

An Anarchist FAQ

Introduction to Volume 2

“Conquer or die – such is the dilemma that faces the . . . peasants and workers at this historic moment . . . But we will not conquer in order to repeat the errors of the past years, the error of putting our fate into the hands of new masters; we will conquer in order to take our destinies into our own hands, to conduct our lives according to our own will and our own conception of the truth.”

Nestor Makhno[\[1\]](#)

Welcome to volume 2 of **An Anarchist FAQ (AFAQ)**!

If the core of volume 1 was based on outlining anarchist ideas and history as well as presenting the anarchist critique of authority, capitalism and statism, then this volume is focused around two threads. The first is the critique of Marxism, historically anarchism’s main alternative within the socialist movement. The second is what anarchists aim for and how we get there.

Needless to say, the second theme is by far the more important as anarchism is more than just analysing what is wrong with the world, it also aims to change it.

First, though, we start with an account of individualist anarchism ([section G](#)). It is fair to say that individualist anarchism has generally been on the margin of accounts of anarchism. This, undoubtedly, reflects the fact it has been predominantly a North American movement and was always a small minority within the global anarchist movement. Even in the USA, it was eclipsed by social anarchism.

As such, it has been somewhat overlooked in accounts of anarchism and **AFAQ** seeks to correct that. Unfortunately, it has also to address claims that “anarcho”-capitalism is a form of individualist anarchism and so it spends some time refuting such assertions. We do so with a heavy heart, as this will tend to exaggerate the importance of that ideology and its influence but it needs to be done simply in order to counteract those ideologues and academics who seek to confuse the two either out of ignorance (for the latter) or self-interest (for the former). In addition, [section G](#) is shaped by the history of **AFAQ**, when it started as an anti-“anarcho”-capitalist FAQ rather than a pro-anarchist one. If it had been started as the pro-anarchist FAQ it has now become, that section would have been substantially different (most obviously, the material on “anarcho”-capitalism being placed in an appendix where it belongs).

This means that in some regards, section G can be considered as a continuation of [section F](#) (which is on why “anarcho”-capitalism is not a form of anarchism). Individualist anarchism *is* the form of anarchism closest to liberalism and, as a consequence, to “anarcho”-capitalism. However, similarities do not equate to the former being a (flawed, from an “anarcho”-capitalist perspective) forerunner of the latter. If this were the case then some would assert that social anarchism is a form of Marxism. There are overlaps, of course, but then again

there are overlaps between individualist anarchism, Marxism and social anarchism. Yet, for all its differences with social anarchism, individualist anarchism shared a critique of capitalism and the state which has significant commonality.

Individualist anarchism is a unique political theory and it does it a disservice to reduce it to simply a flawed precursor of an ideology whose origins and aims are radically at odds with it. It is no coincidence that individualist anarchism found its home in the broader labour and socialist movements while propertarianism views these with disdain. Nor is it a coincidence that the main influences on individualist anarchism were labour, monetary and land reform movements plus the economics of Proudhon and other socialists while, for “anarcho”-capitalism, it is “Austrian” economics which developed, in part, precisely to combat such popular movements. This leads to fundamentally different analyses, strategies and aims that show beyond doubt that the two cannot be confused. The individualist anarchists cannot be considered as forerunners of propertarianism in any more than the most superficial terms. So it is a shame this needs to be discussed at all, but it has.

