

An Anarchist FAQ

An Anarchist FAQ: Introduction to Volume 1

As many anarchists have noted, our ideal must be one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented political theories on the planet. "An Anarchist FAQ" (AFAQ) aims to change this by presenting the basics of anarchist theory and history, refuting the most common distortions and nonsense about it and providing anarchists with a resource they can use to aid their arguments and struggles for freedom. This is important, as much of the ground covered in AFAQ was provoked by having to critique other theories and refute attacks on anarchism.

Anarchism has changed over the years and will continue to evolve and change as circumstances do likewise and new struggles are fought and (hopefully) won. It is not some fixed ideology, but rather a means of understanding an evolving world and to change it in libertarian directions. As such, AFAQ seeks to place specific aspects of anarchism into their historical context. For example, certain aspects of Proudhon's ideas can only be understood by remembering that he lived at a time when the vast majority of working people were peasants and artisans. Many commentators (particularly Marxist ones) seem to forget this (and that he supported co-operatives for large-scale industry). Much the same can be said of Bakunin, Tucker and so on. I hope AFAQ will help anarchism continue to develop to meet new circumstances by summarising what has gone before so that we can build on it.

We also seek to draw out what anarchists have in common while not denying their differences. After all, individualist-anarchist Benjamin Tucker would have agreed with communist-anarchist Peter Kropotkin when he stated that anarchism was the *"no government form of socialism."* While some anarchists seem to take more time in critiquing and attacking their comrades over (ultimately) usually minor differences than fighting oppression, I personally think that this activity while, at times, essential is hardly the most fruitful use of our limited resources -- particularly when it is about possible future developments (whether it is on the economic nature of a free society or our attitude to a currently non-existing syndicalist union!). So we have discussed the differences between anarchist schools of thought as well as within them, but we have tried to build bridges by stressing where they agree rather than create walls.

Needless to say, not all anarchists will agree with what is in AFAQ (it is, after all, as we have always stressed "An Anarchist FAQ", not "The Anarchist FAQ" as some comrades flatteringly call it). From my experience, most anarchists agree with most of it even if they have quibbles about certain aspects of it. I know that comrades do point others to it (I once saw a Marxist complain that anarchists always suggested he read AFAQ, so I explained to him that this was what having a "Frequency Asked Questions" was all about). So AFAQ is only a guide, you need to discover anarchism for yourself and develop and apply it in your own way. Hopefully AFAQ will help that process by presenting an overview of anarchism and indicating what it is, what it is not and where to find out more.

Some may object to the length of many of the answers and that is a valid point. However, some questions and issues cannot be dealt with quickly and be considered as remotely convincing. For example, simply stating that anarchists think that capitalism is exploitative and that claims otherwise are wrong may be both correct and short but it hardly a convincing reply to someone aware of the various defences of profit, interest and rent invented by capitalist economists. Similarly, stating that Marxist ideology helped destroy the Russian Revolution is, again, both correct and short but it would never convince a Leninist who stresses the impact of civil war on Bolshevik practice. Then there is the issue of sources. We have tried to let anarchists speak for themselves on most issues and that can take space. Some of the evidence we use is from books and articles the general reader may not have easy access so we have tried to present full quotes to show that our use is correct (the number of times I've tracked down references only to discover they did not say what was suggested is, sadly, quite numerous).

Moreover, refuting distortions and inventions about anarchism can be lengthy simply because of the necessity of providing supporting evidence. Time and again, the same mistakes and straw man arguments are regurgitated by those unwilling or unable to look at the source material (Marxists are particularly bad at this, simply repeating *ad nauseum* the assertions of Marx and Engels as if they were accurate). Assumptions are piled onto assumptions, assertions repeated as if they were factual. AFAQ seeks to address these and present evidence to refute them once and for all. Simply saying that some statement is false may be correct, but hardly convincing unless you already know a lot about the subject. So I hope that readers will understand and find even the longest answers interesting and informative (one of the advantages of a FAQ format is that people can simply go to the sections they are interested in and skip others).

This volume covers what anarchism is, where it comes from, what it has done, what it is against (and why) as well as what anarchism is not (i.e., showing why "anarcho"-capitalism is not a form of anarchism).

