

# Nietzsche and the Anarchists

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John Moore was a controversial but intriguing English anarchist writer who passed away of a heart attack in October 2002 at the age of 45. He was the author of such short books as *Anarchy & Ecstasy*, *Lovebite*, and *The Book of Levelling*, and widely-read essays such as “A Primitivist Primer” and “Maximalist Anarchism/Anarchist Maximalism.” His “The Appeal of Anarchy” appeared on the back cover of *Fifth Estate* in the 1990s. When he died, he left behind an uncompleted anthology: *I Am Not A Man, I Am Dynamite! Friedrich Nietzsche and the Anarchist Tradition*. It featured essays from a dozen writers, from six countries, on the historical and conceptual relationships between Nietzsche and anarchism. I inherited the project the next year, and finally—eight years after its initiation—the book is finally complete and will be published in December by Autonomedia. I want to offer the following historical research, culled from both the anthology and elsewhere, to contribute to the discussion that will undoubtedly follow the publication of this work.

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The proposal to combine Nietzsche and anarchism must sound audacious to many people. Even if one doesn't hold to the old belief that the “working class” (whoever that might be today) are the only ones who can make revolutionary change, wasn't Nietzsche an influence on the fascists, and an individualist who championed the right of the strong to rule over the weak? And doesn't Nietzsche himself repeatedly denounce the anarchist movement of his day, calling them “dogs” and accusing them of resentment? Without consulting Nietzsche's works themselves in an attempt to “prove” or “disprove” whether he is compatible with anarchism or not, I believe that a more fruitful way to approach this proposed conjunction is to look at the historical record of how left-wing anarchists have approached Nietzsche. The surprising answer is that many of them quite liked him, including the “classical anarchists;” in fact, some of them even used his ideas to justify anarchist beliefs about class struggle.

The list is not limited to culturally-oriented anarchists such as Emma Goldman, who gave dozens of lectures about Nietzsche and baptized him as an honorary anarchist. Pro-Nietzschean anarchists also include prominent Spanish CNT-FAI members in the 1930s such as Salvador Seguí and anarcho-feminist Federica Montseny, anarcho-syndicalist militants like Rudolf Rocker, and even the younger Murray Bookchin, who cited Nietzsche's conception of the “transvaluation of values” in support of the Spanish anarchist project.

## Misogyny, Elitism, Disdain, & Hatred

There were many things that drew anarchists to Nietzsche: his hatred of the state; his disgust for the mindless social behavior of “herds”; his (almost pathological) anti-Christianity; his distrust of the effect of both the market and the State on cultural production; his desire for an “overman” that is, for a new human who was to be neither master nor slave; his praise of the ecstatic and creative self, with the artist as his prototype, who could say, “Yes”

to the self-creation of a new world on the basis of nothing; and his forwarding of the “transvaluation of values” as source of change, as opposed to a Marxist conception of class struggle and the dialectic of a linear history.

Of course, in doing this, the anarchists also conveniently forgot his misogyny, his elitism, and his disdain for those who worked for social justice—as well as his own hatred of them! But then the fascists forgot Nietzsche’s hatred of German nationalism; his admiration for the Jews; his advocating of racial intermarriage; his disgust of resentment (of which Hitler is the personification of par excellence); and his disdain of the State, the market and the herd mentality, all of which the fascist system depended on. Nietzsche-positive left-wing anarchism is most clearly represented by Emma Goldman. She edited the magazine *Mother Earth* for 12 years until the US government arrested her for anti-draft activities in 1917 and deported her to the Soviet Union two years later. *Mother Earth* was common ground for anarcho-communists, individualists, mutualists, syndicalists and the many avant-garde artists who saw anarchism as a political extension of their beliefs (in much the same way that post-WWII counter-culturalists would do the same). The magazine, and Goldman, heavily promoted Nietzsche; not only did they print articles popularizing and discussing his ideas, but you could order Nietzsche’s complete works from their mail-order bookstore.

In her autobiography *Living My Life*, Goldman wrote about her first encounter with the works of Nietzsche in the 1890s. “The magic of his language, the beauty of his vision, carried me to undreamed-of heights. I longed to devour every line of his writings...” She also wrote that “Nietzsche was not a social theorist but a poet, a rebel and innovator. His aristocracy was neither of birth nor of purse; it was of the spirit. In that respect, Nietzsche was an anarchist, and all true anarchists were aristocrats.” As Leigh Starcross details in *I Am Not A Man, I Am Dynamite!*, Goldman popularized Nietzsche’s ideas in lecture tours and used many of his conceptions about morality and the State in her writings. However, she always combined his championing of the self-creating individual with a kind of Kropotkinist anarcho-communism.

