



"the essential introduction to the  
classical anarchist thinkers"



# Anarchism

GEORGE WOODCOCK



# Anarchism

*A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*

George Woodcock



broadview encore editions

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### Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Woodcock, George, 1912-1995

Anarchism : a history of libertarian ideas and movements / George Woodcock.

(Broadview encore editions)

Includes index.

ISBN 1-55111-629-4

1. Anarchism—History. I. Title. II. Series

HX828.W6 204

335'.83

C204-905498-8

Broadview Press Ltd. is an independent, international publishing house, incorporated in 1985. Broadview believes in shared ownership, both with its employees and with the general public; since the year 2000 Broadview shares have traded publicly on the Toronto Venture Exchange under the symbol BDP.

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Fax: 44 (0) 1752 202331

Fax Order Line: 44 (0) 1752  
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Fax: 61 2 9664 5420

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[www.broadviewpress.com](http://www.broadviewpress.com)

Book design and composition by George Kirkpatrick

Cover design by Lisa Brawn

PRINTED IN CANADA

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## Preface to the 1986 Edition

A SERIES of events, of which the book itself was part, have made necessary this new and considerably revised edition of *Anarchism*. I wrote the original version during 1960 and 1961; it was published in the United States in 1962 and in the first British Penguin edition in 1963; subsequently it was translated into many languages, including Italian, Swedish, Japanese, Spanish and Portuguese.

When I wrote *Anarchism*, the most striking recent event in the history of the tradition I discussed had been the Spanish Civil War, in which for the last time anarchism had inspired a genuine mass following. The destruction of the Spanish Republic in 1939, and the virtually unopposed entry of Franco's troops into the traditional anarchist stronghold of Barcelona, seemed to mark the end of the movement that Bakunin had founded during the internal struggles of the International in the 1860s; everywhere but in Spain it had, for various reasons, become moribund. 1939 seemed to me the year that marked the death of classic anarchism, and I chose it as the end point of my narrative.

But even as I did so I made the distinction between a movement and an idea; I pointed out that over the two centuries before Bakunin organized his first conspiratorial cells in post-Risorgimento Italy very similar ideas to his had been formulated, by the Differri in the English and the Enragés in the French Revolutions, by Godwin and Proudhon, and that there was no reason to assume that this perennially renewable anarchist *idea* would not re-emerge once again in a new and different form even after the *movement*, as the world up to 1939 knew it, had faded into history.

But since in 1960-61 the few small groups that represented the vestigial tradition hardly represented a renaissance of the idea, *Anarchism* concentrated on the historic movement, and took on a somewhat elegiac tone, so that one reviewer at the time described it rather felicitously as a threnody. It was indeed, as I then conceived it, a kind of Periclean oration, an expansion into a whole commemorative volume of the old Italian anarchist lament, 'Flowers for the rebels who failed ...' I ended in a peroration that would be inappropriate as a termination to the book as it now appears in



revision but which is too just a tribute to the great anarchists to be abandoned. When I voiced it I took for granted that the movement which ended in Barcelona in 1939 must be treated as a piece of past history, and I remarked that the thought of re-creating obsolete forms of organization or imitating insurrectional methods that had failed in the past would in the future be less important than the impact of the more general and enduring lessons of anarchism on receptive minds. And then I voiced the tribute that I still sustain and would not like to omit entirely from the book it once brought to a close:

The heritage that anarchism has left to the modern world is to be found in a few inspiring lives of self-sacrifice and devotion like those of Melatesta and Louise Michel, but most of all in the incitement to return to a moral and natural view of society which we find in the writings of Godwin and Tolstoy, of Proudhon and Kropotkin, and in the stimulation such writers give to that very taste for free choice and free judgement which modern society has so insidiously induced the majority of men to barter for material goods and the illusion of security. The great anarchists call on us to stand on our own moral feet like a generation of princes, to become aware of justice as an inner fire, and to learn that the still, small voices of our own hearts speak more truly than the choruses of propaganda that daily assault our outer ears. 'Look into the depths of your own being,' said Peter Arshinov, the friend of Makhno. 'Seek out the truth and realize it yourselves. You will find it nowhere else.' In this insistence that freedom and moral self-realization are interdependent, and one cannot live without the other, lies the ultimate lesson of true anarchism.