The latter may come as a surprise to most. Few anarchists, never mind the general population, have heard of that specific ideology (it is US based, in the main) and those who have heard of it may wonder why we bothered given its obvious non-anarchist nature. Sadly, we need to cover this ground simply because some academics insist in listing it alongside genuine forms of anarchism and that needs to be exposed for the nonsense it is. Few serious thinkers would list fascism alongside socialism, regardless of whether its supporters call their ideology "National Socialism" or "National Syndicalism" (unsurprisingly, right-"libertarians" do precisely that). No one took the Soviet bloc states seriously when they described themselves as "peoples' democracies" nor considered their governments democratic. Anarchism seems to be excluded from such common-sense and so we find academics discussing "anarcho"-capitalists alongside anarchism simply, I suspect, because they *call* themselves "anarchists." That almost all anarchists reject their claims to being anarchists does not seem to be a sufficient warning about taking such statements at face value! For obvious reasons, we have not wasted space in explaining why another US based ideology, "National Anarchism", is not anarchism. While some individual anarchists were racist, the notion that anarchism has anything in common with those who aim for racially pure nationalist communities is ridiculous. Even academics have not fallen for *that*, although for almost all genuine anarchists "anarcho"-capitalism makes as little sense as "anarcho"-nationalism.

Then there is the history of AFAQ. As indicated in the original introduction, AFAQ was prompted by battles with "anarcho"-capitalists on-line in the early 1990s. However, while AFAQ may have started as a reply to the "anarcho"-capitalists it is no longer that. It would be a mistake to think that they are more significant than they actually are or that many anarchists bother with them (most, I am sure, have never heard of it). I did consider whether it was wiser to simply exclude section F from the book but, in the end, I decided it should remain. Partly, for the reasons above and partly because it does serve another, more useful, purpose. Neo-liberalism is based, in many ways, on right-"libertarian" dogmas so critiquing those helps our struggle against "actually existing" capitalism and the current attacks by the ruling class.

I do not wish anarchism to go the same way that "libertarian" has gone in the US (and, to a lesser extent, in the UK). Between the 1890s and 1970s, libertarian was simply a pseudonym for anarchist or similar socialist theories. However, the American free-market right appropriated the label in the 1970s and now it means supporters of minimal state (or private-state) capitalism. Such is the power having ideas that bolster the wealthy! The change in "libertarian" is such that some people talk about "libertarian anarchism" -- as if you can have an "authoritarian anarchism"! That these people include "anarcho"-capitalists simply shows how ignorant of anarchism they actually are and how alien the ideology is to our movement (I've seen quite a few of them proclaim anarchism is simply a "new" form of Marxism, which shows their grasp of the subject). Equally bizarrely, these self-proclaimed "libertarian anarchists" are also those who most fervently defend the **authoritarian** social relationships inherent within capitalism! In other words, if "authoritarian anarchists" *could* exist then the "libertarian anarchists" would be them!

As AFAQ explains, being opposed to the state is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for being an anarchist. Not only is this clear from the works of anarchist thinkers and anarchism as a social movement, but also from the nature of the idea itself. To be an anarchist you must also be a socialist (i.e. opposed to capitalist property and the exploitation of labour). It is no coincidence that Godwin and Proudhon independently analysed private property from a libertarian perspective and drew similar conclusions or that Kropotkin and Tucker considered themselves socialists. To deny this critique is to deny anarchism as a movement and as a socio-political theory never mind its history and the aims of anarchists across the years.

Furthermore, as AFAQ stresses, to be a *consistent* anarchist you must recognise that freedom is more than simply the ability to change masters. Anarchism means "no authority" (an-archy) and to support social relationships marked by authority (hier-*archy*) produces a self-contradictory mess (such as supporting forms of domination, such as wage labour, which are essentially identical to those produced by the state – and, sometimes, admitted as such!). Anarchism is, fundamentally, a theory of organisation based on individuals associating together without restricting, and so denying and limiting, their freedom and individuality. This means that a consistent anarchism is rooted in free association within a context of self-management, decentralisation and "bottom-up" decision-making (i.e., it is rooted in political, economic and social equality). While it is possible to be an anarchist while opposing exploitation but not all forms of hierarchical social relationships, it is hardly logical nor a convincing position.

