American industrialist Henry Clay Frick, or the Italian Bakuninists' insurrections of a small group designed to "spark" a wider rebellion. In each case, anarchism looks not to actual conditions that would make a mass revolution possible, but to their own willpower and daring. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the Spanish anarchists attempted one revolt after another, exhausting the movement in premature and adventurist failures. Though they profess otherwise, theirs is a politics that substitutes the action of an elite minority for the activity of workers themselves.

Anarchists, of course, would disagree. We have "no leaders and no followers," they might respond. Instead of democracy, where the majority imposes its will, we have consensus, where everyone comes to an agreement. This may seem at first to be a "nicer," more benign way to reach decisions. In practice, consensus ends up being a profoundly elitist—and entirely impractical—way of making decisions. For what is consensus if not a compulsion to agree? If everyone must agree, then eventually, if the group hopes to eventually *do* something, someone has to "give in" and agree with the rest, even if they don't really agree, unless they want to be attacked for holding up the decision-making process. Alternatively, a tiny minority, even one person, can bring everything to a grinding halt simply by disagreeing with the majority. In practice, the dictum "no leaders, no followers" leads to the creation of behind-the-scenes leaders who are not elected and therefore unaccountable. The phenomenon was recognized as a feature of the early women's movement in an essay written by Jo Freeman in 1970 called "The Tyranny of Structurelessness:"

...[T]o strive for a structureless group is as useful and deceptive as to aim at an "objective" news story, a "value-free" social science or a "free" economy. A "laissez-faire" group is about as realistic as a "laissez-faire" society; the idea becomes a smoke-screen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others. This hegemony can easily be established because the idea of "structurelessness" does not prevent the formation of informal structures, but only formal ones.<sup>26</sup>

#### PREFIGURING THE FUTURE

Anarchism makes the error of believing that the means to achieve a classless, stateless society themselves must prefigure the end result. Thus, if we want to achieve a society based on free association, without coercion, without bureaucratic centralism, we must build forms of organization *today* which prefigure the future society. Hence the emphasis among some anarchists on vegetarianism, collectives, "affinity groups,"<sup>25</sup> and consensus. This lifestyle approach tends to focus on how we live our lives rather than on the best means of winning a struggle.

Lifestyle anarchism today is the most visible form of anarchism. The writer most responsible for linking anarchism with ecological concerns, Murray Bookchin, encapsulates well the direction anarchism has taken in recent years:

[T]he 1990s are awash in self-styled anarchists who—their flamboyant radical rhetoric aside—are cultivating a latter-day anarchist individualism that I will call lifestyle anarchism.... Ad hoc adventurism, personal bravura, an aversion to theory oddly akin to the anti-rational biases of postmodernism, celebrations of theoretical incoherence (pluralism), a basically apolitical and anti-organizational commitment to imagination, desire, and ecstasy, and an intensely self-oriented enchantment of everyday life, reflect the toll that social reaction has taken on Euro-American anarchism over the past two decades.<sup>27</sup>

Bookchin's scathing remarks are accurate, but he himself has contributed to this trend. In his famous 1968 tract "Listen,

Marxist!” he wrote: “The concern of the anarchist movement with lifestyle is not merely a preoccupation with its own integrity, but with the integrity of the revolution itself.”

And he continues in an appended note:

The anarchist flipout attempts to shatter the internal values inherited from hierarchical society, to explode the rigidities instilled by the bourgeois socialization process. In short, it is an attempt to break down the superego that exercises such a paralyzing effect upon spontaneity, imagination and sensibility and to restore a sense of desire, possibility and the marvelous...<sup>28</sup>

“Listen, Marxist!” explicitly counterposes this kind of movement to the struggle of workers. He argues that factory workers are “our enemies,” and that working-class consciousness is a “disease.” His vision of social change involves people living a “revolutionary lifestyle,” engaging in “personal propaganda of the deed” which would erode “all the mores, institutions and shibboleths of domination.” Bookchin appealed to workers to become “un-class conscious.”<sup>29</sup>