Ironically, a sadly unpublished article from the 1950s by the founder of that ideology, Murray Rothbard, has come to light which came to the same conclusion (inaccurately entitled, given the history of anarchist use of libertarian, **Are Libertarians ‘Anarchists’?**). Ignoring the errors, distortions and inventions about anarchism Rothbard inflicts on the reader, this essay came to the following (correct!) conclusion: *“We must therefore conclude that we are **not** anarchists, and that those who call us anarchists are not on firm etymological ground, and are being completely unhistorical.”* This was applicable to both the *“dominant anarchist doctrine . . . of ‘anarchist communism’”* (*“which has also been called ‘collectivist anarchism,’ ‘anarcho-syndicalism,’ and ‘libertarian communism’*) as well as individualist anarchists, considered by Rothbard *“the best of them”*, as **both** had *“socialistic elements in their doctrines.”* He suggested that there were thinkers *“in that Golden Age of liberalism”* who had ideas *“similar”* to his ideology but these *“never referred to themselves as anarchists”* while *“all the anarchist groups . . . possessed socialistic **economic** doctrines in common.”* If only he had kept to that analysis and called his ideology something more accurate then this FAQ would have been much shorter!

Also significant is Rothbard’s use of the term “libertarian communism” which indicates he was well aware of the traditional use of libertarian as an alternative to anarchist. Interestingly, while reminiscing about the origins of the so-called “libertarian” right in America Rothbard publicly acknowledged their stealing of the word libertarian from genuine anarchists:

“One gratifying aspect of our rise to some prominence is that, for the first time in my memory, we, ‘our side,’ had captured a crucial word from the enemy . . . ‘Libertarians’ . . . had long been simply a polite word for left-wing [sic!] anarchists, that is for anti-private property anarchists, either of the communist or syndicalist variety. But now we had taken it over . . .”[\[2\]](#)

Today, of course, propertarians shrilly denounce anarchists using the term libertarian in its original and correct meaning as attempting to appropriate *their* name and associate it with socialism! Oh, the irony...

Unlike the propertarians who are so busy degrading the good name “libertarian” and the memories of individualist anarchism, adherents of both schools of anarchism considered themselves socialists. Of course there *are* real differences between individualist and social

anarchism, and we explore these. We show that attempts by some members of each school to excommunicate the others are, ultimately, pointless (in general, the individualists seemed keener to do that than the social anarchists but both sides had their intolerant ones). There is significant overlap between both sections of the movement and so it is perfectly possible for each to coexist happily in a free society as well as, on certain issues and tactics, to work fruitfully together in resisting capitalism and the state.[3]

We then turn to discuss Marxism and its flaws (section H). To be honest, it is staggering that this section even needs to be written given that the anarchist critique of Marxism has been validated time and time again. It is like writing a book on evolution and spending a significant time refuting the claims of Lamarckian theory. Sadly, though, many radicals seem unable to grasp the facts of history, namely that the predictions made by anarchism as regards Marxism have come to pass. Bakunin was right: social democracy did become reformist and the dictatorship of the proletariat became the dictatorship *over* the proletariat.

This critique is not to suggest that anarchists should reject everything Marx argued.[4] In terms of his critique of capitalism, there is much that libertarians can agree with (undoubtedly because much of it was built on Proudhon's analysis!). In part, it is this analysis which ensures that Marxism remains alive as a distinct ideology in the radical movement rather than Marx's positive contributions being integrated along with others (such as Proudhon and Bakunin) into libertarian socialism. It is a powerful and, in large parts, a correct analysis of that system but in terms of constructive ideas on what socialism would be and how to achieve it, Marxism comes up as deeply flawed. So, as with anarchist thinkers, we should recognise the important and valid parts of Marx's contribution to the socialist movement while rejecting its negative aspects – particularly as many so-called "Marxist" positions were first expounded by anarchists!

In part, because as well as his critique of capitalism the other main reason for Marxism's continued existence is, undoubtedly, its apparent success. Needless to say, most Marxists are keen to forget that the first apparently successful Marxist movement was social democracy. Engels lavish praise for it is rarely mentioned these days, given social democracy's quick descent into reformism and, worse, explicit counter-revolution during the German revolution. Rather, it is the apparent success of Leninism[5] during the Russian Revolution that accounts for why so many radicals are attracted to it. As such, what Alexander Berkman termed **The Bolshevik Myth** is alive and well – and needs to be combated.