AFAQ also seeks to go into subjects anarchists have, traditionally, been weak on, such as economics (which is ironic, as Proudhon made his name by his economic critiques). In this sense, it is a resource for anarchists both in terms of our own history and ideas but also on

subjects which we inevitably come across in our struggles (hopefully, the critiques we provide of capitalism, neo-liberalism and so forth will also be useful to other radicals). We have tried to indicate the quoted source is an anarchist or libertarian. If in doubt, please look at the bibliography on the webpage. This breaks references down into libertarian (anarchist and non-anarchist) thinkers (or sympathetic accounts of anarchism) and non-libertarians (which, needless to say, includes right-"libertarians"). It should go without saying that quoting an expert on one subject does not mean anarchists subscribe to their opinions on other matters. Thus if we quote, say, a Keynesian or post-Keynesian economist on how capitalism works it does not imply we support their specific political recommendations.

Some have criticised AFAQ for not including some of the more recent developments within anarchism, which is fair enough. I have asked on numerous occasions for such critics to contribute a section on these and, of course, for referenced corrections for any mistakes others think we have done. Nothing has been forthcoming and we have usually discovered mistakes ourselves and corrected them (although a steady flow of emails pointing out typos has come our way). We have always been a small collective and we cannot do everything. This also explains why important social events like, say, the turn of the century Argentinean revolt against neo-liberalism is not discussed in [section A.5](#) (this is a wonderful example of anarchist ideas being spontaneously applied in practice during a mass revolt). Suffice to say, anarchistic tendencies, ideas and practices develop all the time and anarchism is growing in influence but if we continually added to AFAQ to reflect this then it would never have become ready for publication! As it is, we have excluded most of the appendices from the book version (these remain available on the website along with a lengthy links page).

I would like to thank everybody who has helped and contributed (directly and indirectly, knowingly and unknowingly) to AFAQ. As for authorship, AFAQ started as a collective effort and remained so for many years. I have been the only person involved from the start and have done the bulk of the work on it. Moreover, the task of getting it ready and revised for publication has fallen to me. I have enjoyed it, in the main. This explains why the book has my name on it rather than a collective. I feel I have earned that right. As such, I claim responsibility for any typos and examples of bad grammar that remain. I have substantially revised AFAQ for publication and while I have tried to find them all, I am sure I have failed (particularly in sections that were effectively rewritten). I hope these do not detract from the book too much.

Finally, on a personal note I would like to dedicate this book to my partner and two lovely children. They are a constant source of inspiration, love, support and hope (not to mention patience!). If this work makes the world we live in better for them then it has been more than worthwhile. For, when it comes down to it, anarchism is simply about making the world a freer and better place. If we forget that, then we forget what makes us anarchists in the first place.

Iain McKay

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A Summation

"No question, the word anarchy freaks people. Yet anarchy -- rule by no one -- has always struck me as the same as democracy carried to its logical and reasonable conclusions. Of course those who rule -- bosses and politicians, capital and the state -- cannot imagine that people could rule themselves, for to admit that people can live without authority and rulers pulls out the whole underpinnings of their ideology. Once you admit that people can -- and do, today, in many spheres of their lives -- run things easier, better and more fairly than the corporation and the government can, there's no justification for the boss and the premier. I think most of us realise and understand that, in our guts, but schools, culture, the police, all the authoritarian apparatuses, tell us we need bosses, we need to be controlled 'for our own good.' It's not for our own good -- it's for the good of the boss, plain and simple."

"Anarchism is a demand for real freedom and real autonomy"

"But I also remain convinced that something like an anarchist future, a world of no bosses or politicians, one in which people, all people, can live full and meaningful lives, is possible and desirable. We see glimpses of it all around us in our day-to-day lives, as people organise much of their lives without depending on someone to tell them what to do. We see it in that spirit of revolt -- a spirit that is often twisted by anger and despair, but nonetheless shows us that people have not given up. We see it in the political activism, the social lives, the demands for decency and respect and autonomy people put forward, the desire to be individuals while still being part of a community."

"No, I don't think bowling leagues are the anarchist utopia, but they, like much of our lives outside of the workplace, are organised without hierarchy and oppression; the most meaningful, truly human parts of our lives already work best when organised on anarchist principles. Yet I also believe that in its function as critique and as a vision of the future -- perhaps the only one that doesn't end in our extinction as a species, or, as Orwell put it, as a jackboot smashing a human face, forever -- anarchism is not only desirable but possible and necessary."

Mark Leier: **The Case for Anarchy**