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MATTHEW WILSON

RULES WITHOUT RULERS

**THE POSSIBILITIES AND
LIMITS OF ANARCHISM**

Rules Without Rulers

The Possibilities and Limits of Anarchism

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This book would not exist if it were not for the love and support of my family, and it is dedicated to them for good reason... for Mum, Dad, Paul, Holly, Ernest and Aurora.

Preface.

Although there are many forms of social organisation that exist throughout the world, there is one which everyone, and everything, is undoubtedly affected by. This system, which is often referred to as liberal democracy, but is perhaps more accurately termed polyarchy or capitalism, can be defined in numerous ways. For now, let us say just two things about it: first, it isn't working; second, it is nonetheless flourishing. We are immersed in this system and immersed in the multiple crises that flow from it; these crises are economic, political, social, and environmental. We might also add cultural and moral to the list. Individual humans and non-humans alike, suffer in their billions, and the planet itself is increasingly under strain. Actually, the planet will do just fine; but the things that currently live on it might not fare too well, as resources as basic as clean air and fresh water dwindle, and air pollution and waste increase. We know all this. Yet here we are, seemingly incapable of making the necessary changes. In part, this is because we cannot agree on which changes are in fact necessary; can we stop at light-bulbs, or do we need to change capitalism too? And what about the state? What about *us*?

Despite the plurality of visions for another world, there is an increasingly visible trend towards relocalising. Whether they are involved in the Green party, Transition Towns, Earth First!, or countless other more or less radical campaigns, a rapidly growing number of people are coming to believe that the hierarchical and centralised systems we currently live under have had their day, and that, conversely, from food production to politics, it is high time we started to take genuine control over our daily lives. If we didn't already call the system we have *democratic*, it might be a little easier to capture the spirit of this trend; we might then say we are quite simply witnessing a movement towards democracy. But we are told we already have democracy. So what is this movement? Is it a move towards a *real* democracy? If so, what would that mean? Or are we working towards something else? Even if we could agree on where we wanted to get to, could we agree on how to get there?

As we ponder such questions, we look around us to see what is going so self-evidently and catastrophically wrong; but as we search for answers, where then do we turn our gaze? For some, the answer is in plain sight, waiting impatiently to be grasped; anarchism. What better way to deal with a corrupt political system than to somehow depose that system in its entirety? What better way to empower people to take control over their own lives than to build a new politics, a new world, from the bottom-up, with us, each of us, all of us, in control? That is, after all, what anarchism calls for. Yet despite its increasing popularity, and although many of its most basic principles chime with countless other political tendencies perhaps less radical, but equally impatient for change, anarchism is not what most of us turn to in search for answers. Without knowing it, many people now employ some of its ideas; they accept many of its critiques, echo some of its demands; yet we are far from witnessing the widespread and wholehearted acceptance of anarchism as a viable alternative. Why not?

Although there are many ways to answer such a question, the following work is ultimately an attempt to address just one reason why anarchism remains a distant dream. That reason is Anarchism. We can blame the corporate media, blame the police, the state, the schools and the history books, none of which do anarchism any real favours; but if anarchism is ever

grow, to inspire, to challenge, it is anarchism itself which needs to be rethought and rearticulated. Although there is much to be said for plenty of anarchist theory and practice on the whole it is a political movement, a political idea, which is struggling to present itself as a viable alternative. Of perhaps more concern still is how few anarchists appear bothered by this. For too long now, anarchists have avoided asking themselves whether the overwhelming indifference (or worse) towards anarchism may not be at least in part due to the way anarchists themselves have defended their cause. It has been all too easy to blame the people that 'just don't get it'. Although I believe there are far too few critical voices from within the anarchist world, I am not entirely alone in challenging anarchism in this way.

Indeed, numerous critics over the years have made their own particular claims about anarchism's shortcomings, refusing to accept key anarchist views as unquestioned orthodoxy. There is of course no clear cut line between these more critical thinkers and others who have tended to be less so, but I would certainly highlight the work of Gustav Landauer, Errico Malatesta and Michael Taylor. Colin Ward was another such critical friend of anarchism, and I share his concerns with the question of whether or not anarchism is 'respectable'. 'In asking this question', notes Ward, 'I am not concerned about the way we dress, or whether our private lives conform to a statistical norm, or how we earn our living, but with the quality of our anarchist ideas: are our ideas worthy of respect?' (quoted in White 2007, 11). Though I say this with a deep sense of personal regret, not to mention an uneasy feeling of betraying those who have fought and died for anarchism, as well as countless friends involved in anarchist struggles, the answer to Colin Ward's question must, at present, be a resounding *no*.

Anarchism, it has been said, lies like a seed, buried beneath the weight of the state. True enough. But who will tend to it, help it flourish and grow, when what it offers is so vague, so simplistic, so one-sided? People are impatient for change, and even many of those involved in far less radical politics could be easily convinced that more, much more, needs to be done. But to take the leap that anarchism requires, to demand and fight for such a profound change to run the risk of dismantling capitalism and the state only to find ourselves in an even worse situation, to ask people to do this will require an anarchism that is ready and able to answer the challenging questions that people will quite reasonably ask of it. It is clear that it matters little what horrors our system throws at us, as long as we are left without an alternative. At present, anarchism is not giving people the confidence to believe it can offer that. Fortunately, there is no reason why it cannot do this. At least, no good reason. Through the usual trappings of ideology, not to mention the subtle but powerful blocks to criticism that arise through personal relationships (after all, to criticise a movement is to in some way criticise our friends within it), political cultures have a highly developed immune system. Sadly, they keep themselves immune, not from external threats, but from internal critique. Anarchists see this clearly when it comes to capitalism, or communism; when it comes to themselves, the blinkers are there to protect them just the same. It is time we took the blinkers off, stopped, or at least paused, from our critique of the world out there, and looked inwards. People will be convinced by our arguments only when our arguments are convincing.

