YES, ONCE AGAIN: WHAT IS ANARCHISM?

Anarchism was dead — or so we've been told. But today, more than 100 years after it first became a political force in the life of the western nations, it is clearly alive once again.

A new climate of rebellion and good sense, a fresh current of sanity and self-confidence, is moving through society. The vital signs are everywhere, the evidence plain, that anarchism — that doctrineless doctrine which allows for the creation of freedom, justice and community among all social humans — is coming forth again as an alternative to parliamentary republicanism, a burdensome bureaucracy, state capitalism, magic leaders, institutional medicine men, corporate pirates, and the conditions and crimes they foster through heirarchy, coercion, war, wage slavery, sexism, racism, and the neurotic destruction of our environment.

Anarchism, of course, never died, though in recent decades its visibility in the world of politics has been much reduced. Global war, state repressions, Marxist "revolutions," labor and liberal hedging and readjustments, the rapid and resourceful expansion of capitalism, and unceasing propaganda campaigns by authoritarians of every coloration have kicked up a dust storm which has seemingly obscured the anarchist vein continuing just below the surface of our social existence.

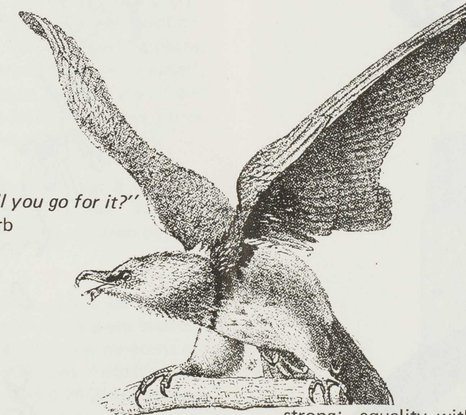
But now, in the last 15 years, since the experiences of the harsh testing-ground of the 1960s and its sweeping cultural transformations, people of awareness and courage on every level of life, are looking to anarchism again as a means for combating worldwide social and economic problems and for bringing the struggle for freedom and human dignity into workplace, community and basic personal relations. Increasingly each of us now sees that only we ourselves can build the free existence that is our birthright.

Anarchism as a term is little understood today. When the word is mentioned people express horror, or giggle and begin talking of black capes, bearded maniacs and bombs. This is true even in the developed, literate nations, although the non-violent practices and theories of anarchism have long been an important force in the labor movement of western Europe (Norway, France, Spain and Italy in particular), and more than 400 anarchist groups are currently active in North America alone. This condition of misunderstanding has been skillfully created by political figures and by the well-financed labors (and lies) of Establishment historians and ambitious journalists, but admittedly some of the confusion and misrepresentation has grown out of the lively diversity and constant changes in the anarchist movement itself since Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1808-1865) and Michael Bakunin (1814-1876) began to publish their theories for action and working-class consolidation in the 19th century.

Anarchism has experienced many developments, come forth in a variety of forms, and expressed a multitude of perceptions about the social and economic human. Included in this history are: the European and Latin American class-struggle doctrines of anarchist collectivism and anarchist communism; the "individualist" anarchism of Benjamin Tucker; the federated anarcho-syndicalist laborers of the Industrial Workers of the World (still alive and growing in Chicago and elsewhere despite obituaries stating the contrary); the peasant communards of the Ukraine in the Russian Revolution; the artisan and small-scale farmer anarchs of Western Europe; the anarcho-pacifists and anarcho-communitarians of Britain and North America; the zany, colorful street practitioners of the 1960s (calling themselves Provos, Diggers, and Situationists); those who have offered a refurbished doctrine of ethics and styled themselves "social anarchists"; the hippie, heal-the-earth anarchists of the Rainbow Tribal family; the new Autonomists of the European labor movement; and the Krakers and "enrages" of Amsterdam and Zurich (who have chosen to take charge of their own lives — and a lot of real estate — in very special ways).

Despite this diversity anarchists traditionally have grown out of only three modes of belief and have usually been in agreement on a set of rock-bottom principles. Historically all anarchists can be placed broadly within Individualism, Mutual Aid practices, or Collectivism (almost forming a Right, Center and Left Wing for this system of beliefs). The "organized" anarchist activists in political life today tend to be largely of the Left and may be further divided between revolutionary anarchists (devoted to direct action and class-struggle politics) and evolutionary anarchists (most usually stressing the value of alternative lifestyles, non-violent philosophy and communalism). Of course, since these movements are made up of mere humans and must often shift practice as conditions alter, these categories must be seen only as generalizations of limited worth.

The principles, however, that anarchists embrace never truly change, for anarchism is not at all an ideology in the familiar sense (no party line, no sacred texts) but rather a sequence of natural responses growing out of a profound ethic. The principles



"If you don't get it from yourself, where will you go for it?"
— Zen proverb

on which anarchists agree are based on the conviction that the individual human is capable of freedom and possesses the personal skills which permit her/him to allow others to achieve freedom also. The keys to anarchist practice may be found in an extraordinary faith in egalitarianism, the small-scale organization, mutual aid to one's fellow humans, and the open possibilities for cooperation on all levels of society.