Green activists have been most influenced by this approach, combining individual lifestyle politics with efforts to “create living alternatives to our present ways.” What is most striking about this approach is that it is coupled with accounts of how it may be “too late” to save humanity and the planet unless we act with urgency. We are asked to seek radical lifestyle alternatives which focus on the individual and the local community as a means for a global transformation that can’t wait another day. This absurd contradiction is brought out even more sharply by Bookchin in a more recent book: “Unless we try—vainly, I believe—to revive myths of proletarian insurrection, of a feeble armed confrontation with the vast nuclear armamentarium of the modern nation-state, we are obliged to seek out counter-institutions that stand opposed to the power of the nation-state.”<sup>30</sup> We are asked to see a mass uprising of workers as “feeble,” and in the same stroke of the pen, as an *alternative*, we are offered “counter-institutions”!

The dichotomy between means and ends that afflicts middle-class politics is at its most extreme here. Workers are incapable of liberating themselves or anyone else. “Indoctrinated from birth,” they are “an organ within the body of capitalism.” It seems that for middle-class radicals like Bookchin *only in the case of the working class* is it true that people are too indoctrinated to change anything. In today’s world of French and Canadian general strikes, this 1984-style view of workers hardly accords to reality. Moreover, it assumes that there is some other force in society that isn’t “tainted” by capitalism—a special elite that stands above the fray. This view assumes that workers who get involved in struggle are incapable of leading themselves and must be led by others. And in casting around for candidates, who is left? Various sections of the middle class, disaffected intellectuals, people living on the margins of society.

Even worse, this kind of anarchism *calls on* people to become marginal, by mimicking ways of life that are forced upon the poorest. Squatting in a condemned building or being unemployed is something *forced* upon poor people by capitalism. Middle class anarchists, on the other hand, who squat and avoid work by choice, are not only insulting, but irrelevant. A retreat into safe lifestyle havens reflects, if anything, a belief that things *can’t* change. Personal revolt becomes a *substitute* for effective struggle; individual “rebellion” turns its back on the real rebellion of workers and others seeking to change the world.

#### THE NEED FOR LEADERSHIP

The purist anti-organization anarchists aside, most anarchists will acknowledge the need for *some* kind of organization, though, as

we have seen, of the ineffectual kind. Special venom has been reserved among anarchists for Marxist, especially Leninist, organization—in particular, the “vanguard party.” To the extent that the anarchists are denouncing what is in fact a caricature of Leninism—top-down parties organized along Stalinist lines where decisions are made by unelected leaders who tell everyone else what to do, or small groups of people who proclaim themselves leaders but lead no one—there is little to be said.

The much-abused word “vanguard” merely means “leading body.” Lenin’s idea of the revolutionary party—that an organization must be built which embraces the most active and militant section of the working class around a revolutionary program and practice—remains profoundly relevant. For that is all Lenin meant by “vanguard”—the most advanced part of the working-class movement, the actual revolutionary layer of the working class, that part which participates in workers’ day-to-day struggles but tries to win the movement as a whole toward a challenge to capitalism.

Struggle against aspects of the system moves workers to oppose the system as a whole; however, workers do not come to such conclusions uniformly, but in fits and starts, and unevenly, so that some workers move more quickly than others. If all workers moved to socialism uniformly and simultaneously, organization and leadership would not be necessary. Anarchists are therefore wrong when they counterpose “spontaneous” action with organization. Organization is necessary to hasten and guide the process by which workers “spontaneously,” through their own experience, come to reject various aspects of capitalism. British socialist Duncan Hallas, defending the need for a revolutionary party in 1970, writes,

Spontaneity and organization are not alternatives; they are different aspects of the process by which increasing numbers of workers can become conscious of the reality of their situation and of their power to change it. The growth of that process depends on a dialogue, on organized militants who listen as well as argue, who understand the limits of a party as well as its strengths and who are able to find connections between the actual consciousness of their fellows and the politics necessary to realize the aspirations buried in that consciousness.<sup>31</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Marxist Hal Draper called anarchism “the primal scream of the petty bourgeois in a squeeze.” Its seemingly extreme radicalism—“down with all authority”—that “can be learned by heart in five minutes,” is attractive to youth and declassed elements, but has limited appeal to workers seeking to build a collective challenge to capitalism:

Rooted in an idealist theory of the state, it oscillated between opportunism in politics and a frenzied flight from political reality to adventures in individual terrorism. *Above all, it was an ideology alien to the life of modern working people.* In the course of its development it reflected various class elements in a blind alley: artisanal workers fearfully confronting modern industry; recently proletarianized peasants fearfully meeting new societal pressures; lumpen-bourgeois elements fearfully facing an empty future; and alienated intelligentsia fearfully resenting the indignities of a money-obsessed society.<sup>32</sup>

The anarchist renunciation of principles in the face of real struggle *flows from the character of anarchism itself.* It stands, in principle, outside the stream of struggle; then, when it becomes apparent that the stream will pass it by, it jumps in and drowns. Either way, it commits itself to impotence.

Bakunin’s secret dictatorship, Proudhon’s support for the slave-holding South, Emma Goldman’s hatred of the masses, the Spanish

anarchist leaders joining a state (and a bourgeois government at that!)—these are not aberrations in an otherwise spotless anarchist record. Anarchists' absolute categories—authority bad, state bad, politics bad, leadership bad, centralism bad—lead logically to these positions, in the same way that a pacifist's categorical antiviolence position leads in practice to accepting the current violence of the CIA, the Guatemalan death squads, and murderously racist U.S. cops. Being antistate and antipolitical, as we have seen, means in practice acquiescing to the existing state and to mainstream, bourgeois politics. Being antileadership means, in practice, either unaccountable leadership à la Bakunin, or conceding leadership to other forces. Being anticentralist *in principle* means supporting the Southern slaveowners against the northern centralizers in the Civil War. Being against authority means opposing democracy (the will of the majority over the minority), and therefore, control of society from below by ordinary workers themselves. In every case, anarchist tenets taken to their logical extreme lead *away* from the professed aims of anarchism.

The most logically consistent anarchism is absolute individualism. "Freedom," wrote Bakunin, "is the absolute right of every human being to seek no other sanction for his actions but his own conscience, to determine these actions solely by his own will, and consequently to owe his first responsibility to himself alone."<sup>33</sup> There is nothing radical in this proposition—it has been used to justify the right-wing's attack on the welfare state, the right of billionaires to make their billions without interference, the superiority of the chosen few over the "mass," and the right of scabs to cross a picket line.

This "Janus-faced" quality of anarchism comes out clearly in Bookchin's call for "radical municipalism." This is seen as a movement uniting people in a cross-class movement that focuses on achieving local power through institutions like the New England town meeting. Ulrike Heider, a German writer more sympathetic to the ideas of syndicalism, had the opportunity to attend a Vermont town meeting with Bookchin and his partner Janet Biehl. Heider's account of their discussion on the way home from the meeting is instructive in showing how easily what is portrayed as left-wing anarchism can flip over into its libertarian opposite:

While driving back, Janet Biehl explained to me that the Vermont Republicans are not like Reagan or Bush; they are real 'libertarian' decentralists who don't want to have anything to do with government or the [welfare] state, because they are proud and want to live independent lives; but, of course, unlike the Greens they are for free enterprise. However, Biehl felt that the Burlington Democrats' centralistic state philosophy is more dangerous.<sup>34</sup>

Anarchism continually regenerates itself as a kind of primitive rebellion against tyranny and oppression. But, beyond that, it runs aground. Anarchism today is a dead end, inviting young people who are radicalizing to move into an elitist politics that focuses on lifestyle liberation and shocking spectacles designed to create "liberated" spaces—not to change the world, but to retreat from it. Personal rebellion and anarchist lifestyle politics may have seemed like a realistic alternative in the conservative 1980s when collective struggle and mass action from below seemed to be precluded. Today, with the revival of class politics and collective working-class struggle at United Parcel Service, the French general strike, etc., personal rebellion is the cry of despair. Anarchism has precious little to offer a new movement. It is theoretically empty and politically conservative, a wet blanket of make-believe, abstentionism, and defeatism. Young activists can be drawn to anarchism's rebelliousness. But if they