If my own arguments here are convincing, it is no small part thanks to the help of a great many people who have helped shape my thoughts over the years, who commented on various drafts of this work, and who otherwise supported and encouraged me along the way; naming

you all would take too much space, and run the risk of accidentally missing some one out, but you know who you are. So, thank you. That said, Ruth Kinna deserves to be mentioned for sharing her wisdom and good humour, and for sticking with me throughout the writing of this book. Thanks Ruth.

We do not wish to be ruled. And by this very fact, do we not declare that we ourselves wish to rule nobody? (Kropotkin 1970, 98)

Introduction.

In the summer of 2012, I attended a gathering of activists interested in radical social change. The event lasted five days and offered an impressive range of workshops, one of which was to look at the Occupy movement's attempts to organise itself democratically. The workshop started with brief reflections from four speakers (one of whom was myself) before opening up the discussion to everyone there. At some point, the conversation became suddenly heated, as one participant reacted angrily to the news that, in the London Occupy building, a number of social workers, psychiatrists and counsellors had been working with people with serious mental health issues. Occupy, she said, was supposed to be a space where everyone felt welcome. No one, she insisted repeatedly, was to be excluded. As such, she was outraged that there would be people such as social workers there. The gaping contradiction in the women's message seemed to mostly go unnoticed. How could it be a space for *everyone*, a space where, categorically, *no one was to be excluded*, if people who happened to work in a particular profession were not allowed to be there?

A few years earlier, and we're in

Stirling, Scotland - 6th July 2005: 2 a.m. [...] From the Horizons eco-village and protest camp [...] a mass exodus is in progress [...] On the A9 hundreds of people are obstructing the road along a few miles [...] throwing the entire region into a gridlock [...] turning Perthshire into one big traffic jam. In it, hundreds of secretaries, translators, businessmen and spin doctors are beginning one very long morning [...] In case some one hasn't noticed anarchism is alive and kicking (Gordon 2008, 1-2).

I'm sure lots of people did indeed notice the anarchist presence in Scotland: one man certainly did. My journey to the G8 summit began two weeks earlier when I left for Scotland from London, on a bike, with sixty other cyclists. The G8 Bikeride travelled up through the country, without motorised support, to join in the protests. Although the ride was never explicitly anarchist, it was organised along anarchist principles, and certainly most of the people who took part would have identified with, for example, the principles of anarchism outlined in Uri Gordon's book from which the above quote is taken. Sometime in the afternoon of the 6th, the ride arrived at a small village called Auchterarder, where large numbers of diverse groups were meeting, with the intention of marching to Gleneagles where the summit was being held. When we arrived, the main road running through the village and an adjoining park were filled with protesters. As we were about to head off for another ride, to see what was happening nearby, a large man with an unhappy expression stood right in front of me and my bike, preventing me from moving. I didn't know why he was doing what he was doing, but it was clearly intentional. I assumed, given the circumstances, he was a plain-clothes police officer. 'Excuse me' I said. Then, suddenly, 'Bloody anarchists' he yelled, 'we've been sat in traffic jams all morning thanks to you lot. I thought you believed in freedom! What about *my* freedom?' I had been, momentarily, the victim of a one-man blockade. I don't know why he singled me out, and it doesn't really matter; the fact is, he had a point. A few bystanders joined in, supporting the man, and by the

end of the day, the feeling of animosity towards (simply) 'anarchists' was plain to see. By blocking roads, not only world leaders, but also a great many protesters had been disrupted by a relatively small number of anarchists. Their tactics had, undeniably, prevented people exercising their *freedom* to protest. Yet freedom, as my one-man blockader correctly suggested, is usually understood as being a fundamental principle of anarchism: so how was the denial of this man's freedom justified?

And some years before that, 18 June 1999, London is the site of an anti-capitalist day of action, and groups of tens, hundreds, sometimes thousands of people are wandering the city doing their best to evade the police and searching for targets to attack (mostly symbolically, at times physically, but never violently). On the Waterloo Bridge, a thousand or more people find themselves blocked from the north by a line of police, two officers deep. As people are still trying to work out what to do, the sound of horns and shouting sweeps over the bridge from behind the police line, and suddenly another thousand of more people are marching towards the bridge, heading south. The police stand their ground, and so within minutes they are no longer blocking protestors, but being sandwiched between them. Of course, no anti-capitalist action is complete without a large inflatable beach ball, and so when one appeared the line of police became a net in-between the two blocks of protestors, and a joyous game of volleyball was soon in full swing. Some of the officers took their new role in life with good humour. Many were visibly seething. A few look scared. None of them, it seemed clear, wanted to be there, but their repeated attempts to cut through the crowd were futile. The crowd was mostly good natured, but they were clearly enjoying the fact that the tables had fully turned, and that the police were now being kettled.

