

Preface

The arguments found here have been gestating for a long time, as I wrote about peasants, class conflict, resistance, development projects, and marginal peoples in the hills of Southeast Asia. Again and again over three decades, I found myself having said something in a seminar discussion or having written something and then catching myself thinking, “Now, that sounds like what an anarchist would argue.” In geometry, two points make a line; but when the third, fourth, and fifth points all fall on the same line, then the coincidence is hard to ignore. Struck by that coincidence, I decided it was time to read the anarchist classics and the histories of anarchist movements. To that end, I taught a large undergraduate lecture course on anarchism in an effort to educate myself and perhaps work out my relationship to anarchism. The result, having sat on the back burner for the better part of twenty years after the course ended, is assembled here.

My interest in the anarchist critique of the state was born of disillusionment and dashed hopes in revolutionary change. This was a common enough experience for those who came to political consciousness in the 1960s in North America. For

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me and many others, the 1960s were the high tide of what one might call a romance with peasant wars of national liberation. I was, for a time, fully swept up in this moment of utopian possibilities. I followed with some awe and, in retrospect, a great deal of naiveté the referendum for independence in Ahmed Sékou Touré's Guinea, the pan-African initiatives of Ghana's president, Kwame Nkrumah, the early elections in Indonesia, the independence and first elections in Burma, where I had spent a year, and, of course, the land reforms in revolutionary China and nationwide elections in India.

The disillusionment was propelled by two processes: historical inquiry and current events. It dawned on me, as it should have earlier, that virtually every major successful revolution ended by creating a state more powerful than the one it overthrew, a state that in turn was able to extract more resources from and exercise more control over the very populations it was designed to serve. Here, the anarchist critique of Marx and, especially, of Lenin seemed prescient. The French Revolution led to the Thermadorian Reaction, and then to the precocious and belligerent Napoleonic state. The October Revolution in Russia led to Lenin's dictatorship of the vanguard party and then to the repression of striking seamen and workers (the proletariat!) at Kronstadt, collectivization, and the gulag. If the *ancien régime* had presided over feudal inequality with brutality, the record of the revolutions made for similarly melancholy reading. The popular aspirations that provided the energy and courage for the revolutionary victory were, in any long view, almost inevitably betrayed.

Current events were no less disquieting when it came to what contemporary revolutions meant for the largest class in world history, the peasantry. The Viet Minh, rulers in the northern half of Vietnam following the Geneva Accords of

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1954, had ruthlessly suppressed a popular rebellion of smallholders and petty landlords in the very areas that were the historical hotbeds of peasant radicalism. In China, it had become clear that the Great Leap Forward, during which Mao, his critics silenced, forced millions of peasants into large agrarian communes and dining halls, was having catastrophic results. Scholars and statisticians still argue about the human toll between 1958 and 1962, but it is unlikely to be less than 35 million people. While the human toll of the Great Leap Forward was being recognized, ominous news of starvation and executions in Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge completed the picture of peasant revolutions gone lethally awry.

It was not as if the Western bloc and its Cold War policies in poor nations offered an edifying alternative to “real existing socialism.” Regimes and states that presided dictatorially over crushing inequalities were welcomed as allies in the struggle against communism. Those familiar with this period will recall that it also represented the early high tide of development studies and the new field of development economics. If revolutionary elites imagined vast projects of social engineering in a collectivist vein, development specialists were no less certain of their ability to deliver economic growth by hierarchically engineering property forms, investing in physical infrastructure, and promoting cashcropping and markets for land, generally strengthening the state and amplifying inequalities. The “free world,” especially in the Global South seemed vulnerable to both the socialist critique of capitalist inequality *and* the communist and anarchist critiques of the state as the guarantor of these inequalities.

This twin disillusionment seemed to me to bear out the adage of Mikhail Bakunin: “Freedom without socialism is

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privilege and injustice; socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality.”