Goldman wasn’t the only anarchist to combine Nietzsche with Kropotkin, though. Alan Antliff documents (also in *I Am Not A Man, I Am Dynamite!*) how the Indian art critic and anti-imperialist Ananda Coomaraswamy combined Nietzsche’s individualism and sense of spiritual renewal with both Kropotkin’s economics and with Asian idealist religious thought. This combination was offered as a basis for the opposition to British colonization as well as to industrialization.

Kropotkin himself, however, was no great fan of Nietzsche. Kropotkin’s few published mentions of him are curt and he clearly does not see him (or Stirner) as congruent with his perspective. But Kropotkin took his elaboration to the grave with him, dying before completing the last chapter of his *Ethics* which was to be on Stirner, Nietzsche, Tolstoy and others.

The Spanish anarchists also mixed their class politics with Nietzschean inspiration. Murray Bookchin, in *The Spanish Anarchists*, describes prominent CNT-FAI member Salvador Seguí as “an admirer of Nietzschean individualism, of the superhombre to whom ‘all is permitted.’” Bookchin, in his 1973 introduction to Sam Dolgoff’s *The Anarchist Collectives*, even describes the reconstruction of society by the workers as a Nietzschean project. He says that “workers must see themselves as human beings, not as class beings; as creative personalities, not as ‘proletarians,’ as self-affirming individuals, not as ‘masses’... [the] economic component must be humanized precisely by bringing an ‘affinity of friendship’ to the work process, by diminishing the role of onerous work in the lives of producers, indeed by a total ‘transvaluation of values’ (to use Nietzsche’s phrase) as it applies to production and consumption as well as social and personal life.”

Another CNT-FAI member influenced by Nietzsche was Federica Montseny, an editor of *La Revista Blanca* who later achieved infamy as one of the four anarchists who accepted cabinet positions in the Spanish Popular Front government. Nietzsche and Stirner—as well as the playwright Ibsen and anarchist-geographer Elisee Reclus—were her favorite writers, according to Richard Kern (in *Red Years/Black Years: A Political History of Spanish Anarchism, 1911–1937*). Kerr says she held that the “emancipation of women would lead to a quicker realization of the social revolution” and that “the revolution against sexism would have to come from intellectual and militant ‘future-women.’ According to this Nietzschean concept of Federica Montseny’s, women could realize through art and literature the need to revise their own roles.”

Rudolf Rocker was yet another anarchist admirer of Nietzsche. Rocker, a German-born anarchist, had moved to England in 1895 and became a well-known union organizer among Yiddish-speaking Jewish workers there. A

proponent of anarcho-syndicalism, in 1922 he helped form the AIT (International Workers' Association), the coordinating body for anarcho-syndicalist unions. Rocker invokes Nietzsche repeatedly in his tome *Nationalism and Culture*, citing him especially to back up his claims that nationalism and state power have a destructive influence on culture, since "Culture is always creative," but "power is never creative." Rocker even ends his book with a Nietzsche quote.

## **The artist as model for the revolutionary subject**

Lastly, the influence of Nietzsche on the pro-Situ milieu should not be underrated. The Situationists are often mistaken for anarchists, but they were actually a combination of the ideas of several avant-garde currents (including Dada, Surrealism, and Lettrism) with the Hegelian-influenced "western" Marxism of Georg Lukacs, Henri Lefebvre and others. (For Guy Debord's own views on anarchism, see theses 91–94 of *The Society of the Spectacle*). According to Jonathan Purkis, John Moore claimed that the Situationist influence marked "a second wave of anarchist thought," the first major theoretical shift from "classical" anarchism.

One of the most important shifts in this was an ontological switch: whereas Marx had seen human nature as being essentially defined by work (he lays this out explicitly in his 1844 manuscripts), the Situationists saw humanity as being essentially ecstatic and creative. They, like Nietzsche, took the artist, and not the worker, as their model for the new revolutionary subject. Those who followed in the pro-Situ tradition, such as Hakim Bey, have seen kinship with Nietzsche on this basis. And Fredy Perlman would have appreciated the philosopher's advice in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to avoid all "unconditional people" who "look sourly at life," for "they have heavy feet and sultry hearts: they do not know how to dance."

One, it seems, does not need to combine Nietzsche and anarchism: they are already joined, and we have already inherited the fruit of their union.

For further reading about the political reception of Nietzsche: Although not specifically about anarchism, I highly recommend Steve Aschheim's *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890–1990*.

As we go to press, *I Am Not A Man, I Am Dynamite! Friedrich Nietzsche and the Anarchist Tradition* is in the latter stages of production. As soon as it is available, we will have copies for sale in The Barn.



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