Over the last fifteen years or so, the alternative political landscape has shifted dramatically towards a more libertarian, or horizontal, place. At the heart of this shift lies the philosophy of anarchism, a form of politics which takes the notions of freedom and democracy to their radical extreme. Although these new movements and the people who form them are not always explicitly anarchists, they increasingly follow a great many ideas and tactics which stem from the anarchist tradition; as I will explain in greater detail below, it therefore makes sense when trying to understand these movements to explore the anarchist tradition. The anarchist tradition, however, is a diverse and often internally contradictory one, and it is no easy task to tease out the fundamental principles which define it. Nonetheless, I believe we can say here (and I will also defend this position in more depth shortly) that anarchism, or we might more correctly say *anarchists*, often posit notions of freedom that are absolute in nature. To talk of anarchist coercion, anarchist domination, even anarchist control, is, in many, oxymoronic. So the examples cited above (and I could have mentioned countless more) ought to give the critical mind cause for concern. How genuine is the demand for absolute freedom? What does such a demand even mean? Isn't it the case that, at times, anarchists are ready and willing to negate certain freedoms, to employ censorial or even coercive tactics to fight for what they believe? In part, the following work is an attempt to answer the question posed to me by my temporary blockader; what about *my* freedom? It does so, however, in the form of a wider enquiry into the fundamental principles of anarchism. I begin by asking, then, what conception(s) of freedom do anarchists have? Are there other principles at times over-rule the value of liberty, therefore justifying, for example, the denial of my blockader's freedom? If so, what are these principles? So I turn to the

question of ethics, to examine which other values might sit alongside, and inform, anarchist visions of freedom. Anarchist approaches to ethics, however, must be understood in relation to another core concept; that of power. Is power understood as necessarily bad, or can it be positive, creative force? And does it reside simply in certain institutions, such as the state, or within all areas of life? These three concepts then, freedom, ethics, and power, form the basis of the following enquiry. However, exploring these themes has not been a matter of simply detailing what anarchists say they think about such matters; rather, it has been a *critical* engagement, exposing numerous problems and unspoken assumptions within what I call an *anarchist common sense*. Indeed, whilst the concepts of freedom, ethics, and power form the narrative structure of the following work, my discussions of them are propelled by the overarching claim that anarchism is a deeply problematic ideology, which, if it is to be capable of offering a viable vision of an alternative world, is in very real need of a sustained and critical re-assessment.

This view, however, might be dismissed at the out-set, as being simply untrue. Anarchism, it might be argued, is enjoying a considerable surge in interest that has not been seen for well over fifty years; social justice and environmental activists are increasingly embracing anarchist ideas, most notably at the time of writing within the global Occupy movement; and anarchism is receiving attention from academics across the globe. Of course anarchism faces certain challenges, but what ideology doesn't? Surely the high levels of interest generated in recent years suggests that anarchism is in fine health, and any barriers to it becoming more popular still are not the result of anarchism's own failing, but are purely external, emanating from the state, the corporate media, and so on. Anarchism is not considered respectable by the very elites it seeks to get rid of, but that is clearly to be expected; and it evidently *does* meet with the approval of a wide spectrum of people committed to some form of social change. However, I would challenge this view. As both an activist and an academic, I remain unconvinced that anarchism is in a position of strength. Although there has indeed been a great deal of enthusiasm for anarchist ideas within various protest movements, much of this translates into extremely limited tactical shifts. Protests are organised along non-hierarchical lines, more direct action takes the place of marching from *a* to *b*, and so on; this is all well and good, but I believe the legitimate celebration of these achievements now needs to give way to an assessment of how, and in what ways, anarchism can be taken still further. Although anarchism may well be at the heart of much radical political protest, it remains very much marginalised as an alternative political model. In fact, I believe that if sufficient changes do not take place within the movement, it is likely to slide once more into insignificance, to possibly be replaced with a return to a more hierarchical form of leftist politics. Before continuing the discussion of the work itself, then, I want to say a few words on the recent interest in anarchism; in doing so, I hope it will become clear that, for all that has been achieved in its name over the past decade or so, anarchism is still far from being a threat to the established order.

In the Margins, or on the Front-Line?

Despite the myriad human catastrophes endured under 'actually existing socialism', for much of the latter half of the twentieth century, Marxism was still considered, at least in the

academic world, as the only viable contender to capitalism; anarchism simply did not appear in the minds, or works, of respectable, leftist academics. At the beginning of the twenty-first century however, this situation has changed dramatically, and anarchism is now reverberating not only through a thoroughly global social movement, but also, increasingly through the corridors of academic institutions as well. Anarchism has not been so visible for decades. And yet, here in the UK, when discussions about the prospect of a hung parliament and the apparent crisis of democracy dominated the media after the general election in May 2010, not once did I see an anarchist perspective being given column space or air-time. This is just one example, but the point is this: anarchism, for all it has achieved in recent years, remains utterly at odds with most people's understanding of politics; perhaps more importantly, it remains at odds with their understanding of possibility. Anarchism is simply not seen as being a realistic political philosophy by the vast majority of people. And I am wholly unconcerned here with the *Daily Mail* reading public; what about the people involved in Transition Towns or the Green Party, and even the countless people who have dabbled with radical politics at Climate Camps² or G8 summits, for example, but who tend to fall back on more conventional forms of social change sooner or later? For example, there has been a big debate within the Climate Camp movement, which began as an explicitly anarchist network, about the extent to which more conventional political routes should be taken to tackle the issue of climate change, with many arguing that anarchism simply does not have the capacity to respond to such an urgent and global problem³.