All anarchists would agree that the evils of the world take place when a human, societal or ecological imbalance or waste is permitted. To an anarchist all unnaturalness is evil and the only sin is waste; thus the principles which must permeate all anarchist thought and practice will include a belief in the primary value of the individual human and the absolute sacredness of human life, a conviction that central control, hierarchy and the dominance of one person over another (or one section of society or gender or race over another) can only add to our woes, and a belief that coercion in any form — whether by the State "for the good of the whole" or by capitalism in the name of profit over people — is totally unacceptable. Reduced to a few words, all anarchists believe in individual freedom, economic equality, and the utter worthlessness and evil of the sovereign state. If you agree with these principles you may well be an anarchist; if you disagree that these principles are essential for the social good (but have faith instead in elites, leaders, the value of class divisions, or the worth of top-downward institutions or decision-making) then you are possessed by a non-anarchist mode of perceiving, response and judgment.

Anarchism is idealism, but a highly practical form of idealism, bringing one's desires into reality through the pragmatism natural to all humans living unalienated within a healthy society. It is open, organic, flexible and ready for inevitable change, thus demonstrating its pronounced differences with both Marxist and bourgeois capitalist ideologies. Anarchists see the individual as a complete human fully capable of self-management and possessing an infinite potential for achieving personal happiness, fulfillment and social harmony. Capitalism offers a partial vision of the person as "Private/Economic Man," one willing to trade away "community" and much of his/her private life and public value for wage payments. The Marxist view of "Social/Economic Man," tied to a theory of fixed historical process, attempts to create "economic community" while asking that we trade away personal freedom for the individual and large segments of society outside the party elite. Capitalism offers justice as an abstract at the price of community. Marxism offers the abstract of community at the price of justice. Unfortunately freedom minus a community of equals makes the poor and weak less free than the rich and strong; equality without freedom makes us all slaves together. Anarchism, in its continuously expandable vision, offers an opportunity for both community and justice at the very base of society itself. For ourselves and all others we demand total freedom and total equality, and we offer the tools for achieving this.

Anarchy — that ideal condition desired by anarchists — seeks its process and means in all people. The methods for bringing it forward into our lives can be found in: (1.) the individual's commitment to an autonomous life for self and all others; and (2.) an organizational form which permits and sponsors the principles listed above and encourages the initiatives of working persons and community members to build on unitary consciousness. Anarchists have never been against organization but have instead favored such horizontal forms as free communes, cooperatives or worker councils, where collective consciousness and direct implementation of decisions may be achieved.

Almost all left anarchism practiced in the world today — whether of a class-war, work-place orientation or the communal alternative "lifestyle" variety — draws from a number of methods for action and/or organization. The individualism of Godwin and Tucker, the mutualism and federalism of Proudhon, the collectivism of Bakunin ("From each according to his ability, to each according to his work."), the communism of Kropotkin, Malatesta and Goldman ("From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."), and the syndicalism of Pelloutier, Pouget and the Spanish C.N.T. trade unionists — all have a part in the beautiful free-form mix that is the militant contemporary movement.

This may be confusing to non-anarchists, but each of these major areas of practice has been developed to meet needs in the real world, and as time passes the differences between them appear to be less important and can be best seen simply as differences of emphasis. As the British anarchist Nicolas Walter has written (in his excellent pamphlet *About Anarchism*, Freedom Press, London): ". . . in our private lives we are individualists, doing our own things and choosing our companions and friends for personal reasons; in our social lives we are mutualists, making free agreements with each other; in our working lives we would mostly be collectivists, joining our colleagues in producing for the common good — and in the management of work we would mostly be syndicalists, joining our colleagues in deciding how the job should be done; in our political lives we would mostly be communists, joining our neighbors in deciding how the community should be run. This is of course a simplification, but it expresses a general truth about the way anarchists think nowadays."

The newly revitalized anarchist movement of North and South America, Europe, Asia and Australia is coming forth to confront a great historical crisis. We have at last become aware of the cataclysmic waste and disharmony which are the facts of our daily lives, conditions which are rapidly pressing us toward the destruction of the human race and of all life support systems on this planet. These conditions have come to exist in part because of our own inattention and confusion, our greed and lack of knowledge; and also in part because of the structure we use for making decisions, the monopoly of resources we have allowed to take place, and the subtle controls over our lives which our true enemies — the State, its corporate commanders, and their institutional handmaidens — have been permitted to extend. The working people and providers of this planet have come to realize that only through revolutionary change in every aspect of our existence can we alter our economic, political, social, ecological and spiritual practices and halt this destruction, thus bringing the world back into natural balance, peace and shared prosperity.

What truly separates the bourgeois and most Marxists from anarchists is the secret perception in the minds and hearts of the latter that freedom already exists within. Only persons who have experienced the naturalness and wholesome quality of freedom within themselves can see the preciseness and essential correctness of allowing freedom (and its companion virtues of generosity, compassion, equanimity and magnanimity) to develop and find fulfillment.

To grasp the precise defining element in the non-ideology of anarchism we must look to the character of each individual "avowed" anarchist. For the workability of anarchist society or a left libertarian social revolution must always rest with: (1.) the self-knowledge and commitment of each person, (2.) the "social-knowledge" and open cooperation of the affinity group composed of individual anarchists, (3.) the representatives structure of group federations, and (4.) a special recognition of the social and ecological interdependency we all share. The success of anarchism will depend on how well these stages of process are developed — and finally on the raw human qualities that each of us, only within ourselves, can bring to fruition.

— MINGO