Suffice to say, the promises of Lenin's **State and Revolution** did not last the night and within six months there was a *de facto* party dictatorship presiding over a state capitalist economy (by early 1919, the need for party dictatorship in a revolution was considered a truism by all the leaders of the party). If that counts as a success, what would failure be? Luckily, unlike Berkman's generation, the numbers blinded by wishful thinking about "socialism" in Russia are fewer although we do have those who, while denouncing Stalin, seem incapable of seeing the obvious links with Lenin's regime and its ideological conceptions (most notably, but not limited to, its vanguardism). As we show in section H.6, the standard modern-day Leninist excuses for Bolshevik tyranny have nothing to recommend them – both in terms of theory and empirical evidence. So as well as presenting a theoretical critique of Marxism, we seek to root it in the experiences of Marxism in practice. This involves, in the main, focusing on the Social-Democratic movement, Bolshevism and the Russian Revolution.

We also spend some time refuting numerous Marxist distortions of anarchist ideas. I've lost count of the times I have seen blatantly false claims about anarchism raised by Marxists. I'm not that surprised, as few Marxists actually bother to read the likes of Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin. Instead, they simply repeat what other Marxists have claimed about anarchism (starting, of course, with Marx and Engels). This explains why [section H.2](#) has so many quotes in it, simply to drive home what would be obvious to anyone familiar with anarchist theory and practice. A few quotes could be dismissed as selective, a multitude cannot. I'm sorry that has to be done, but the regularity of abysmally bad Marxist diatribes against anarchism means that it had to be done in such detail. Sadly, I'm sure that refuting these habitual false assertions in **AFAQ** it will not stop Marxists repeating them.

Marxist myths on anarchism also feeds into [section G](#), given that many Marxists have been at pains to portray anarchism as being simply "anti-state" (in this, they share common-ground with the proprietarians). Yet even a cursory glance of anarchist theory and history shows that it has *never* limited itself to just a critique of the state. As long as anarchism has been a named socio-economic theory we have directed our fire at both state **and** property. *Property is Theft!*, my new anthology of Proudhon's writings, shows how interlinked the anarchist opposition to the state and capitalism has been from the start. Thus we find Proudhon arguing that "*the capitalist principle*" and the "*governmental principle are one and the same principle*" and so "*the abolition of the exploitation of man by man and the abolition of government of man by man are one and the same formula.*" Moreover, it is "*to protect this exploitation of man by man that the State exists*" Unsurprisingly, then, anarchists are "*simultaneously striving for the abolition of capital and of the State*" and "*if you do away with the former, you still have to do away with the latter, and vice versa.*" [\[6\]](#)

So the notion of an anarchism which is simply anti-state is completely alien to our tradition. However, falsely limiting anarchism to purely opposition to the state does allow Marxists to portray their tradition as the only form of socialism and so exclude anarchism, by definition, from anti-capitalism.

After Marxism, we move onto more constructive and fruitful subjects, namely anarchist ideas of what a free society could be like ([section I](#)) and what we do in the here and now to bring it closer and to make our lives better ([section J](#)).

Section I is important, simply because it presents a rough outline of what anarchists have suggested would characterise a free society. So we discuss workers self-management, community self-government, economic and social federalism, anti-social behaviour in a free society, and a host of other issues. While many people, particularly Marxists, question the wisdom of discussing the future society (Marx's comment on "writing the cookbooks of the future" springs to mind [\[7\]](#)), anarchists have been more willing to sketch out a rough vision of what a free society could be like. This may come as a surprise for some (infatuated with Bakunin's pre-anarchist comment that "*the urge to destroy is a creative urge*") but in reality anarchism has always been a constructive socio-economic theory and anarchist thinkers have always been more than willing to sketch what a free society *could* be.

And that is the key, this is what anarchy *could* be like. As we are at pains to stress, we are not presenting a blueprint: it is a series of suggestions based on our critique of capitalism, anarchist principles and the experiences of the struggle against oppression as well as social revolutions that have taken place. This is important, as anarchists have never abstractly postulated ideal social organisations to the oppression of hierarchy but, rather, developed our

ideas of what a free society could look like by critically analysing the current exploitative and oppression one as well as the self-activity and self-organisation of those resisting it.