An Anarchist Squint, or Seeing Like an Anarchist

Lacking a comprehensive anarchist worldview and philosophy, and in any case wary of nomothetic ways of seeing, I am making a case for a sort of anarchist squint. What I aim to show is that if you put on anarchist glasses and look at the history of popular movements, revolutions, ordinary politics, and the state from that angle, certain insights will appear that are obscured from almost any other angle. It will also become apparent that anarchist principles are active in the aspirations and political action of people who have never heard of anarchism or anarchist philosophy. One thing that heaves into view, I believe, is what Pierre-Joseph Proudhon had in mind when he first used the term “anarchism,” namely, *mutuality, or cooperation without hierarchy or state rule*. Another is the anarchist tolerance for confusion and improvisation that accompanies social learning, and confidence in spontaneous cooperation and reciprocity. Here Rosa Luxemburg’s preference, in the long run, for the honest mistakes of the working class over the wisdom of the executive decisions of a handful of vanguard party elites is indicative of this stance. My claim, then, is fairly modest. These glasses, I think, offer a sharper image and better depth of field than most of the alternatives.

In proposing a “process-oriented” anarchist view, or what might be termed anarchism as praxis, the reader might reasonably ask, given the many varieties of anarchism available, what particular glasses I propose to wear.

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My anarchist squint involves a defense of politics, conflict, and debate, and the perpetual uncertainty and learning they entail. This means that I reject the major stream of utopian scientism that dominated much of anarchist thought around the turn of the twentieth century. In light of the huge strides in industry, chemistry, medicine, engineering, and transportation, it was no wonder that high modernist optimism on the right and the left led to the belief that the problem of scarcity had, in principle, been solved. Scientific progress, many believed, had uncovered the laws of nature, and with them the means to solve the problems of subsistence, social organization, and institutional design on a scientific basis. As men became more rational and knowledgeable, science would tell us how we should live, and politics would no longer be necessary. Figures as disparate as the comte de Saint-Simon, J. S. Mill, Marx, and Lenin were inclined to see a coming world in which enlightened specialists would govern according to scientific principles and “the administration of things” would replace politics. Lenin saw in the remarkable total mobilization of the German economy in World War I a vision of the smoothly humming machine of the socialist future; one had only to replace the German militarists at the helm of state with the vanguard party of the proletariat, and administration would make politics beside the point. For many anarchists the same vision of progress pointed the way toward an economy in which the state was beside the point. Not only have we subsequently learned both that material plenty, far from banishing politics, creates new spheres of political struggle but also that statist socialism was less “the administration of” things than the trade union of the ruling class protecting its privileges.

Unlike many anarchist thinkers, I do not believe that the state is everywhere and always the enemy of freedom. Americans

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need only recall the scene of the federalized National Guard leading black children to school through a menacing crowd of angry whites in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 to realize that the state can, *in some circumstances*, play an emancipatory role. I believe that even this possibility has arisen only as a result of the establishment of democratic citizenship and popular suffrage by the French Revolution, subsequently extended to women, domestics, and minorities. That means that of the roughly five-thousand-year history of states, only in the last two centuries or so has even the *possibility* arisen that states might occasionally enlarge the realm of human freedom. The conditions under which such possibilities are occasionally realized, I believe, occur only when massive extra-institutional disruption from below threatens the whole political edifice. Even this achievement is fraught with melancholy, inasmuch as the French Revolution also marked the moment when the state won direct, unmediated access to the citizen and when universal conscription and total warfare became possible as well.

Nor do I believe that the state is the only institution that endangers freedom. To assert so would be to ignore a long and deep history of pre-state slavery, property in women, warfare, and bondage. It is one thing to disagree utterly with Hobbes about the nature of society before the existence of the state (nasty, brutish, and short) and another to believe that “the state of nature” was an unbroken landscape of communal property, cooperation, and peace.