Those words are still true, but this book is no longer a threnody. Since it was written, anarchism has re-emerged in new forms, adapted to a changing world. Few readers will not have seen, appended to some wall graffito that challenges our complacency as well as that of our society, the symbol of the circled A. it is a sign the classic anarchists did not even know. It was first used in 1964 by a small French group, Jeunesse Libertaire, taken up in 1966 by another youth group, the Circolo Sacco e Vanzetti in Milan, and then in 1968 it suddenly became popular in Italy, whence it spread rapidly around the world, so that nowadays one is as likely to see it in some small town of the Australian outback or the Canadian prairie as in the capitals of Europe.

The spread of the circled A, and of the libertarian fraternity it represents, is merely one manifestation of the resurgence of anarchist ideas that

has made it necessary to revise this book, since one can no longer validly argue that anarchism in any final sense came to an end in 1939, though the old traditional anarchism did. The idea has revived astonishingly, assuming new manifestations over the past two decades. The earliest clear signs began to emerge in the very year the first edition of *Anarchism* was published in Britain. The small nucleus that had attracted some of the British literati during World War II and had continued tenuously ever since suddenly began to proliferate under the stimulus of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and I remember in 1963 reading with astonishment a report from London of a contingent five hundred strong marching twenty abreast behind the black banner of the London anarchists in one of the street demonstrations of that year. 'The London anarchists came ringleted and bearded and pre-Raphaelite,' enthused one reporter. 'It was a frieze of non-conformists enviable in their youth and gaiety and personal freedom.' There had not even been fifty active anarchists in London when I had been involved in editing *Freedom* twenty years before.

As the decade went on the evidence of new upsurges of anarchism increased, not only in Britain but also in the United States, where anarchist ideas played an important role in the counter-culture of the 1960s, in France, where the black flag was prominent in the great revolt of May 1968, and in Holland, where the Provos gave a new twist to the old idea of propaganda by deed through deliberately goading governments into showing their most brutal faces. The weak provoke; the strong unwillingly expend themselves.

Through provocation [said one Provo manifesto] we force authority to tear off its mask. Uniforms, boots, helmets, sabres, truncheons, fire hoses, police dogs, tear gas and all the other means of suppression they have lined up for us must be produced. The authorities must be forced to rage, threatening us right and left, commanding, forbidding, condemning, convicting. They will become more and more unpopular and the popular spirit will ripen for revolution. A revolutionary feeling will once again be in the air: crisis.

A crisis of provoked authority.

Such is the gigantic provocation we call for from the International Provotariat.

At first, when such reports reached me from all over the Western world, I began to think I had been rash in so officiously burying the historic anarchist movement. But in fact what was happening in the 1960s was not a knock in the coffin of the past. The anarchists of the 1960s were not

the historic anarchist movement resurrected; they were something quite different—a series of new manifestations of the idea. Anarchism spread into classes and regions that had never welcomed it before. It seized on the new issues of the times. It produced a whole fresh literature of its own, with writers like Paul Goodman and Colin Ward and Murray Bookchin adding new insights to the old anarchist arguments. And it became for the first time a matter of interest to political scientists and historians; books on its personalities and its old and new manifestations proliferated. Even when it was not welcome, anarchism was at last taken seriously as a political alternative.

In what happened *Anarchism* itself played a role as the first comprehensive history of libertarian ideas and movements; it is still the fullest. It has continued to be read over the two decades since it first appeared and has been in print throughout that period; this will be the eighth printing in Britain alone. In 1973 I decided that something must be done to recognize what had taken place in anarchist terms since 1939, and I wrote a postscript that in a rather general way outlined recent developments; it appeared in the 1975 edition. Now it seems to me that more extensive changes are needed, and I have accordingly carried out a general revision and updating of the book. This has made little difference to the first eight chapters, dealing with the general idea of anarchism and the particular contributions of the classic anarchist thinkers. But it has involved considerable revision and additions to the next six chapters, which deal with anarchism as a changing and developing movement, both internationally and in various specific countries. Finally, the original epilogue and much of the more general material in the 1975 postscript have been combined in a new epilogue with fresh material to offer a more adequate comparison between what one might call old and new anarchism.

