No Birds, No Trees

America's Leftists love to praise Chairman Mao for destroying all the flies in China by sending each school child out with an empty jar that must be filled by sundown. (Damned reality won't even permit us our "good stories" anymore: recent visitors to China report that flies are still plentiful.)

Then there were the birds of Peking. Mao said they shouldn't eat farmers' seeds, so all were ordered killed. For years, starting a quarter of a century ago, millions of swallows, bulbuls, and sparrows in the ancient capital were exterminated, chased by firecrackers, loudspeakers, and stones until they fell dead from exhaustion.

But who or what would now eat all the insects? Suddenly there was a health menace because the birds were dead and the pest population was exploding. All the insects' food and breeding areas were ordered destroyed: up came the grasses, out came the shrubs, and down came the trees. Today, Peking's once lovely parks and gardens are bare.

Then the new regime, post-Gang of Four, suddenly saw another threat. The wind-breaks against the great winter dust storms were gone and the area's natural filter system had disappeared; air pollution had become six times greater than is considered safe. Local water had become undrinkable, in part because the bounty of good ideology had not left time and energy for sensible social planning; more than a million and a half tons of raw sewage and industrial waste was being dumped daily into city streams that polluted underground water supplies with large dosages of mercury, benzene, cyanide, and cobalt. Peking had become an ecological basket case.

So now a new order is out: PLANT TREES, SHRUBS, AND GRASS. And does anyone have a songbird or two to spare?

Anarchism As Taoism?

The late leftist writer Paul Goodman wrote that if anarchists wished to develop or choose a spiritual discipline which could co-exist with their beliefs and practices as social revolutionaries they would do well to seek it in Taoism.

Goodman wasn't the first to see the similarities between the western tradition of anarchism and the ancient Chinese "way of nature" we know as Taoism. Now we find much scholarly material is being published in English on a possible Taoist-anarchist connection. Many articles and two recent volumes have appeared suggesting the kinship; and the professional publication, "Journal of Chinese Philosophy", edited by Chung-ying Cheng of the University of Hawaii, has devoted a 94-page issue to four long essays on "Political Taoism and Anarchist Theory".

The essays in the journal are by professors of philosophy at three important universities in the United States, and each writer very plainly believes that classical and -- even more particularly -- contemporary anarchism is a virtual twin to Chinese Taoism. The primary concerns of the essays are in answering two major questions: (1) given the nature of western anarchism, to what extent can Taoist political (and metaphysical) thought be said to be anarchistic? and (2) given the deeper ontological foundations of Taoism, what might contemporary anarchist theory learn from a consideration of Taoist ideas?

The authors offer four chief statements of western anarchism to serve as a framework for answering these two questions: (1) that the freedom and autonomy of the individual are of paramount importance for the fulfillment (on both the personal and collective levels) of human life; (2) that all forms of coercive authority are rejected as deleterious to the fulfillment of the individual and society; (3) that anarchism offers an ideal of a non-authoritarian society in

which harmony and community of individuals comes about naturally; and (4) that anarchism is able to provide a program for the concrete realization of its ideal vision.

Taoism developed in China over a five thousand year period and has branched out into half a dozen directions (as many as 81 different sects were formally organized on the Chinese mainland when the communists took over in 1949). Among the different categories of Taoism are the philosophical schools from the teachings of Lao tzu (6th century B.C.) and Chuang tzu (4th century B.C.); the traditional medical and sexual practices from the time of the Yellow Emperor Huang Ti (26th century B.C.); the magical and religious Taoism started by the Celestial Masters school (1st century A.D.); the yogic sects prominent in China throughout the last three thousand years; the practitioners of art forms and agricultural sciences which gave such cultural maturity to the T'ang and Sung dynasties; and the martial art skills (such as t'ai chi ch'uan) which