With capitalism teetering on the brink of collapse for several years, a recession as bad as anyone can remember, the global threat of climate change, a looming energy crisis, and, in the UK (and elsewhere), a political system that even mainstream commentators are suggesting is unfit for purpose, with calls for greater democratic accountability on all levels, it has become increasingly possible to imagine that a radically different politics such as anarchism would be embraced by more and more people. Clearly, this hasn't happened, and to find out why, I would suggest anarchists need to take a more critical look at their own ideology, to honestly assess its problems. This might seem like an all too obvious point to make, but woven throughout my critique is an additional claim that anarchists have tended to be far too *uncritical* of their own ideology; I discuss some significant reasons as to why this is the case in [Chapter 1](#).

Which Anarchism?

I have so far made a number of broad statements about anarchism, which raises the question of which anarchism, or anarchists, am I talking about? As every anarchist will happily tell you, the anarchist spectrum is a broad one, encompassing many diverse and at times mutually incompatible views of what anarchism is. Anarchism has always been a broad church, with different thinkers in different times and places emphasising certain aspects over others, and over time, coming to reject particular elements altogether. Can we coherently discuss anarcho-syndicalists of the 1930s in the same breath as anarcho-feminists of the 1980s, for example? As the now infamous dispute between Murray Bookchin (1995) and Bob Black (1997) so clearly demonstrated, a shared ideological *label* does not necessarily entail much else (I discuss this debate briefly in [Chapter 6](#); see also Martin 1998, 39-44 for a useful

discussion on the Bookchin and Black debate). Making claims about simply *anarchism*, or *anarchists*, then, with no qualification about which anarchism or anarchists one is discussing is to obscure these important differences and treat all anarchists as following one coherent and well-defined ideological position; for better or for worse, this is rarely the case. As Leonard Williams puts it: ‘sometimes it seems that the only thing that is constant about anarchism is its inconstancy’ (Williams 2007, 299).

However, I believe it is both possible and useful to discuss anarchism as a whole. Although at times it is useful to explore a narrowly defined aspect of an ideology (a particular era, a thinker, or theory) it is also useful to stand back and take a broader view. Doing so allows us to see through the many important differences, to uncover some shared problems. This is not to say these differences are ignored, but rather suggests that at times an over-emphasis on diversity may in fact mask and muddle some more fundamental challenges faced by the majority of anarchist thought. It can therefore be worthwhile to put these differences to one side at times, to get down to the nuts and bolts, to discover what I call here *an anarchist common sense*, which, as we shall see, is often far less diverse and unchanging than is often claimed.

Defining the Anarchist Common Sense.

The anthropologist and anarchist David Graeber notes that:

Anarchism is less about a body of theory than about an attitude, or perhaps a faith: a rejection of certain types of social relation, a confidence that certain others are a much better ones [sic] on which to build a decent or human society, a faith that it would be possible to do so (Graeber 2007, 303).

Whilst academic philosophers may wish to, and be able to, dissect a particular line of thought and demonstrate to what extent it rests on this or that metaphysical understanding of, for example, knowledge, or of human nature, the majority of anarchist thought has not been constructed on such methodical grounds. Indeed, an increasingly common complaint from within anarchism, and an ever present complaint from its detractors, has been this lack of philosophical rigour (McLaughlin 2007). It may be argued, however, that whether or not people are aware of the foundations they rest their philosophy on is beside the point; the foundations are there, and are of no small importance (see Jun, 2010 for an informative discussion of anarchism’s philosophical underpinnings). This is no doubt true on one level, but it is worth considering to what extent anarchists’ philosophical (or scientific) beliefs come *after* their more basic ethical and political leanings, justifying them retrospectively, rather than being their source. Malatesta makes the point well with regards to Kropotkin, who ‘[...] anarchism and communism’, he argued, ‘were much more the consequence of his sensibility than of reason. In him the heart spoke first and then reason followed to justify and reinforce the impulses of the heart’ (Malatesta 1965, 264). Much the same could be said, I would argue, for most anarchists. This is especially relevant when we look to contemporary *activists*, many of whom ‘[...] overtly disdain abstract or academic theory’ (Williams 2007, 298).

So what can be said about this anarchist common sense? Generalisations may at times be useful, but important differences cannot simply be ignored. Firstly, I want to explore the distinction between contemporary and classical anarchism; in doing so, we will see that a number of fundamental anarchist assumptions about freedom, ethics and power, have, in important respects, remained more or less the same over the last century and a half. Sam Newman argues that whilst poststructuralism has

had a major impact on different areas of scholarship and thought, as well as political anarchism tends to have remained largely resistant to these developments and continues to work within an Enlightenment humanist epistemological framework (Newman 2008, 101)

Although there are a few small grains of truth in the claim that certain anarchists have followed a largely Enlightenment inspired philosophical framework, the picture Newman paints is best understood as being mostly false, for two good reasons. Firstly, as we shall see throughout the thesis, early anarchist theorists often demonstrated what could well be seen as a poststructural bent, decades before Foucault and other poststructuralists were even born (see Jun 2012 for a powerful defence of this). Secondly, poststructural thought has had considerable influence on anarchist theory for many years now, a point which has been widely acknowledged (Purkis & Bowen 1997, 2004; Amster et al 2009; Curran 2006). Indeed in the last decade, anarchism, it has been argued, has experienced an internal rupture, and supposedly 'new' anarchism (Graeber 2002), 'revised' (Williams 2007) and 'reloaded' (Gordon 2008) with discourses from feminist, poststructural and post-colonial thought, to name a few, has been born. And it had already been 'reinvented' (Ehrlich et. al. 1979) and 'reinvented, again' (Ehrlich 1996) before that. The distinction between 'capital A Anarchists' and 'small a anarchists' (with 'capital A Anarchists' representing an older, more ideological and strict form of primarily class focused anarchism, and 'small a anarchists' representing a contemporary, ideologically fluid variety, much more in line with poststructuralist theories) presents still further evidence of this philosophical shift (Neal 1997; Graeber 2004; Kuhl 2009, 19). As Leonard Williams suggests:

In recent decades [...] anarchist thought has moved beyond its central focus on the State and capital to embrace wide-ranging thinking about such matters as the environment, technology, work, and the status of women (Williams 2007, 300).