This anti-utopian perspective has been a significant aspect of anarchism since Proudhon who (especially his **System of Economic Contradictions**) attacked utopian socialists like Fourier and Saint-Simon for presenting fantastical visions (and appealing for rich benefactors!) rather than studying tendencies within capitalism which could transcend it (particularly working class self-activity). Thus social transformation “*must not emanate from the powers that be; it ought to be SPONTANEOUS.*” It must come “*from below*” as only this ensured change “*by the concerted action of the citizens, by the experience of the workers, by the progress and diffusion of enlightenment, revolution by the means of liberty.*”^[8] Echoing Proudhon, Kropotkin argued that “*the method followed by the anarchist thinker*” is “*entirely different from that followed by the utopists . . . He studies human society as it is now and was in the past . . . tries to discover its tendencies, past and present, its growing needs, intellectual and economic, and in his ideal he merely points out in which direction evolution goes.*”^[9] A key aspect of this is looking at the self-organisation and struggles of working class people, these being the means by which anarchists link the current to the future.

So we discuss in **AFAQ** the perennial issues of both transition and how the new world gestates within the old. As [section I.2.3](#) shows in detail, anarchists have always stressed that the new world is created in our struggles against the old. The fight for freedom transforms those who take part as well as creating the organisations (such as community assemblies, workers’ councils, factory committees and their federations) which will be the framework of a free society. So the IWW slogan of “*building a new world in the shell of the old*” has been a key aspect of anarchism for some time, with Proudhon proclaiming during the 1848 Revolution that “*a new society be founded in the heart of the old society*” based on “*a body representative of the proletariat be[ing] formed . . . in opposition to the bourgeoisie’s representation.*”^[10]

Which brings us nicely to the last section, on what do anarchists do? In [section J](#) we summarise how anarchists see social change happening, how we organise to influence the class struggle as well as the forms of organisations we create. There are substantial discussions on alternative forms of social organisation we advocate and how they are the embryonic forms of a free society we create while resisting the current oppressive one. Thus, for example, we discuss how the federations of workplace assemblies we urge to fight the bosses become the means by which co-operative production is organised in a free society while the neighbourhood assemblies created as a counter-power to the state become the means by which free individuals manage their communities.

We also outline why anarchists support direct action and reject voting (“political action”) as the means of social change as well as the role of libertarians in social struggle and revolution as well as how we organise to influence both. As well as summarising our ideas on the important issues of how we organise and how we change the world, we take the time to refute some of the more common false claims against abstentionism and whether we are “a-political” or not. Suffice to say, the anarchist critique of electioneering has been validated (as can be seen by the numbers of ex-radical politicians and ex-socialist parties in the world). Our arguments on the transforming power of direct action, solidarity and working class self-organisation from below have, likewise, been vindicated time and time again.

It must also be noted that the sections within this volume have been slightly edited to ensure that it approximates volume 1 in size. This has involved trimming around a tenth of the material. I have tried to cut non-essential paragraphs and sub-sections to ensure that the core of the arguments remain intact. This means that, for example, [section H.2](#) (which debunks various Marxist myths about anarchism) ends on [section H.2.11](#) in print but goes to [section H.2.14](#) on-line. This was done with a heavy heart.

Since volume 1 has been published, significant changes have occurred in the world. Neo-liberalism has taken a battering as the inevitable consequences of its policies resolved themselves in economic crisis. While reality has struck a blow to that ideology, it is fair to say that it will survive – after all, the ideology is so unrealistic already why should mere reality impact on its beauty for the true believer? Not to mention, of course, the significant class interests expressed in it. One thing is true, unless working class people organise and resist then governments, political discourse, economies and economic ideology will simply continue on as before – and those who will pay the costs of the crisis will not be the ruling class that created it.