The last strand of anarchist thought I definitely wish to distance myself from is the sort of libertarianism that tolerates (or even encourages) great differences in wealth, property, and status. Freedom and (small “d”) democracy are, in condi-

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tions of rampant inequality, a cruel sham as Bakunin understood. There is no authentic freedom where huge differences make voluntary agreements or exchanges nothing more than legalized plunder. Consider, for example, the case of interwar China, when famine and war made starvation common. Many women faced the stark choice of either starving or selling their children and living. For a market fundamentalist, selling a child is, after all, a voluntary choice, and therefore an act of freedom, the terms of which are valid (*pacta sunt servanda*). The logic, of course, is monstrous. It is the coercive structure of the situation in this case that impels people into such catastrophic choices.

I have chosen a morally loaded example, but one not all that uncommon today. The international trade in body parts and infants is a case in point. Picture a time-lapse photograph of the globe tracing the worldwide movement of kidneys, corneas, hearts, bone marrow, lungs, and babies. They all move inexorably from the poorest nations of the globe, and from the poorest classes within them, largely to the rich nations of the North Atlantic and the most privileged within them. Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" was not far off the mark. Can anyone doubt that this trade in precious goods is an artifact of a huge and essentially coercive imbalance of life chances in the world, what some have called, entirely appropriately, in my view, "structural violence"?

The point is simply that huge disparities in wealth, property, and status make a mockery of freedom. The consolidation of wealth and power over the past forty years in the United States, mimicked more recently in many states in the Global South following neoliberal policies, has created a situation that the anarchists foresaw. Cumulative inequalities in access

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to political influence via sheer economic muscle, huge (state-like) oligopolies, media control, campaign contributions, the shaping of legislation (right down to designated loopholes), redistricting, access to legal knowledge, and the like have allowed elections and legislation to serve largely to amplify existing inequalities. It is hard to see any plausible way in which such self-reinforcing inequalities could be reduced through existing institutions, in particular since even the recent and severe capitalist crisis beginning in 2008 failed to produce anything like Roosevelt's New Deal. Democratic institutions have, to a great extent, become commodities themselves, offered up for auction to the highest bidder.

The market measures influence in dollars, while a democracy, in principle, measures votes. In practice, at some level of inequality, the dollars infect and overwhelm the votes. Reasonable people can disagree about the levels of inequality that a democracy can tolerate without becoming an utter charade. My judgment is that we have been in the "charade zone" for quite some time. What is clear to anyone except a market fundamentalist (of the sort who would ethically condone a citizen's selling himself—voluntarily, of course—as a chattel slave) is that democracy is a cruel hoax without *relative* equality. This, of course, is the great dilemma for an anarchist. If relative equality is a necessary condition of mutuality and freedom, how can it be guaranteed except through the state? Facing this conundrum, I believe that both theoretically and practically, the abolition of the state is not an option. We are stuck, alas, with Leviathan, though not at all for the reasons Hobbes had supposed, and the challenge is to tame it. That challenge may well be beyond our reach.

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The Paradox of Organization

Much of what anarchism has to teach us concerns how political change, both reformist and revolutionary, actually happens, how we should understand what is “political,” and finally how we ought to go about studying politics.

Organizations, contrary to the usual view, do not generally precipitate protest movements. In fact, it is more nearly correct to say that protest movements precipitate organizations, which in turn usually attempt to tame protest and turn it into institutional channels. So far as system-threatening protests are concerned, formal organizations are more an impediment than a facilitator. It is a great paradox of democratic change, though not so surprising from behind an anarchist squint, that the very institutions designed to avoid popular tumults and make peaceful, orderly legislative change possible have generally failed to deliver. This is in large part because existing state institutions are both sclerotic and at the service of dominant interests, as are the vast majority of formal organizations that represent established interests. The latter have a chokehold on state power and institutionalized access to it.

