

Kropotkin and the Anarchist Intellectual Tradition

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1

Anarchism Before Kropotkin

The historical roots of anarchism

'Anarchy' is a composite word that derives from the Greek. The prefix 'an', meaning 'the absence of', when joined with 'archos', denoting 'ruler' or 'authority', gives us 'anarchy', a term which originally signified 'contrary to authority'.¹ In classical Greece the term was also widely used to refer to those who lived 'without rule'. As such it referred to people living in acephalous communities 'without a leader', especially those not ruled by, or under the control of, military leaders. While many of these early 'anarchic' societies were in fact stateless, they were rarely completely leaderless. Their leaders, however, did not have access to coercive agencies of authority and were often forced to rely upon a combination of skill, luck and persuasion to maintain their influence and exert authority. Acephalous communities such as these were also characterized by only the most rudimentary forms of role differentiation and could sustain only a minimum amount of economic specialization.² In areas outside Roman influence, village communities and freely sworn brotherhoods of free individuals were largely beyond state control. Kropotkin was to claim that the 'barbarian' spirit of societies such as these lingered on among Scandinavian, Saxon, Celtic and Slavic peoples. For seven or eight centuries after the collapse of Rome, it had incited men, and women, to seek satisfaction of their needs through individual initiative, and later in the Middle Ages through free agreement between the brotherhoods of workers and craft guilds.³ With increased usage the term 'anarchy' was applied pejoratively by supporters of state authority to primordial communities, and later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to pre-colonial societies and disorderly elements within the ranks of otherwise 'orderly' state societies. All of these were deemed 'anarchic' precisely because they were beyond the reach of state authority, or were only tenuously linked to state societies governed by the rule of

law. Gradually, however, the term was also used in a derogatory fashion to describe those who constituted a threat to the authority of church and state.

There was a widespread assumption in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the rural inhabitants of the pre-colonial world lived anarchic lives. This was because in large tracts of Africa, Latin America, India, and much of the Islamic world until comparatively recently, cities were considered cradles of luxury and refinement. 'Disorderly' elements were either excluded from, or granted only limited or temporary access to, these centres of 'refined' living. In the early colonial city, privileged citizens and those in authority would come together to construct their own versions of civic culture. They also took pains to contain any anarchic elements in their midst. Even as late as the eighteenth century, anarchy was said to lurk beyond the boundaries of city walls. The further one moved from the city, the more barbaric, disorderly and *anarchic* did life become. Indeed, for centuries the boundary between town and country was diligently policed in order to prevent cities growing so large that their inhabitants literally became uncontrollable.⁴ Rulers in these cities were generally drawn from the *demos*, as was the case in classical Greece, or from educated privileged elites, as was the case in colonial India, Latin America and Africa. As recently as the nineteenth century, 'encroachment laws' in India defined those who had the right to live in the city. Here laws were designed to control such seemingly 'anarchic' manifestations of urban life as street trading, vagrancy and the development of shantytowns, all of which were considered blighted spots on the face of an ordered civility. Similarly in the early years of Maoist China, the gates of the country's larger cities were only opened temporarily to accommodate the huge numbers of refugees, ex-soldiers and peasants who were displaced by war. They were subsequently closed in the 1950s to stem the flood of impoverished peasants who sought a new life in the urban centres of post-revolutionary China. In Maoist China, as in the military dictatorships of Latin America, peasants were kept on the land, both because they were required to work there, and because they were more easily controlled in the countryside than they would be in the cities. Thus for example in French West Africa up until the 1950s, colonial authorities regulated the movement of the rural poor to the city, and consigned refugees from the countryside to the grim peripheries of Algiers, Dakar, Brazzaville and Abidjan.⁵ In all of these cases, as famously

also in tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century and the Soviet Union in the twentieth, those living outside the city were regarded as second-class citizens. As ‘people without history’ they were also considered ‘disposable people.’⁶ To those in authority they were simply trapped in an endless cycle of hardship. Their lives literally lacked direction, and their history, unlike that of their social superiors, did not appear to lead anywhere. As such they were deemed to have no place in the settled and orderly landscapes of ‘civilized’ peoples. Thus, in the colonial world of the nineteenth century, migration to the city was often discouraged because it was believed that untrammelled urban expansion might contribute to the physical, and even *moral* destruction of urban civilization.