The extension of the scope of anarchism beyond 1939 has led to a change in my relation to the book. I am no longer the sympathetic though objective observer looking from the present into a past in which I had no part. I did play a role in the anarchist movement during the 1940s, which means that in the book as revised I appear as an actor, if only a minor one, and that at times an element of subjectivity enters in, since I am looking at events in which I was involved and to which I reacted personally. In dealing with myself as a figure in the book, I have followed the practice of talking of 'George Woodcock' whenever it is merely a question of recording what I did and of talking of 'I' when I am expressing a personal view of a situation in which I was involved.

2 September (Labor Day) 1985

## I. Prologue

‘**W**HOEVER denies authority and fights against it is an anarchist,’ said Sébastien Faure. The definition is tempting in its simplicity, but simplicity is the first thing to guard against in writing a history of anarchism. Few doctrines or movements have been so confusedly understood in the public mind, and few have presented in their own variety of approach and action so much excuse for confusion. That is why, before beginning to trace the actual historical course of anarchism, as a theory and a movement, I start with a chapter of definition. What is anarchism? And what is it not? These are the questions we must first consider.

Faure’s statement at least marks out the area in which anarchism exists. All anarchists deny authority; many of them fight against it. But by no means all who deny authority and fight against it can reasonably be called anarchists. Historically, anarchism is a doctrine which poses a criticism of existing society; a view of a desirable future society; and a means of passing from one to the other. Mere unthinking revolt does not make an anarchist, nor does a philosophical or religious rejection of earthly power. Mystics and stoics seek not anarchy, but another kingdom. Anarchism, historically speaking, is concerned mainly with man in his relation to society. Its ultimate aim is always social change, its present attitude is always one of social condemnation, even though it may proceed from an individualist view of man’s nature; its method is always that of social rebellion, violent or otherwise.

But even among those who recognize anarchism as a social-political doctrine, confusion still exists. Anarchism, nihilism, and terrorism are often mistakenly equated, and in most dictionaries will be found at least two definitions of the anarchist. One presents him as a man who believes that government must die before freedom can live. The other dismisses him as a mere promoter of disorder who offers nothing in place of the order he destroys. In popular thought the latter conception is far more widely spread. The stereotype of the anarchist is that of the cold-blooded assassin who attacks with dagger or bomb the symbolic pillars of established society. Anarchy, in popular parlance, is malign chaos.

Yet malign chaos is clearly very far from the intent of men like Tolstoy and Godwin, Thoreau and Kropotkin, whose social theories have all been described as anarchist. There is an obvious discrepancy between the stereotype anarchist and the anarchist as we most often see him in reality; that division is due partly to semantic confusions and partly to historical misunderstandings.

In the derivation of the words 'anarchy', 'anarchism', and 'anarchist', as well as in the history of their use, we find justifications for both the conflicting sets of meanings given to them. *Anarchos*, the original Greek word, means merely 'without a ruler', and thus anarchy itself can clearly be used in a general context to mean either the negative condition of unruliness or the positive condition of being unruled because rule is unnecessary for the preservation of order.

It is when we come to the use of the three words in a social-political context that we encounter important shifts of meaning. 'Anarchy' and 'anarchist' were first used freely in the political sense during the French Revolution. Then they were terms of negative criticism, and sometimes of abuse, employed by various parties to damn their opponents, and usually those to the Left. The Girondin Brissot, for example, demanding the suppression of the Enragés, whom he called anarchists, declared in 1793, 'it is necessary to define this anarchy'. He went on to do so:

Laws that are not carried into effect, authorities without force and despised, crime unpunished, property attacked, the safety of the individual violated, the morality of the people corrupted, no constitution, no government, no justice, these are the features of anarchy.

