

# THE POLITICAL THEORY OF ANARCHISM

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April Carter

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*By*

APRIL CARTER

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**April Carter**



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## Author's Note

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This book was conceived and written as a brief study in political theory, primarily for students of politics. Its main aim is to explore anarchist ideas in relation to a number of important themes in political thought.

The book assumes no prior knowledge of anarchist history and philosophy, and will therefore cover ground familiar to those already versed in the literature on anarchism. On the other hand it does assume some knowledge of general political theory, although the specific connexions between anarchist and other theorists are spelt out as clearly as possible. It also explores the relevance of anarchist ideas to contemporary politics and political discourse.

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# Introduction

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The cluster of ideas, attitudes and beliefs which can be defined by the term 'anarchism' have not received much attention from political theorists. There are a number of reasons for this neglect. One is that anarchist political theory sounds like a contradiction in terms—a denial of the value and necessity of government both sweeps aside many of the traditional concerns of political theorists, and suggests an essentially apolitical doctrine. Another is the lack of any outstanding theoretical exponent of anarchism. There are important, interesting and attractive anarchist writers, but none comparable as social theorists with, for example, Marx. Within the corpus of 'great political thinkers' only Rousseau comes close occasionally to being an anarchist. A third reason for the comparative neglect of anarchism is probably the fact that anarchists have never yet won permanent victory, and there are no anarchist societies in being; so their opponents have never felt under pressure to examine anarchist ideas very seriously. However, their political failure is also the anarchists' strength, as spokesmen for values which the politically established and victorious have too often forgotten or suppressed.

Anarchism like most other contemporary political ideals and doctrines began to emerge as a relatively coherent theory at about the time of the French Revolution. William Godwin's *Political Justice*, which is usually treated as the first theoretical exposition of anarchism, was popularly regarded as a reply to Burke's denunciation of the Revolution. Godwin was writing within the theoretical framework of individualism and rationalism associated with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The diversity of anarchist thought is illustrated by the fact that the next major anarchist theorist, Max Stirner, belonged to the generation of young intellectuals in Germany of the 1840s who were strongly influenced by Hegel's Idealist philosophy, and who developed their own theories through a systematic critique of the more conservative implications of Hegel's philosophy in relation to the State and to religion. Another member of that circle of Young Hegelians, Karl Marx, later attacked the ideas of the other Young Hegelians, including those of 'Saint Max', in *The German Ideology*. Stirner argued in *The Ego and His Own* that the individual should be totally free from all socially imposed ties and from the conventions of morality. Godwin and Stirner had in common only

their atheism and their willingness to take to logical extremes the belief that the individual—not the State or Society—is sovereign. In their stress on the complete autonomy of the individual both differed from most later anarchist thinkers. By the second half of the nineteenth century anarchism had become a political movement closely associated with the international socialist movement, and sharing to some extent the socialist commitment to fraternity as a social ideal, and working class solidarity as a necessary weapon in the political struggle.

The development of anarchism as a political movement revealed that it was a doctrine which had its strongest appeal in areas where the process of industrialization had not yet changed the social landscape: among craftsmen like the Swiss watchmakers in the Jura mountains; among skilled workers in small factories, as in France in the 1860s; and among poverty-stricken peasants, for example in Andalusia in Spain. The type of anarchism developed by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who first adopted the title 'anarchist', idealized the sturdy independence of the small peasant proprietor or skilled craftsman, and proposed a type of co-operative organization appropriate to the economic needs of this kind of community and to a society of independent equals. Proudhon had spent part of his childhood on a farm in the Franche-Comté, was apprenticed as a printer (a trade which has produced many anarchists), and gained some of his ideas—including the name of his 'Mutualist' social and economic theory—from the militant textile workers of Lyons in the 1840s. His thought always tended to reflect these models of society, though he extended his theory to include workers' co-operative ownership of large scale industry. For a time the Proudhonists were a significant force in the French socialist movement, and in the First Socialist International, which was founded in 1864, the year before Proudhon's death.

But the dominant anarchist figure of the First International was the Russian Michael Bakunin, a genuinely internationalist revolutionary who saw the inside of a great many European jails. Bakunin's influence was greatest in Switzerland, where for a short time the headquarters of his separate anarchist international was located; and in particular among the Jura watchmakers, whom he had encouraged in their initiative in opposing Marx's leadership of the First International. The Jura watchmakers epitomized the virtues of the Proudhonian ideal. Bakunin's compatriot, Prince Peter Kropotkin, said in his *Memoirs* that the Jura watchmakers had finally converted him to anarchism.