Episodes of structural change, therefore, tend to occur only when massive, noninstitutionalized disruption in the form of riots, attacks on property, unruly demonstrations, theft, arson, and open defiance threatens established institutions. Such disruption is virtually never encouraged, let alone initiated, even by left-wing organizations that are structurally inclined to favor orderly demands, demonstrations, and strikes that can usually be contained within the existing institutional framework. Opposition institutions with names, office bearers, constitutions, banners, and their own internal governmental

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routines favor, naturally enough, institutionalized conflict, at which they are specialists.¹

As Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward have convincingly shown for the Great Depression in the United States, protests by unemployed and workers in the 1930s, the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the welfare rights movement, what success the movements enjoyed was at their most disruptive, most confrontational, least organized, and least hierarchical.² It was the effort to stem the contagion of a spreading, noninstitutionalized challenge to the existing order that prompted concessions. There were no leaders to negotiate a deal with, no one who could promise to get people off the streets in return for concessions. Mass defiance, precisely because it threatens the institutional order, gives rise to organizations that try to channel that defiance into the flow of normal politics, where it can be contained. In such circumstances, elites turn to organizations they would normally disdain, an example being Premier Georges Pompidou's deal with the French Communist Party (an established "player") promising huge wage concessions in 1968 in order to split the party loyalists off from students and wildcat strikers.

Disruption comes in many wondrous forms, and it seems useful to distinguish them by how articulate they are and whether or not they lay claim to the moral high ground of democratic politics. Thus, disruption aimed at realizing or expanding democratic freedoms—such as abolition, women's suffrage, or desegregation—articulate a specific claim to occupy the high ground of democratic rights. What about massive disruptions aimed at achieving the eight-hour workday or the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, or, more nebulous, opposition to neoliberal globalization? Here the objective is still reasonably articulated but the claim to the moral high

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ground is more sharply contested. Though one may deplore the strategy of the “black bloc” during the “Battle in Seattle” around the World Trade Organization meeting in 1999, smashing storefronts and skirmishing with the police, there is little doubt that without the media attention their quasi-calculated rampage drew, the wider antiglobalization, anti-WTO, anti-International Monetary Fund, anti-World Bank movement would have gone largely unnoticed.

The hardest case, but one increasingly common among marginalized communities, is the generalized riot, often with looting, that is more an inchoate cry of anger and alienation with no coherent demand or claim. Precisely because it is so inarticulate and arises among the least organized sectors of society, it appears more menacing; there is no particular demand to address, nor are there any obvious leaders with whom to negotiate. Governing elites confront a spectrum of options. In the urban riots in Britain in the late summer of 2011, the Tory government’s first response was repression and summary justice. Another political response, urged by Labour figures, was a mixture of urban social reform, economic amelioration, and selective punishment. What the riots undeniably did, however, was get the attention of elites, without which most of the issues underlying the riots would not have been raised to public consciousness, *no matter how they were disposed of*.

Here again there is a dilemma. Massive disruption and defiance can, under some conditions, lead directly to authoritarianism or fascism rather than reform or revolution. That is always the danger, but it is nonetheless true that extra-institutional protest seems a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for major progressive structural change such as the New Deal or civil rights.

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Just as much of the politics that has historically mattered has taken the form of unruly defiance, it is also the case that for subordinate classes, for most of their history, politics has taken a very different extra-institutional form. For the peasantry and much of the early working class historically, we may look in vain for formal organizations and public manifestations. There is a whole realm of what I have called “infrapolitics” because it is practiced outside the visible spectrum of what usually passes for political activity. The state has historically thwarted lower-class organization, let alone public defiance. For subordinate groups, such politics is dangerous. They have, by and large, understood, as have guerrillas, that divisibility, small numbers, and dispersion help them avoid reprisal.