While anarchists associate anarchism with a whole range of doctrines that condemn the institutions of government as unnecessary and detrimental to social and economic development, their enemies have equated anarchy with social chaos and violent disorder. This disparagement of anarchism, and the categorization of anarchists as mindless fomenters of social chaos, has had a long history in Western Europe. Long before Peter Kropotkin’s defence of ‘scientific anarchism’ in the latter half of the nineteenth century, opponents of authority were derogatorily described as ‘anarchists’. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, figures of authority began applying the term to opponents of ecclesiastical authority. As the focus of political dissent shifted from church to the monarchy, and later to the institutions of the modern state, anarchists were indiscriminately lumped together with all those who sought to challenge abuses of ecclesiastical and state authority. These included those who, unlike ‘true anarchists’, sought to reform rather than abolish the institutions through which the authority of church and state was mediated. Whenever anarchists sought to distinguish themselves from other critics of authoritarian regimes they were required to take an intellectual stand quite distinct from their radical confrères. In doing so they set about rewriting history in order to challenge some of the most cherished beliefs of the social order from which they sought to liberate society. They challenged the ‘founding principles’ of political authority, and condemned the foundational belief systems of political regimes. The latter, they argued, extolled the virtues of government and social order, while mischievously associating statelessness with violent social turmoil and political chaos. While anarchist praxis can best be described as a principled opposition to government that rejects all forms of authority,

anarchist theory has always implied a sustained intellectual challenge to the authority and the very territorial organization of the state. Thus anarchists sought to undermine state authority, attacked the foundational principles of authoritarian rule, and criticized the political and intellectual establishment for covering their state-centred objectives beneath the mantle of objective rationality. Their greatest achievement has been their intellectual defence of the state of statelessness. Throughout their long history of anti-authoritarian struggles, anarchists have always managed to articulate a 'vocabulary of desire'.⁷ This has sustained the possibility of a stateless society throughout centuries of state formation, nation-building and imperial expansion. From the seventeenth century onwards, anarchists were to argue that cooperation and individual initiative, rather than competitive struggle and the suppression of individualism, should be the guiding principles of social progress. They also insisted that self-governing autonomous communities were the only rational alternatives to the bureaucratization of the state and the centralization of authority in both capitalist and pre-capitalist societies. Far from being a utopian dream, they insisted that the anarchist society of the future was grounded in the present and sustained by already-existing practices of mutual support and decentralized decision-making. Thus 'practical' anarchists counteracted the utopianism of philosophical anarchism, just as they criticized the egotism of individualist anarchism.⁸ They also challenged the utter pessimism of bourgeois pragmatists who have tended to reduce anarchism to wishful thinking and caricature anarchists as mindless individuals with no other objective than the wilful destruction of orderly society. As a vehicle for antithetical thought, practical anarchism has also been ideologically distinct from the 'individualist' anarchism of those whose rejection of authority was motivated by the quest for artistic freedom. For practical or 'social anarchists' anarchism was always to remain a means to an end, which in principle had to be as uncharted as it was undefined. The dilemma confronting all anarchists was how to visualize a federalized alternative to the capitalist state without becoming ensnared in prescriptive constructs that risked of placing new restrictions on social and economic progress.⁹ As political realists, anarchists have certainly been aware of the many historical instances that showed just how easily ideals could be compromised or 'canonized' in a rigid set of dogmatic beliefs about the relationship between the individual and the state. Experience has often taught them to be alert to the dangers of

utopian thinking and the ossification of political protest in ‘repressive dystopias’. Keeping the anarchist project to the fore when proposing changes to existing societies, they constantly reminded their followers that the anarchist alternative to the capitalist state was well within the realms of possibility. The stateless society of the future, they argued, was literally inherent in the present order of society.