However, despite such shifts, he goes on to highlight the fact that 'anarchism seems to retain its central character as a viewpoint opposed to the presence of coercion, hierarchy, and authority in human affairs' (ibid.). Importantly, this continuity is not necessarily the result of conscious reflection, and Williams goes on to note that '[o]ne element that remains unquestioned is anarchism's bedrock commitment to opposing authoritarianism in almost any form' (ibid., 311). In other words, despite the many changes that anarchism has undergone, some of its core principles and concerns remain, not only *unchanged*, but also *unquestioned*. The various claims that anarchism has changed so radically in the last half century tell, therefore, only half the story.

I believe that anarchism is best understood as a set of basic moral demands, which, through a complex network of crisscrossing narratives, are often articulated within certain discursive

parameters, including, but not limited to, particular conceptions of human nature, rationality, power, and so on. Rather than resting on these foundations, however, the anarchist project is effectively free-floating, with the primary aim being the achievement of a certain moral rupture from the status quo. This is not to suggest that anything an anarchist might say is mere opportunism, but to highlight the possibility that what really lies at the core of anarchism is not a view of human nature, or of the state, or whatever, but rather a basic libertarian impulse that, when articulated, necessarily becomes intertwined with various other political, ethical, sociological, scientific, and cultural ideas; and, perhaps above all, with often highly contextualised tactical beliefs. Like all ideologies, anarchism is best understood as incorporating a core set of values that exist in a fluctuating relationship with a large collection of peripheral ideas (Freedon 1996), some of which may be used to retrospectively justify these values.

What unites the vast majority of anarchist thought, old and new, is ultimately a failure to really engage with these issues. Freedom, ethics, power; when we begin to explore these questions, there is no clear, absolute humanist, or anti-humanist, foundation to which we can point. Of course, it is true that some of the earlier anarchists at times applied a profound rationalist, scientific approach to their work; my aim is not to deny this, but to stress that there is at least another narrative that can be equally informative. Indeed, throughout anarchist thought there is in fact a strong emphasis on praxis, on anarchy in action, which, however much this may rely implicitly on some metaphysical view or another, is rarely concerned with uncovering what these views might be. As Williams states

Whether in the form of street demonstrations or an urban bookstore, many of today's anarchists are more focused on getting things done and much less concerned with developing a political philosophy or taking sides in polemical disputes (Williams 2003: 309).

Making a similar point, David Graeber suggests that anarchists are not interested in creating their own High Theory; rather, they see themselves as 'giving a name and voice to a certain kind of insurgent common sense' (Graeber 2009, 213). My feeling is that this *common sense* has not changed dramatically in the last two centuries; it has been added to, stretched, pulled and tugged, and so has inevitably incorporated new concerns, and no doubt abandoned a few along the way: but its most fundamental elements remain. Crucially, many of those fundamental elements are being incorporated into the theories of the wider radical left; the anarchist common sense and the ideas and tactics it promotes is slowly becoming the common sense of the radical left in general. If anarchism is in fine health, then we can have hope that the movements it inspires will go from strength to strength. If, however, anarchism is haunted by problems, many of which are yet to be fully acknowledged, let alone dealt with, then the future looks considerably less bright. In the following work, I want to get to the heart of the anarchist common sense, revealing and it for what it is, and challenging what is revealed, to see what remains; to uncover the possibilities, and the limits, of anarchism.

Chapter 1

The Case for Anarchy: Unhelpful Assumptions & Unchallenged Ideas.

Is this book really necessary? Surely the questions I have so far posed have been asked and answered many times already? Not surprisingly, I think the questions in this book remain in need of answers (and I also think the reasons why such a discussion is necessary are interesting and revealing, and therefore worthy of a chapter of their own). I would argue, in fact, that the majority of anarchist texts, and indeed the majority of anarchists themselves, appear strangely unconcerned with asking whether anarchism really is viable. Indeed, it is not unusual to see the question simply turned on its head. As Randall Amster puts it:

the question is often posed: How can a society achieve the production, distribution and maintenance of public goods absent a central authority? [...] The problem with such queries is that they are inverted; the real question is how a society premised on coercion and central authority can ever produce, distribute and maintain free individuals (Amster 2009, 296).

However, anarchism is plagued by the charge that it is simply not viable: while other ideologies may be critiqued for their moral failings, anarchism may well find itself applauded for what it argues *for*, but dismissed on the grounds that it is simply impractical (Leach 1997, 186); consider, for example, how the state in liberal theory is frequently referred to as *necessary evil*, which, we might reasonably infer, suggests that anarchism is seen by at least some liberals as ultimately desirable, but practically unobtainable – or obtainable at too high a cost (Bobbio 2005, 83). We might imagine, therefore, that anarchists would have devoted a great deal of their time to demonstrating that in fact anarchism is perfectly possible; and, in some ways, they have indeed done so. However, a great deal of this argumentation has taken the form of referring to existing examples of anarchism, rather than defending anarchism theoretically. On the surface, this makes perfect sense: if asked for evidence that a design for a four wheeled carriage could move along the floor powered by a diesel engine, we would save ourselves a great deal of bother by simply pointing to a car. Why waste time embroiling ourselves in theory when the requested proof lies all around us? As Colin Ward famously put it: ‘An anarchist society, a society which organises itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state’ (Ward 1977, 11). The view that anarchism already exists, and has indeed always existed, is extremely important to the anarchist, and has helped shape anarchist thought in a very particular way. However much people may bemoan the lack of philosophical justifications and explanations for anarchist ideas, such critiques are likely to fall on deaf ears: go ahead and make your theoretical critiques, anarchists will respond, anarchism already exists all around us; we do not need to explain or define or defend it, we just need to look for it. Viewed this way, anarchism is not so much a theory at all, but a practice which people have been engaged in throughout our history, and which, in increasingly rare circumstances, people still engage in.