The very organization of the watch trade, which permits men to know one another thoroughly and to work in their own houses,

where they are free to talk, explains why the level of intellectual development in this population is higher than that of workers who spend all their life from early childhood in the factories. There is more independence and more originality among petty trades . . . The clearness of insight, the soundness of judgment, the capacity for disentangling complex social questions, which I noticed amongst these workers . . . deeply impressed me; . . . But the equalitarian relations which I found . . . appealed even more strongly to my feelings (266–7).

Bakunin, however, saw himself rather as the spokesman for the very poor: the ‘proletariat of the countryside, this last outcast of history’, and ‘that great mass, those millions of non-civilized, disinherited, wretched and illiterates’ who are ‘very nearly unpolluted by all bourgeois civilization’ (*Marxism, Freedom and the State*, 47–8). Bakunin tried to win support in Italy, but had more success among workers in the towns of the northern-central provinces than among the very poor peasants of the South. In Spain, however, Bakunin’s Italian emissary, Fanelli, was successful in spreading anarchism not only among the workers but among the rural proletariat. Bakunin’s concern for the poorest peasants, and for the ‘riff raff’, was not intended to exclude other potentially revolutionary groups. Bakunin often seems to share Marx’s belief that the factory workers will be in the vanguard of revolutionary activity—at least in the West; and he saw the potentialities of the strike as a revolutionary tactic. What Bakunin objected to was Marx’s exclusive emphasis on the organized working class, because this approach ignored the possibility of revolt by other groups, and because it seemed to imply a new ‘class domination’ over the masses, the peasantry and ‘lumpenproletariat’.

Bakunin’s thought had affinities with Proudhon, whom he had read and admired; though Bakunin, consistent with his appeal to the propertyless and illiterate, opposed personal ownership of property in land or of small workshops, and what he regarded as the bourgeois ideology of individualism. Instead he urged a form of ‘collectivism’:

I think that liberty must establish itself in the world by the spontaneous organisation of labour and of collective ownership by productive associations freely organised and federalised in districts . . . (*Marxism, Freedom and the State*, 18).

Kropotkin, before he encountered the Jura watchmakers, had already been inclined towards anarchism by his experience on the one hand of the brutality, corruption and incompetence of the Tsarist régime; and on the other by his perception of the natural good sense, initiative, and ability for spontaneous co-operation among the ‘un-

civilized' tribes in Siberia, or among the Russian peasantry. His perceptions and his conclusions were similar to those formed by the other eminent Russian anarchist theorist, Count Leo Tolstoy. Kropotkin observed in his *Memoirs* :

The years that I spent in Siberia taught me many lessons which I could hardly have learned elsewhere. I soon realised the absolute impossibility of doing anything really useful for the masses of the people by the means of the administrative machinery . . . To witness for instance, the ways in which the communities of the Dukhobortsy . . . migrated to the Amur region; to see the immense advantages which they got from their semi-communistic brotherly organization; and to realise what a success their colonization was, amidst all the failures of State colonization, was learning something which cannot be learned from books . . . The part which the unknown masses play in the accomplishment of all important historical events, and even in war, became evident to me from direct observation, and I came to hold ideas similar to those which Tolstoy expresses concerning the leaders and the masses in his monumental work, *War and Peace* (201-2).

Intellectuals in Russia were particularly attracted to anarchist ideas, both because existing social and economic conditions seemed favourable to the transition to an anarchist society—the Russian peasant commune as a basis for a regenerated society appealed to many radicals—and because throughout most of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century the existing government barred the way to moderate liberal reforms. However Russian anarchists had surprisingly little mass revolutionary support. George Woodcock comments in his study of *Anarchism* that only 'between 1918 and 1921, did Russian anarchists gain a brief and sudden glory when the peasants of the southern Ukraine flocked in their tens of thousands to the black banners of the anarchist guerilla leader Nestor Makhno', whose army was crushed by Trotsky in 1921 (376).

Bakunin in his polemic with Marx about the organization and policy of the First International, and about the role of the State after a socialist revolution, contrasted the anarchist tendencies of the Latin and Slav nations with German authoritarianism. Although such generalizations should, as Bakunin was aware, be treated with caution, his predictions were not inaccurate. Germany had become by 1900 the home of the best organized and best drilled Marxist Party in Europe. The German anarchist Gustav Landauer complained in 1896 in a report to the London International Congress that: 'in no other country has a single party, an isolated sect, managed to such a degree to pass for the unique and only legitimate representative