

Anarchism, the Creed That Won't Stay Dead

The Spread of World Capitalism Resurrects a Long-Dormant Movement

Joseph Kahn

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Since Karl Marx bested the anarchist leader Mikhail Bakunin in a struggle to shape world revolution a century and a half ago, anarchism has undergone a half-dozen resurrections and almost as many deaths.

It was crushed with the Paris Commune in 1871, suppressed in the United States after an anarchist shot President William McKinley in 1901, destroyed by Franco in the Spanish Civil War of the late 1930's and left to wither away with the 1960's student radicalism. Ideologically opposed to power and ambivalent about organization, anarchists perpetually live on the fringe of great movements — and on the verge of defeat.

Yet the very qualities that consign anarchism to obscurity also endow it with many lives, if only as a prefix: anarcho-collectivism, anarcho-syndicalism, anarcho-mutualism, anarcho-individualism, anarcho-ecologism. And at the turn of this century, it is undergoing a fresh resurgence.

Black-masked anarchists stoned chain stores in Seattle during global trade talks last year. Protesters with giant A's pasted on their shirts blocked intersections in Washington during demonstrations against international lending agencies last spring. They were in the streets of Philadelphia during the Republican National Convention this week and have promised to stalk the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles this month.

Self-described anarchists are small in number. But anarchism, broadly construed, is becoming fashionable. There are hints of it in the way protesters of diverse loyalties — labor, environmental and consumer groups among them — have sought to become a mass but leaderless movement, a collection of affinity groups that operate by consensus. Many of those who oppose the institutions that enforce rules of international capitalism call for a return to local decision-making, echoing longtime anarchist objections to the way nation-states usurped the power of cities and towns.

The protests have often been condemned in the mainstream news media as imbecilic and chaotic, all action and no theory. But that is also an anarchist trait. Its adherents have long been dismissed as uneducated and unwashed. Anarchism's most memorable slogan, coined by Enrico Malatesta of Italy, is "propaganda by deed."

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"With the decline of socialism, you have seen anarchism go through a revival as an easy way to oppose global capitalism," said Paul Avrich, a leading historian of anarchism who teaches at Queens College in New York.

Mr. Avrich, who has written extensively on early-20th-century American anarchists, said anarchist cells all but disappeared by the 1970's as the last of the European immigrants who brought the creed to the United States died. But anarchist groups are reappearing in every major city, he says. Today they have their own bookstores, like Blackout Books on the Lower East Side and Social Anarchism in Baltimore. They read The Match, a popular magazine published in Tucson, Ariz., or Fifth Estate, a Detroit newspaper.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was probably the first person to call himself an anarchist when he wrote “What Is Property?” in 1840. (His answer: theft.) Proudhon advocated free bank credit and rejected parliamentary politics as hopelessly dominated by the elite. But anarchism was defined and popularized by Bakunin, a heavily bearded Russian insurrectionist who helped foment uprisings across Europe in 1848.

Bakunin’s motto was, “The urge to destroy is a creative urge.” Unlike Marx, Bakunin did not justify his theory as science. He described anarchists as people who know what they are fighting against more than what they are fighting for.

Anarchism reached critical mass as a revolutionary movement only once, during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39. But it has long touched a political and cultural chord in the United States.

Henry David Thoreau was an exemplary anarchist, though he never called himself one. Emma Goldman, a Russian immigrant who advocated free love, women’s rights and armed insurrection, was the best known of the immigrant anarchists who helped prompt a red scare around World War I. (She appears in E. L. Doctorow’s novel “Ragtime” and in Warren Beatty’s movie “Reds.”) In 1927 the Italian immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, both avowed anarchists, were executed after being convicted of killing a paymaster and his guard at a shoe factory near Boston.

Anarchists consider themselves of the left, not the right. But antigovernment ideas that sound anarchist themes are common across the political spectrum. John Wayne, in many of his Westerns, and Mel Gibson, in “The Patriot,” play reluctant but violent American heroes called on to smash evil so they can return to a life of bucolic isolation. The quest for pure rebellion in some punk rock lyrics reflects the spread of anarchism, or perhaps nihilism — anarchism without the utopian impulses — among teenagers.

But nothing has revived anarchism like globalization. Anarchists are now battling what they see as a concentration of power in multinational corporations. Many oppose the spread of corporate investment across national boundaries, which, they say, lets companies like Nike and General Electric evade local labor and environmental laws. They have also attacked the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund because these are seen as superseding national governments.

“For the first time since the 1960’s we are actually putting thought into action,” said John Zerzan, a leading anarchist thinker who lives in Eugene, Ore. He distinguishes anarchists from traditional labor and environmental groups that oppose many of the same aspects of globalization, though he’s not opposed to sharing the stage with them.

“We are succeeding because the liberals failed,” he said. “We are less polite.”

Mr. Zerzan, 56, is a leading proponent of anarcho-primitivism, which combines radical environmentalism with an extreme antitechnology bent. His essays and his book “Future Primitive” espouse a theory that time and technology are not neutral scientific realities but carefully constructed ways to enslave people. For example, he said, the computer and the Internet atomize society, create new divisions of labor, demand ever more efficiency and consume ever more leisure time. To cope with the

increasing strains of our technology-driven society, alienated people by the millions are resorting to drugs like Ritalin and Prozac.

“What we have learned is that our problem is not just control of capital,” he said. “It is also science and technology.”

Mr. Zerzan says that society should return to the Stone Age. He says that more than 12,000 years ago, before agriculture allowed a class of people to leave food production to others, hunter-gatherers were as intelligent and as healthy as people today. And he argues that an old anthropological conundrum — why it took man so long to develop agriculture — should now be posed in reverse. “The question now is why we ever developed agriculture,” he said.

Mr. Zerzan writes long hand. He does not use the Internet and owns no car. He lives in cooperative housing in Eugene, which he has helped turn into a beehive of anarchist activity. Like Bakunin and earlier American anarchists, he argues that property damage is a legitimate tactic, an effective way to attract attention.

“We are not library theorists,” he said. “We are activists.” But he added that while he approved of the antitechnology principles of Theodore J. Kaczynski, the Unabomber, he condemned the taking of human life.

Many other anarchists call anarcho-primitivism a disturbing trend, and, perhaps not surprisingly, sectarian strife among the anarchists is rampant. An old guard supports ethical anarchism, a type of modified socialism that calls for eliminating the nation-state while embracing nonauthoritarian local government. Ethical anarchists reject violence, and some view technology like the Internet as tools to achieve freedom. Many also say that anarcho-primitivists tend to be antiwork and antiworker, which forecloses the possibility of a lasting alliance with labor unions.

The anarcho-primitives “carry a black flag in one hand and a welfare check in the other,” an anarchist named Janet Biehl wrote in a recent Internet essay. Others have called Mr. Zerzan a “McAnarchist” who dumbs down anarchism and corrupts “young gullibles” with mystical visions of life before civilization.

Murray Bookchin, an 80-year-old Vermont-based social theorist who calls himself a communalist, has sharply criticized recent trends in anarchism, though he claims his own writings have contributed to the rise of Direct Action Network and other antiglobalization protest groups.

Mr. Bookchin wrote “Post-Scarcity Anarchism” in the 1960’s. In that book, he merged environmentalism and anarchism into a broader theory of how the state and capitalism are at war with nature. But he says some anarchist groups have taken the ecological message too far, becoming misanthropic nihilists who ignore anarchism’s core humanitarian message.

“Just when there is rising interest among young people,” Mr. Bookchin said, “we are shooting ourselves in the foot.”

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