As we shall see, this view has been fundamental in shaping the continuing focus of anarchist thought, but it has done so as much by influencing what is *not* said, as what is.

Indeed, as fundamental as it is, the concept of anarchy in action, to use Ward's term, is highly problematic, for a number of reasons. Yet before we explore why, it is worth first taking a look at some examples of these existing anarchies, to get a better sense of what it is that anarchists believe we are to look for. In later Chapters, we shall return to these visions to address more specific questions, and to see how, when the issues of freedom, ethics and power are more critically explored, these examples become much more complex and problematic. In this Chapter, however, a general overview should help establish a useful starting point. We can split these examples of anarchy in action into two main parts: anarchy that exists within non-anarchic systems, that we might call *pockets of anarchy*, and which are to be found in our daily lives, and in deliberately created autonomous spaces; and anarchy that exists in a more absolute sense, as wholesale anarchist societies, such as primitive societies, and the brief but important period of anarchism in Spain.

Pockets of Anarchy.

Colin Ward, one of the most influential and, in my opinion, engaging and honest anarchist writers (or propagandists, as Ward saw himself) wrote a great deal about what he often referred to as *anarchy in action*; experiments in non-hierarchical living that, unlike those of the Spanish anarchists or primitive people, exist *within* the wider environment of the state. They are the famous 'seeds beneath the snow', the pockets of anarchy that may one day grow, along with many others, into fully fledged free societies (Ward 2008), although, as we shall see, Ward questioned the extent to which anarchism could ever be the sole, or even primary form of social life (Ward 1973, 135-136).

The idea that evidence of anarchist practices exist all around us is a common one, and goes back to at least the work of Kropotkin, who advanced various arguments to demonstrate the persistent nature of mutual aid, despite the overbearing presence of the state. In *The Conquest of Bread*, Kropotkin points to numerous examples of what he considers to be evidence for his anarchist philosophy (Kropotkin 1985, 129-142). He cites the European rail and postal networks, the British Lifeboat Institution, and a guild that oversees barge movements on the Dutch canal system to 'prove that men, as soon as their interests do not absolutely clash, act in concert, harmoniously, and perform collective work of a very complex nature' (Kropotkin 1985, 130)⁴. For Kropotkin, such 'spontaneous associations', as he somewhat misleadingly calls them, provide such a convincing argument for anarchism that he confidently and rhetorically puts the onus on defenders of the state to explain how this anarchy could possibly work:

And the most interesting thing in this organisation is, that there is no European Central Government of Railways! Nothing! [...] Everything is done by contract. So we ask the believers in the State [...] 'how do European railways manage without them?' (Kropotkin 1985, 131-2).

Kropotkin sees in these examples the existence of the anarchist principles of mutual aid and

self-government, although he does not suggest the people behind such examples are consciously anarchists. In recent years, the global justice movement, much of which is consciously anarchist, has made similar claims to have demonstrated the viability of the same libertarian principles.

The Global Justice Movement.

The postanarchist Saul Newman argues that:

one of the ways of demonstrating the capacity of non-state political alternatives is the development of autonomous communities, collectives and organisations that exist beyond the control of the state. The countless experiments in autonomous politics taking place everywhere – squatters' movements, social centres, indigenous collectives, land re-occupation movements, blockades, workers' occupations, alternative media centres, communes, numerous activist networks and so on – are evidence of this possibility (Newman 2010, 116).

Such arguments are commonplace (Morland 2004, 34-7; Heckert 2010, 190-1; de Angelis 2001, 115) and anarchy in action is in fact one of the defining features of contemporary anarchist theory, or, as it is more commonly called, *praxis* (Gordon 2007). Indeed, even within much recent academic work there is often a conscious rejection of theory (or at least being overly theoretical); what matters is what people are actually doing, and what they are doing, we are told, is creating new forms of democracy. Marianne Maeckelbergh, for example, suggests that 'if one wants to know what the alterglobalisation movement is for one must look at what the alterglobalisation movement *does*' (Maeckelbergh 2009, 4). In doing so, she argues that

we find that what this movement is doing is radically changing the meaning of democracy and simultaneously constructing a democratic world based on principles of diversity and horizontality. [...] Taking an ethnographic approach [...] allows for an exploration of the actual decision-making practices already in place, which make visible the beginnings of an emerging democratic alternative (Maeckelbergh 2009, 4-5).

In other words, Maeckelbergh claims that by looking at the practices of the alterglobalisation movement, its forms of organising, its decision-making structures, its meetings, and so on, we get a glimpse of the 'other world' we hear so much about: we see, then, 'the beginnings of an alternative democratic praxis' (ibid.). Rather than engaging in stale rhetoric and abstract theory, they are *practising* anarchy – anarchy really is 'alive' (Gordon 2008). David Graeber makes a similar point when he argues that activists organise their actions, such as the protests in Seattle, 'according to directly democratic principles and thus provide a living example of how genuine egalitarian decision making might work' (Graeber 2008, 210). In fact, this is a standard position throughout the alterglobalisation movement, which argues not only that another world is possible, but that, thanks to the movement's prefigurative politics, actually at times lives out that other world, however momentarily.