Not the least of the paradoxes surrounding any historical analysis of anarchism is the fact that the term originated in Greece, the birthplace of democracy, where moderate-sized city-states experimented with a limited degree of ‘citizen rule’ some 500 years before the dawn of the Christian era. From the fifth to the third century BCE, classical democracy provided a comparatively small number of privileged citizens with a voice in decision-making. However, the more authoritarian among the Greek philosophers taught that civilization required the protection of the state. These men regarded democracy as an unstable form of government because it could easily descend into anarchy, in the pejorative sense of that term. Indeed Aristotle considered those who resided outside the limits of the state as lawless and dangerous beasts. Like Plato, he believed that law-abiding and hierarchical state societies required protection from social chaos and the threat of barbarism, which he argued was constantly lurking outside state borders.

Not all Greek philosophers defended the state or adopted an authoritarian attitude to social order. Indeed ancient Athenian democracy was predicated on the very concept of *autarkia*, which fostered individual self-sufficiency and a sense of civic duty and sought to uphold the values of social responsibility. Similarly the Stoics favoured cooperation and self-sufficiency as alternatives to the authoritarian state, which caused Kropotkin to label the philosopher Zeno of Citium (336–264 BCE), the ‘best exponent of Anarchist philosophy in ancient Greece.’¹⁰ Nevertheless, in the compact city-states of ancient Greece, the *demos*, namely those eligible to vote, could gather together as a social collective, rather than as individuals, to impose order and determine the political character of their city-states. Their mass meetings of citizens closely approximated what we today would consider direct democracy. However this classical age of Greek democracy lasted only around 200 years and famously excluded women and slaves from the democratic process. Nevertheless these early expressions of Greek democracy are of interest to contemporary students of democracy and anarchists alike. While disagreeing on the scope of

enfranchisement, the entitlements and responsibilities of citizenship and the functions of the state, anarchists and democrats alike agree that collective decision-making works best when the body politic is small and relatively homogeneous. Thus Kropotkin was to suggest that the 'fatal error' of most cities, not just those of classical Greece but also those of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 'was to base their wealth upon commerce and industry to the neglect of agriculture'. This 'estrangement of cities from the land', he argued, not only 'drew them into a policy hostile to the land', it also caused port cities in particular to engage in 'distant enterprises' that contributed to colonial warfare and unrestrained urban expansion on the maritime fringes of Europe.¹¹ This, he argued, hastened the disintegration of the communal systems of self-reliance, undermined local autonomy, and concentrated wealth in the hands of state elites. This in turn aggravated social divisions between town and country, and separated the urban rich from the growing numbers of the urban poor in the expanding cities of early modern Europe.

Thus classical discourses on democracy and anarchism were concerned with the scale and geographical distribution of power, and the degree to which citizens could participate in decision-making processes. Some political commentators have suggested 'direct democracy' can run into grave difficulties in groups larger than 10,000, and that it is literally impossible in towns and cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants.¹² While anarchists have been branded utopians for demanding their 'impossible community', it could be argued that the classical Greek model of democracy is no less a utopian dream in today's globalized world of centralized authorities. Quite apart from the huge numbers of people living under authoritarian regimes, including teeming populations of displaced persons and the inhabitants of 'failed states', an increasing proportion of the global population today live in mega-cities that are exponentially larger than the city-states of ancient Greece. In defending these early manifestations of democracy, Kropotkin showed that 'men lived in societies without states for thousands of years before having known the State.'¹³ He also regarded the state as an historical development and recognized that 'state' and 'government' were fundamentally different concepts. State power, he argued, was always a 'top-down' affair; just as states themselves represented the territorial concentration of social and political functions of society in the hands of the few. Like Weber, he believed that the modern state was characterized by a territorial

jurisdiction of variable dimensions, a bureaucratic administration of power and authority, and a monopolization of legitimate force by state authorities. States, moreover, also presumed territorial jurisdictions of certain dimensions, which meant that classical city-states were not states in the modern sense of the term.¹⁴