Brissot at least attempted a definition. A few years later, turning upon the Jacobins it had destroyed, the Directory descended to partisan abuse, declaring:

By 'anarchists' the Directory means these men covered with crimes, stained with blood, and fattened by rapine, enemies of laws they do not make and of all governments in which they do not govern, who preach liberty and practise despotism, speak of fraternity and slaughter their brothers ...; tyrants, slaves, servile adulators of the clever dominator who can subjugate them, capable in a word of all excesses, all basenesses, and all crimes.

Used moderately by Brissot or violently by the Directory, 'anarchism' was clearly a word of condemnation both during and after the French

Revolution; at best it described those whose politics one considered destructive and disastrous, at worst it was a term to be used indiscriminately for the smearing of one's rivals. And so the Enragés, who distrusted excessive power, and Robespierre, who loved it, were tarred by the same invidious brush.

But, like such titles as Christian and Quaker, 'anarchist' was in the end proudly adopted by one of those against whom it had been used in condemnation. In 1840, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, that stormy, argumentative individualist who prided himself on being a man of paradox and a provoker of contradiction, published the work that established him as a pioneer libertarian thinker. It was *What Is Property?*, in which he gave his own question the celebrated answer: 'Property is theft.' In the same book he became the first man willingly to claim the title of anarchist.

Undoubtedly Proudhon did this partly in defiance, and partly in order to exploit the word's paradoxical qualities. He had recognized the ambiguity of the Greek *anarchos*, and had gone back to it for that very reason—to emphasize that the criticism of authority on which he was about to embark need not necessarily imply an advocacy of disorder. The passages in which he introduces 'anarchist' and 'anarchy' are historically important enough to merit quotation, since they not merely show these words being used for the first time in a socially positive sense, but also contain in germ the justification by natural law which anarchists have in general applied to their arguments for a non-authoritarian society.

What is to be the form of government in the future? [he asks]. I hear some of my readers reply: 'Why, how can you ask such a question? You are a republican.' A republican! Yes, but that word specifies nothing. *Res publica*; that is, the public thing. Now, whoever is interested in public affairs—no matter under what form of government, may call himself a republican. Even kings are republicans. 'Well, you are a democrat.' No ... 'Then what are you?' I am an anarchist!

Proudhon goes on to suggest that the real laws by which society functions have nothing to do with authority; they are not imposed from above, but stem from the nature of society itself. He sees the free emergence of such laws as the goal of social endeavour.

Just as the right of force and the right of artifice retreat before the steady advance of justice, and must finally be extinguished in equality, so the sovereignty of the will yields to the sovereignty of reason and must at last be lost in scientific socialism ... As man seeks justice

in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy. Anarchy—the absence of a master, of a sovereign—such is the form of government to which we are every day approximating.

The seeming paradox of order in anarchy—here indeed we have the key to the change in connotation of this whole group of words. Proudhon, conceiving a natural law of balance operating within society, rejects authority as an enemy and not a friend of order, and so throws back at the authoritarians the accusations levelled at the anarchists; in the process he adopts the title he hopes to have cleared of obloquy.

As we shall later see, Proudhon was a voluntary hermit in the political world of the nineteenth century. He sought no followers, indignantly rebuffed the suggestion that he had created a system of any kind, and almost certainly rejoiced in the fact that for most of his life he accepted the title of anarchist in virtual isolation. Even his immediate followers preferred to call themselves mutualists, and it was not until the later 1870s, after the split in the First International between the followers of Marx and those of Bakunin, that the latter—who were also the indirect followers of Proudhon—began, at first rather hesitantly, to call themselves anarchists.

It is the general idea put forward by Proudhon in 1840 that unites him with the later anarchists, with Bakunin and Kropotkin, and also with certain earlier and later thinkers, such as Godwin, Stirner, and Tolstoy, who evolved anti-governmental systems without accepting the name of anarchy; and it is in this sense that I shall treat anarchism, despite its many variations: as a system of social thought, aiming at fundamental changes in the structure of society and particularly—for this is the common element uniting all its forms—at the replacement of the authoritarian state by some form of non-governmental cooperation between free individuals.