Absolute Anarchy: Life in Primitive Societies.

Although such examples are rare glimpses of anarchy emerging out of the confines of the state, the state itself is ultimately something of a rarity when the long history of humankind is taken into account (Moseley 2007, 124); the majority of our species' existence has in fact been made up of stateless societies. The state is a relatively new phenomenon, and people certainly existed before the state did: furthermore, it is not only in the past, but also in a few rare places in the present, that people can and do live together in relative peace without state apparatus (Graeber 2007, Chps 5,6,7 & 8). Primitive⁵ societies have long been, and continue to be, used by anarchists to demonstrate the viability of a life without the state. Once again, Kropotkin, in his classic text *Mutual Aid* (1902/2008), drew significant conclusions from his (usually indirect) study of primitive life, and argued that, far from being a war of all against all, pre-state societies generally existed in relative peace. There was violence, there were disputes, and Kropotkin makes no attempt to hide this, but these conflicts were largely kept under control, and daily life was far from being a constant, chaotic battle for survival. Similar arguments are abundant. The Anarchist Teapot⁶ (n.d.), for example, in their *Introduction to Anarchy*, note that

99 per cent of human existence has been shaped by tribal society, real communities peacefully roaming around eating berries and having a good time without any conception of needing states or government. Their lives were nothing like the constant struggle against a hostile nature and other tribes we might imagine.

In fact, many of these 'anarchic cultures have flourished to modern times' but are increasingly coming under threat from the related machinery of 'the state', 'corporations', 'armies', and 'aid workers' (ibid.). It is the state that is the anomaly, not anarchism.

This position has been laid out most starkly by anarcho-primitivists such as John Zerzan (2005) and Derrick Jensen (2006), who believe not only that primitive life shows us that life without the state is possible, but that such forms of life are necessary if we are ever to escape social division and environmental destruction. Anarchists have also drawn on the works of theorists who are not necessarily anarchists but whose work strengthens the basic argument that life without the state is possible; in particular, Pierre Clastres' *Society Against the State* (1987) Marshall Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics* (1974), and James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009).

Anarchy in Spain.

Another source of both inspiration and an argument for the feasibility of anarchism is the Spanish Civil War, during which anarchists successfully ran not only large areas of rural Spain, but also, significantly, the industrialised city of Barcelona. Not surprisingly, 'the quintessential moment of anarchism' (Amster et al 2009, 3) features extensively in anarchist writing, and is of course held up as another, and at times, *a more relevant*, example of anarchism's viability. The anarchist period in Spain contains two important elements lacking from examples of primitive societies.

Firstly, those involved were self-consciously *anarchists*. It is often noted that primitive

people are at times aware that states exist: in other words, they are aware of other forms of social organisation, yet they consciously remain 'anarchic' (Maddock 1987, 62; Scott 2009). Nonetheless, whilst this is no doubt true, it seems there is an important difference between people explicitly putting into practice the culmination of several decades of anarchist thought and people who have no such agenda; who have been, in other words, anarchists from birth. Similarly, it is important that the Spanish anarchists were all *raised* within a very different culture, and were in the process of actively creating new forms of social organisation, as opposed to continuing to live out old ones. The anarchist period in Spain demonstrated that people could *become* anarchists, or that societies could become anarchic, regardless of any prior social norms or structures. None of this is intended as a value judgement – neither better or worse – but these differences are significant. The second difference is one of scale: whilst primitive clans or tribes unite and form alliances with each other in any number of ways, the standard unit of daily life is, by modern terms, tiny. The importance of political equality for anarchism, and the need for face-to-face meetings to ensure this equality is genuine, makes this issue of very real importance, and the scale of anarchism in Spain provides compelling evidence that much larger communities can be run in non-hierarchical ways.

These examples of anarchy in action provide anarchists with an important weapon with which to defend the idea of a stateless society. Whilst many people might believe that *anarchism is a nice idea in theory, but that it would never work in practice*, examples of anarchism in action allow anarchists to turn this on its head; anarchism might seem *theoretical* and implausible, but it *does work in practice*. But do such examples really demonstrate the validity of this claim? And, if they do, what *sort* of anarchy do they provide evidence for? In the following section, I want to critically assess these claims, concluding that whilst there is much to be learnt from these anarchic experiences, their value must be understood to be limited in important ways; in particular, anarchists must acknowledge that *context* is crucial when thinking about alternative social systems; a point which, interestingly, is well recognised, as we shall see, when the idea of blue-prints comes under scrutiny, but which is often overlooked when anarchy in action is being discussed. And, as we progress through the work, we will also begin to see that the question of what *forms* of social life these examples demonstrate is crucial; put simply, even *if* anarchism is possible, does a life without the state automatically translate into the sort of world anarchists today wish to see?

Anarchy in Action: A Critical Response.

I readily accept that there is much to be inspired by and to think about in these examples. But can we really learn from them that anarchism, in the twenty-first century, offers a viable alternative to the state? While they may be of tremendous use for anarchists in *thinking about* anarchism, I want to fundamentally challenge the idea that they somehow prove its viability. In fact, these examples raise a number of issues which, when considered honestly, cast an even greater shadow over anarchism's prospects. Although we will return to these examples throughout the work, I want to present a brief analysis of them here.