Plebeian anarchism and radical Protestantism

The spread of Protestantism in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries paved the way for religious radicals who had their own interpretations of what the English religious dissenter, Gerrard Winstanley, called 'righteousness' (i.e. moral probity or 'uprightness'). Martin Luther called the leaders of these dissenting sects 'mad saints'. Their followers included Anabaptist opponents of conventional baptism who insisted that the sacrament marking a child's reception into the church should be a voluntary act undertaken only by consenting adults. Only then, it was argued, could it have spiritual significance.¹⁵ However, Anabaptists and their radical associates in the plebeian world of protest were never simply religious dissenters. They were also to the forefront of political protest against religious authorities throughout the sixteenth century. As early as 1502, the followers of Münster-born Anabaptist and insurrectionist Henry Nichlaes believed that heaven and hell could be experienced in this world. In refusing to separate the politics of the church from those of the state, his followers rejected the Christian injunction to 'render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's'.¹⁶ Their plebeian scepticism, together with their opposition to ecclesiastical authority in general, subsequently developed into a sustained critique of all forms of authority. They opposed the payment of tithes, condemned the payment of taxes, opposed conscription and military service, and regarded compulsory service on magistracies as repugnant to all followers of true religion. Many of them were also proud egalitarians who condemned social inequality and the private ownership of property. Crucially, in refusing to recognize childhood baptism, Anabaptists also undermined the territorial structure of the national church. In its place they proposed congregations of the elect who would function as self-governing 'praying republics'. Had they succeeded, they would have shattered forever the territorial integrity of the Christian world and the reach of its state-centred institutions.

Because Anabaptists were often to the forefront of religious dissent, more conservative Protestants were opposed to the 'mad saints' who led their anti-authoritarian followers. Indeed the religious fissures in sixteenth-century dissenting Europe appeared to follow fairly clear-cut social and geographical lines. Radical dissent and anti-clericalism had attracted large numbers of the urban and rural poor in England, Germany, the Low Countries and Scandinavia. Spain, Italy, Austria, Poland and Lithuania on the other hand remained predominantly Catholic, but still tolerated the presence of small Calvinist minorities in their midst. While widespread emotional support for religious reform in the former countries had to be taken seriously by state authorities, conservative reformers and large numbers of the clergy readily dissociated themselves from the 'mad saints' and radical dissenters of this Reformation Europe. Critical of the 'habit-ridden indifference' of the Catholic Church to ecclesiastical reform, these 'respectable reformers' were nevertheless willing to cooperate with the state, particularly if it furthered their social and political objectives.¹⁷ Preaching respect for the authority of the reformed church and Parliament, they transformed heresy into a respectable religion and policed the politics and the moral conduct of their 'flocks'. If not contained, it was argued, plebeian anti-authoritarianism could threaten the comfortable civility of more respectable Lutherans, Calvinists and other authoritarian Protestants. It was for these reasons that the latter condemned as anarchism the anti-authoritarianism of the more radical plebeian Protestants.

Historically, therefore, opposition to ecclesiastical authority was inseparable from plebeian resistance to monarchical authority and the social, economic and political privilege of landed wealth. Both strands of anti-authoritarianism originated within the ranks of radical Protestantism. By the mid seventeenth century, 'anarchism' was already used as a term of abuse to describe the heretical beliefs of those who threatened to lead the urban and rural poor of northern Europe not only from the church altar but also along the path to social revolution. During the English Revolution, for example, radical Levellers were branded 'Switzerising anarchists'. Doubly condemned as 'foreigners' and opponents of religious authority, they were thrown, like most plebeian opponents of church and state, onto the dust heaps of history. Because they appeared to be 'demanding the impossible', these early anarchists had no friends on

the reformist left or the political right. Their radical disavowal of social and political authority cast them in the role of friendless revolutionaries.¹⁸