On a more positive note, [section B.1](#) of **AFAQ** indicated how hierarchies of wealth and power adversely affect those subject to them. **The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better** by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett presents more evidence on this subject, noting that on almost every index of quality of life or wellness there is a strong correlation between a country's level of economic inequality and its social outcomes. Significantly, it is not just the poor that are adversely affected by inequality, but society as a whole. So more equal societies have less crime and smaller prison populations as well as consistently delivering other advantages such as better physical and mental health, lower rates of teenage pregnancy and obesity, and higher rates of literacy and social trust. All of which confirm the anarchist analysis of the harmful effects of inequality in wealth and power.

AFAQ has moved its main site location (although the various aliases we have remain the same).^[11] As a result, it also has a blog in which we post supplemental material on anarchism and news about the FAQ itself (such as updates).^[12] Notable postings include the 2008 article marking the 150th anniversary of the use of the term “libertarian” by anarchists (*150 years of libertarian*), a supplement to our appendix on anarchist symbols contained in volume 1 (*The Red Flag of Anarchy*) and an unfinished appendix to [section C](#) explaining classical economics from a socialist perspective.

Finally, on a personal note, I dedicate this volume, like the first, to my family. I hope that this work will help, however slightly, to make the world a better place for them and that my children will grow up in a freer, more sustainable, world. Whether they do or not really is up to us, the current generation. Are we up for the challenge? Are we ready to fight for freedom and equality? The answer to that lies in your hands.

Either you can read **AFAQ** and leave it at that or you can join in the struggle for freedom and equality. The anarchist movement is not perfect, nor does it have all the answers. However, it remains for all that our best chance of making the world a fit place for unique individuals to live and flourish in. The question is whether we will remain happy to keep surviving within capitalism or whether we will seek to transform ourselves and our world for the better. We may fail. We may not stop the slide towards increased authoritarianism and atomisation. One thing is sure, if we do not resist then that slide will accelerate.

And if we do resist? Well, we may well change the world...

Iain McKay

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End Notes

[1] quoted by Peter Arshinov, **The History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 58

[2] **The Betrayal of the American Right**, Ludwig von Mises Institute, p. 83

[3] I would also like to take the opportunity to thank individualist anarchist Shawn Wilbur for his valued input into [section G](#) and the suggestions he made after reading the first drafts sent to him. Without this help, and the numerous works of nineteenth century anarchism he has placed on-line, this section would not be as comprehensive as it has become.

[4] Nor, for that matter, that there are no libertarian Marxists. There are, as we indicated in [section A.4.4](#) of volume 1 of **AFAQ**. Why they continue to call themselves Marxists while rejecting Marx's ideas on numerous key issues (and implicitly agreeing with Bakunin in the process) is a mystery.

[5] We are aware that many Marxists reject the suggestion that Leninism is actually Marxist – a position we show has some validity. We argue that it was not only anarchism which Lenin distorted in **State and Revolution** but also important aspects of the ideas of Marx and Engels on such key issues as the state (see [section H.3.10](#), for example).

[6] **Property is Theft!**, p. 496, p. 535, p. 503 and p. 506

[7] If Marx had been a bit more forthcoming then the likes of Stalin would have found it harder to label their nightmare regimes “socialist.”

[8] Proudhon, **Op. Cit.**, p. 325 and p. 398

[9] **Anarchism**, p. 47

[10] **Op. Cit.**, p. 321. Proudhon had made a similar call in 1846, arguing that “*an agricultural and industrial combination must be found by means of which power, today the ruler of society, shall become its slave*” as the state is “*inevitably enchained to capital and directed against the proletariat.*” (pp. 225-6)

[11] Namely: www.anarchistfaq.org, www.anarchismfaq.org, www.anarchyfaq.org and www.anarchistfaq.org.uk.

[12] It can be found at: <http://anarchism.pageabode.com/blogs/afaq>