seek to truly transform society, they must reject anarchism and commit themselves to revolutionary Marxism, the politics of mass, democratic struggle of workers to transform society.<sup>35</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and Vladimir Lenin, *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 179. This article will leave aside right-wing libertarianism, that brand of anarchism that opposes interference by the state in the individual's right to exploit and step on others for their own personal gain—though clearly it must be considered a "wing" of anarchism. Libertarianism in fact shows up the contradiction of anarchism's anti-authoritarianism. After all, if I try and restrict your "freedom" to make a profit off the labor of others, aren't I being an authoritarian?
- <sup>2</sup> *Diet Soap #5*, www.spunk.org/library/pubs/dietsoap/sp000521.txt.
- <sup>3</sup> Edward Hyams, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 6-7.
- <sup>4</sup> Michael Bakunin, *Selected Writings*, Arthur Lehning, Ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1973), pp. 237-38.
- <sup>5</sup> Edith Thomas, *The Women Incendiaries* (New York: George Braziller, 1966), p. 23; Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 186; and Hyams, op. cit., p. 146, 150. Hyams, like many anarchists, acknowledges Proudhon's "defects" only to move on to what he considers the "essence" of his ideas!
- <sup>6</sup> Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Volume IV: Critique of Other Socialisms* (New York: Monthly Review, 1990), p. p. 296. The same circular comments that as a "natural consequence" of everyone's hatred of Jews, "every popular revolution is accompanied by a massacre of Jews."
- <sup>7</sup> *Selected Writings*, op. cit., p. 172.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 180.
- <sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, "Critique of the Goth Program," *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 540.
- <sup>11</sup> Frederick Engels, *Anti Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), p. 318-319.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in Hal Draper, *The Two Souls of Socialism* (London: Bookmarks, 1996), p. 12.
- <sup>13</sup> *Frequently Asked Questions About Anarchism*, at web.access.net.au/~axxs/anarchyfaq.html. The masthead of this Australian anarchist web page reads: "Punk, Anarchism, Veganism, and Equality."
- <sup>14</sup> Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, op. cit., p. 209..
- <sup>15</sup> Karl Marx, "Notes on Bakunin's *State and Anarchy*," in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, Volume 24 (New York: International Publishers, 1989), p. 518.
- <sup>16</sup> Frederick Engels, "On Authority," in *Anarchism*, op. cit., p. 103.
- <sup>17</sup> Both quoted in Lenin, *State and Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1994), p. 33.
- <sup>18</sup> T.R. Ravindranathan, *Bakunin and the Italians* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1988), p. 184.
- <sup>19</sup> Engels, "On the Political action of the working class," from *Anarchism* op. cit., p. 51.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 145.
- <sup>21</sup> Pierre Broué and Emile Témime, *The Revolution & the Civil War in Spain* (London: Faber, 1972), p. 130-131.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 131.
- <sup>23</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution, 1931-1939* (New York: Pathfinder, 1981), p. 316.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 327.
- <sup>25</sup> Emma Goldman, "Minorities Versus Majorities, in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 69, 78.
- <sup>26</sup> Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," (first published in *the Berkeley Journal of Sociology* in 1970; I got this version, transcribed from a version published by the English Anarchist Workers' Association, off one of the dozens of anarchist web site).
- <sup>27</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or lifestyle Anarchism: an unbridgeable Chasm*, (San Francisco: AK Press, 1995), p. 4.
- <sup>28</sup> Murray Bookchin, "Listen Marxist," in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1986), p. 240.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 195-240.
- <sup>30</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future*, (Boston: South End Press, 1989), p. 183.
- <sup>31</sup> Duncan Hallas, "Toward a Revolutionary Socialist Party," in *Party and Class* (London: Bookmarks) 1996, p. 52.
- <sup>32</sup> Draper, op. cit., p. 170.
- <sup>33</sup> Quoted in Daniel Guerin, *Anarchism* (New York: Monthly Review, 1970), p. 31.
- <sup>34</sup> Ulrike Heider, *Anarchism: Left, Right and Green* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1994), p. 67-68.
- <sup>35</sup> As the "Friends of Durruti" did in the Spanish Civil War. They were a small group of Anarchists who broke from the "government" anarchists and argued the following: "To beat Franco we need to crush the bourgeoisie and its Stalinist and Socialist Allies. The capitalist state must be destroyed totally and there must be installed workers' power depending on rank and file workers' committees. A-political anarchism has failed."