By infrapolitics I have in mind such acts as foot-dragging, poaching, pilfering, dissimulation, sabotage, desertion, absenteeism, squatting, and flight. Why risk getting shot for a failed mutiny when desertion will do just as well? Why risk an open land invasion when squatting will secure *de facto* land rights? Why openly petition for rights to wood, fish, and game when poaching will accomplish the same purpose quietly? In many cases these forms of *de facto* self-help flourish and are sustained by deeply held collective opinions about conscription, unjust wars, and rights to land and nature that cannot safely be ventured openly. And yet the accumulation of thousands or even millions of such petty acts can have massive effects on warfare, land rights, taxes, and property relations. The large-mesh net political scientists and most historians use to troll for political activity utterly misses the fact that most subordinate classes have historically not had the luxury of open political organization. That has not prevented them from working microscopically, cooperatively, complicitly, and massively

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at political change from below. As Milovan Djilas noted long ago,

The slow, unproductive work of disinterested millions, together with the prevention of all work not considered “socialist”, is the incalculable, invisible, and gigantic waste which no communist regime has been able to avoid.³

Who can say precisely what role such expressions of disaffection (as captured in the popular slogan, “We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us”) played in the long-run viability of Soviet bloc economies?

Forms of informal cooperation, coordination, and action that embody mutuality without hierarchy are the quotidian experience of most people. Only occasionally do they embody implicit or explicit opposition to state law and institutions. Most villages and neighborhoods function precisely because of the informal, transient networks of coordination that do not require formal organization, let alone hierarchy. In other words, the experience of anarchistic mutuality is ubiquitous. As Colin Ward notes, “far from being a speculative vision of a future society, it is a description of a mode of human experience of everyday life, which operates side-by-side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society.”⁴

The big question, and one to which I do not have a definitive answer, is whether the existence, power, and reach of the state over the past several centuries have sapped the *independent, self-organizing* power of individuals and small communities. So many functions that were once accomplished by mutuality among equals and informal coordination are now state organized or state supervised. As Proudhon, anticipating Foucault, famously put it,

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To be ruled is to be kept an eye on, inspected, spied on, regulated, indoctrinated, sermonized, listed and checked off, estimated, appraised, censured, ordered about by creatures without knowledge and without virtues. To be ruled is at every operation, transaction, movement, to be noted, registered, counted, priced, admonished, prevented, reformed, redressed, corrected.⁵

To what extent has the hegemony of the state and of formal, hierarchical organizations undermined the capacity for and the practice of mutuality and cooperation that have historically created order without the state? To what degree have the growing reach of the state and the assumptions behind action in a liberal economy actually produced the asocial egoists that Hobbes thought Leviathan was designed to tame? One could argue that the formal order of the liberal state depends fundamentally on a social capital of habits of mutuality and cooperation that antedate it, which it cannot create and which, in fact, it undermines. The state, arguably, destroys the natural initiative and responsibility that arise from voluntary cooperation. Further, the neoliberal celebration of the individual maximizer over society, of individual freehold property over common property, of the treatment of land (nature) and labor (human work life) as market commodities, and of monetary commensuration in, say, cost-benefit analysis (e.g., shadow pricing for the value of a sunset or an endangered view) all encourage habits of social calculation that smack of social Darwinism.

I am suggesting that two centuries of a strong state and liberal economies may have socialized us so that we have largely lost the habits of mutuality and are in danger now of becoming precisely the dangerous predators that Hobbes thought

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populated the state of nature. Leviathan may have given birth to its own justification.

An Anarchist Squint at the Practice
of Social Science

The populist tendency of anarchist thought, with its belief in the possibilities of autonomy, self-organization, and cooperation, recognized, among other things, that peasants, artisans, and workers were themselves political thinkers. They had their own purposes, values, and practices, which any political system ignored at its peril. That basic respect for the agency of nonelites seems to have been betrayed not only by states but also by the practice of social science. It is common to ascribe to elites particular values, a sense of history, aesthetic tastes, even rudiments of a political philosophy. The political analysis of nonelites, by contrast, is often conducted, as it were, behind their backs. Their “politics” is read off their statistical profile: from such “facts” as their income, occupation, years of schooling, property holding, residence, race, ethnicity, and religion.