Pockets of Anarchy.

Kropotkin, as we saw, was so taken with the examples of mutual aid which he saw around, he confidently asked defenders of the state to explain how it was that the European rail network, for example, could exist without the aid of a national government. Sadly, the answer is a rather simple one: it doesn't. The European rail network, and all the other examples Kropotkin cites, are deeply embedded in numerous ways within the state. While they offer certain interesting and possibly inspiring insights into the ways humans can and do organise, insights that could well be used to advocate an expansion of democratic reforms in the work place, for example, they do not offer any real argument for such reforms on the societal level. It can reasonably be argued that train companies operate within the *safe space provided by the state*; their ability to act together for their mutual benefit is not evidence that the state is unnecessary, but rather evidence that each of the states these companies operate in are doing their job perfectly well, allowing individuals and companies to get on with their daily lives whilst simply ensuring that they are protected from the careless and corrupt precisely as liberals argue it should. Kropotkin himself says: 'Everything is done by contract but who enforces such contracts? That they *could* be enforced without the state is an argument that can well be made, but these examples do nothing to add to such a position because these contracts *are* in fact safeguarded by the state. What Kropotkin argues ultimately, is that different groupings of people can come together without an overarching authority *that subsumes them all*: but this does nothing to diminish the liberal argument that states are still ultimately necessary. All of Kropotkin's examples are found with states, and any or all of their positive attributes could reasonably be assumed to be there precisely because of the protection and organisation offered by those states. Again, it could be argued that this isn't the case, but there is no evidence for this; we have not witnessed anarchy in action; at most we have glimpsed its possibilities.

Furthermore, we must take into account the fact that the power of the state does not simply exist in the form of a looming policeman: people learn to police themselves to a great extent, even when the prospects of being caught and punished are extremely low. Interestingly, David Graeber misses this point when he suggests that the fact of activists refraining from physically overpowering a truck driver about to dump toxic waste 'is remarkable testimony to most activists' dedication to non-violence' (Graeber 2009, 203), but then fully acknowledges it when discussing, not the activists' motives, but those of the truck driver, who is, in similarly refraining from violence, 'likely to be thinking about the possibility of being brought up on charges of negligent homicide' (ibid. 208). Somehow Graeber assumes the authority of the state is only felt by the truck driver, and not the activists, but makes no attempt to defend such a claim (which is in any case only implicit). What seems clear is that our daily lives are heavily influenced by the knowledge that the state, with the full power of the law behind it, is always present; the fact that some anarchists would prefer that it were not does little to negate the point that people's behaviour is constantly, if often subconsciously, informed by this reality, and that holds as true for anarchists as anyone else.

What is lacking from these examples is evidence that any of them would work without the various legal and social functions the state is supposed to provide. Once again, the idea of the liberal state is precisely that people *can and should* act together without undue interference

from government. Many more examples of these ‘seeds beneath the snow’ have been given over the years, but they all ultimately suffer the same fate. They do indeed offer anarchists many valuable philosophical and sociological insights, and in as much as they do so, it could well be argued that they add considerably to the argument for a life without the state. What they do not do is in any way prove that the state is unnecessary.

The Global Justice Movement.

We can of course apply much the same critique to the examples of anarchy apparently demonstrated by the global justice movement. Within the movement, it is commonly argued that in *temporary autonomous zones* the power of the state is rendered effectively redundant. As an anonymous writer in *Do or Die* puts it: ‘Where the barricades begin, the state ends’ (anonymous 2003, 22). These claims to have achieved *autonomy* raise questions about how anarchists understand the way power works, and the extent to which anarchists believe people can *escape* certain power relations. Much of the recent work by postanarchists such as Saul Newman argues that anarchists have failed to acknowledge the capacity for other forms of power relations to exist without the state. As Newman suggests:

To insist simply on an autonomous and self-determined space avoids the question of the shape of social and political relations within that space; autonomous spaces can be subject to the worst kinds of authoritarian, repressive and fundamentalist politics. It is clear, then, that autonomy must refer not only to the independence from the state of a particular political and territorial space, but also to the internal micro-political constitution of that space, to the organisation of social life within it (Newman 2010, 179).

I return to discuss the question of power in [Chapter 4](#), but other considerations arise with these recent examples of anarchist practice. For instance, it is important to note the brief time spans of many of these autonomous zones, most of which are indeed *temporary*: during a two week protest camp, the organisation of daily life is fundamentally different from that of a sustained community. For example, discussions about how the land is to be divided up and used by the people on it are unlikely to ever occur, except as hypothetical campfire chat. Economic questions are for all intents and purposes redundant in such spaces: people bring money, and resources, from the capitalist world ‘outside’ and difficult questions around the distribution of goods never arise. Another important factor to consider is the *intention* element of such projects. Such spaces work effectively in large part because there is a considerable degree of trust and a united sense of purpose, based on shared political, ethical and often cultural views, and of course on many interwoven personal relationships.

Another way to think of this is to see such spaces as creating temporary *communities*. This may be seen as a positive thing, and indeed the idea of community is often considered key to the functioning of an anarchist society (Taylor 1982). However, whilst communities may exist in various forms (we might talk of, for example, an artistic community) for Taylor, for societies to function effectively without the state, the community must be small and *stable* (ibid., 94). If they are to effectively maintain some degree of order, then, they must ‘have little turnover in their memberships’ (ibid., 91). However, as we shall see in [Chapter 5](#), the

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