But even when one has established the view of anarchism as a definite current of social philosophy, crystallizing at certain times into action, there remain misunderstandings which arise from historical rather than semantic confusion. First, there is the tendency to identify anarchism with nihilism, and to regard it as a negative philosophy, a philosophy of destruction simply. The anarchists themselves are partly responsible for the misunderstanding, since many of them have tended to stress the destructive aspects of their doctrine. The very idea of abolishing authority implies a clean sweep of most of the prominent institutions of a typical modern society, and the strong point in anarchist writings has always been their incisive criticism of such institutions; in comparison their plans of reconstruction have been oversimplified and unconvincing.

Yet in the mind of no anarchist thinker has the idea of destruction ever stood alone. Proudhon used the phrase *Destruam et Aedificabo* as the motto for the attack on industrial Caesarism embodied in his *Economic Contradictions* (1846): 'I destroy and I build up.' And Michael Bakunin ended his essay on *Reaction in Germany* with a celebrated invocation: 'Let us put our trust in the eternal spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unsearchable and eternally creative source of all life. The passion for destruction is also a creative passion!'

The tradition has continued into our own generation. In 1936, almost a hundred years after Bakunin published *Reaction in Germany*, the Spanish anarchist leader Buenaventura Durutti, standing among the destruction caused by the Civil War, boasted to Pierre van Paassen:

We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth. There is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie may blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a new world, here in our hearts. That world is growing this minute.

The anarchist, then, may accept destruction, but only as part of the same eternal process that brings death and renewed life to the world of nature, and only because he has faith in the power of free men to build again and build better in the rubble of the destroyed past. It was Shelley, the greatest disciple of Godwin, who gave eloquent expression to this recurrent anarchist dream of renewal:

The earth's great age begins anew,  
 The golden years return,  
 The earth doth like a snake renew  
 Her winter weeds outworn;  
 Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam  
 Like wrecks in a dissolving dream.

It is through the wrecks of empires and faiths that the anarchists have always seen the glittering towers of their free world arising. That vision may be naïve—we have not yet come to the point of judging it in such terms—but it is clearly not a vision of destruction unmitigated.

Certainly no man capable of such a vision can be dismissed as a nihilist. The nihilist, using the term in a general sense, believes in no moral principle and no natural law; the anarchist believes in a moral urge powerful



enough to survive the destruction of authority and still to hold society together in the free and natural bonds of fraternity. Nor is the anarchist a nihilist in the narrow historical sense, since the particular group somewhat inaccurately called nihilists in Russian history were terrorists who belonged to the People's Will, an organized conspiratorial movement which sought during the later nineteenth century to achieve constitutional government—an unanarchistic aim—by a programme of organized assassination directed against the autocratic rulers of Tsarist Russia.

This last statement begs a familiar question. If anarchists are not nihilists, are they not terrorists in any case? The association of anarchism with political terrorism is still well established in the popular mind, but it is not a necessary association, nor can it be historically justified except in a limited degree. Anarchists may be substantially agreed on their ultimate general aims; on the tactics needed to reach that aim they have shown singular disagreement, and this is particularly the case with regard to violence. The Tolstoyans admitted violence under no circumstances; Godwin sought to bring change through discussion and Proudhon and his followers through the peaceful proliferation of cooperative organizations; Kropotkin accepted violence, but only reluctantly and because he felt it occurred inevitably during revolutions and that revolutions were unavoidable stages in human progress; even Bakunin, though he fought on many barricades and extolled the bloodthirstiness of peasant risings, had also times of doubt, when he would remark, in the tones of saddened idealism:

Bloody revolutions are often necessary, thanks to human stupidity; yet they are always an evil, a monstrous evil and a great disaster, not only with regard to the victims, but also for the sake of purity and the perfection of the purpose in whose name they take place.

In fact, where anarchists did accept violence it was largely because of their adherence to traditions that stem from the French, American, and ultimately the English Revolutions—traditions of violent popular action in the name of liberty which they shared with other movements of their time such as the Jacobins, the Marxists, the Blanquists, and the followers of Mazzini and Garibaldi. With time—and particularly as the memory of the Commune of 1871 began to fade—the tradition acquired a romantic aura; it became part of a revolutionary myth and in many countries had little relation to actual practice. There were, indeed, special situations, particularly in Spain, Italy, and Russia, where violence had long been endemic in political life, and here the anarchists, like other parties,