This is a practice that most social scientists would never judge remotely adequate to the study of elites. It is curiously akin both to state routines and to left-wing authoritarianism in treating the nonelite public and “masses” as ciphers of their socioeconomic characteristics, most of whose needs and worldview can be understood as a vector sum of incoming calories, cash, work routines, consumption patterns, and past voting behavior. It is not that such factors are not germane. What is inadmissible, both morally and scientifically, is the hubris that pretends to understand the behavior of human agents without for a moment listening systematically to how they understand

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what they are doing and how they explain themselves. Again, it is not that such self-explanations are transparent and nor are they without strategic omissions and ulterior motives—they are no more transparent than the self-explanations of elites.

The job of social science, as I see it, is to provide, provisionally, the best explanation of behavior on the basis of all the evidence available, including especially the explanations of the purposive, deliberating agents whose behavior is being scrutinized. The notion that the agent's view of the situation is irrelevant to this explanation is preposterous. Valid knowledge of the agent's situation is simply inconceivable without it. No one has put the case better for the phenomenology of human action than John Dunn:

If we wish to understand other people and propose to claim that we have in fact done so, it is both imprudent and rude not to attend to what they say. . . . What we cannot properly do is to claim to *know* that we understand him [an agent] or his action better than he does himself without access to the best descriptions which he is able to offer.⁶

Anything else amounts to committing a social science crime behind the backs of history's actors.

A Caution or Two

The use of the term “fragments” within the chapters is intended to alert the reader to what not to expect. “Fragments” is meant here in a sense more akin to “fragmentary.” These fragments of text are not like all the shards of a once intact pot that has been thrown to the ground or the pieces of a jigsaw

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puzzle that, when reassembled, will restore the vase or tableau to its original, whole condition. I do not, alas, have an elaborately worked-out argument for anarchism that would amount to an internally consistent political philosophy starting from first principles that might be compared, say, with that of Prince Kropotkin or Isaiah Berlin, let alone John Locke or Karl Marx. If the test for calling myself an anarchist thinker is having that level of ideological rigor, then I would surely fail it. What I do have and offer here is a series of aperçus that seem to me to add up to an endorsement of much that anarchist thinkers have had to say about the state, about revolution, and about equality.

Neither is this book an examination of anarchist thinkers or anarchist movements, however enlightening that might potentially be. Thus the reader will not find a detailed examination of, say, Proudhon, Bakunin, Malatesta, Sismondi, Tolstoy, Rocker, Tocqueville, or Landauer, though I have consulted the writing of most theorists of anarchy. Nor, again, will the reader find an account of anarchist or quasi-anarchist movements: of, say, Solidarność in Poland, the anarchists of Civil War Spain, or the anarchist workers of Argentina, Italy, or France—though I have read as much as I could about “real existing anarchism” as about its major theorists.

“Fragments” has a second sense as well. It represents, for me at any rate, something of an experiment in style and presentation. My two previous books (*Seeing Like a State* and *The Art of Not Being Governed*) were constructed more or less like elaborate and heavy siege engines in some Monty Python send-up of medieval warfare. I worked from outlines and diagrams on many sixteen-foot rolls of paper with thousands of minute notations to references. When I happened to mention to Alan MacFarlane that I was unhappy with my ponderous

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writing habits, he put me on to the techniques of essayist Lafcadio Hearn and a more intuitive, free form of composition that begins like a conversation, starting with the most arresting or gripping kernel of an argument and then elaborating, more or less organically, on that kernel. I have tried, with far fewer ritual bows to social science formulas than is customary, even for my idiosyncratic style, to follow his advice in the hope that it would prove more reader-friendly—surely something to aim for in a book with an anarchist bent.