Gerrard Winstanley and the anti-authoritarian tradition

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed massive changes in the social and economic landscapes of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The collapse of feudal privileges fostered the development of a market-centred economy, facilitated an early form of nation-building under the auspices of substantial landholders, promoted state centralization, and gave Parliament new powers to regulate social and economic activity on an unprecedented scale. The power blocs of this new Puritan Britain sought to literally refashion the country in their own image. This in turn led to the privatization of property and the increased commercialization of agriculture, particularly in the country's rural heartlands in the south of England. Here large-scale enclosures nurtured the seeds of an emerging Puritan hegemony, which in turn threatened the traditional moral economy of the rural poor, while simultaneously contributing to the proletarianization of many smallholders and tenant farmers. Massive developments in agriculture and transportation also threatened to further reduce the regional and cultural diversity, and the parochialism, of late feudal Britain. This transformed even Britain and Ireland's remotest districts into functioning communities that were linked to the national state structure and indeed the global economy.¹⁹

This was the environment in which Gerrard Winstanley produced an astonishing output of religious and political writings that laid the foundations of modern anarchism. In 1648 he began to publish the religious tracts that brought him to the attention of the London poor, and of the civil and military authorities. Accused of fomenting anarchy by churchmen and the English gentry, Winstanley conspired to 'level men's estate' by making a number of critical interventions in English revolutionary politics between 1648 and 1652. Baptized in Wigan on 10 October 1609, he was the son of a textile dealer of modest means who had Puritan sympathies.²⁰ The young Winstanley grew up in a parish strongly associated with rural radicalism that was dominated by powerful landlords and aggressive landowning clerics. This may have prompted his later criticisms of landlordism and authoritarian religion. The fact that he possessed some knowledge of Latin suggests that he may have

attended the local grammar school. However, in an England where poor schoolmasters tutored pupils in their own homes, it is not improbable that his knowledge of the language could have been acquired in a less authoritarian atmosphere outside of school. In 1630, Winstanley left for London where he was apprenticed to the widow Sarah Gater, who carried on her deceased husband's trade as a merchant tailor in the impoverished parish of St Michael, in Cornhill. We know that he shared the house of his female employer until 1638, and that she was a devout and comparatively learned woman who had her own small library of medical books and religious tracts. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the widow Gater was the source of Winstanley's religious radicalism. Quite the contrary indeed, as it would appear that she was of a conservative disposition and one of the overseers of her last will and testament was no other than her staunchly royalist cousin, Izaak Walton, the author of *The Compleat Angler*, published in 1653. In London, Winstanley ran a small shop in the parish of St Olave where he probably took in items of clothing for resale. Four years later the business was in jeopardy and he was forced to divide up his stock to pay off creditors. He moved to Cobham in 1643 where he lived near his wife's family.²¹

Winstanley could not have been unaware of the social and intellectual ferment in London in the early 1640s. Neither was he immune to the impact of the civil war on the daily lives of the London poor. He certainly appears to have been acutely aware of the revolutionary potential of the 'giddy multitude' of London and the 'glorious flux and intellectual excitement' that engulfed the city in these years. Convinced that 'the old world [was] running up like parchment in the fire,'²² he welcomed its demise and set about preparing citizens for the new anti-authoritarian society which he believed was about to emerge from the political chaos and millenarian hopes of these brief years. As Christopher Hill has suggested, anything seemed possible in revolutionary England between 1648 and the restoration of the landed gentry under the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell. In these years the urban and rural poor not only challenged the authority of church and state – they questioned the very foundational values of early modern capitalism, not least its work ethic and its moral code of respectability. In his account of this 'world turned upside down,' Hill has shown that mid seventeenth-century England was the site of at least two major social revolutions. The one which succeeded went on to defend the rights of property, abolished feudal tenures, put