

# Anarchism

**A generative force that gives birth to a new world**

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In one sense, anarchy is a desired end. In another, it's an ever-present means, a universal tendency, a generative force that gives birth to new worlds.

In this latter sense, anarchy represents the ultimate achievement in human self-consciousness; the point at which we recognize—if only as a fleeting but transformative glimpse—that we are the artists who make and remake the human world of morality, social structure, and scientific theory.

After this realization, structure loses its immutability. We are no longer merely the recipients of normative, objective values or the passive adherents to absolute, “natural” orders. Instead, we play an active role in shaping the structural tools we use as aids in living fuller, freer lives.

An example of this tendency at work can be found in the activities and philosophy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dada movement. A collection of painters, sculptors, and poets, the Dadaists organized in opposition to the excessive rationalism that allowed imperialism and war to flourish, and which limited the creative potential of the individual.

From the relative calm of neutral Zurich during World War I, this group tapped into a creative chaos that could lead to the growth of new possibilities in an otherwise cold, sterile ideological landscape. “Dada,” the French/German, sculptor/painter Hans Arp declared, “is the ground from which all art springs.”

For the Dadaists, inherited aesthetic standards—while useful for the creation of art—had become stale, and humanity had outgrown them. To discover and create new media and styles, the old, clearly-defined barriers that distinguished art from non-art had to be rejected so the irrational could be opened up as a territory for exploration.

“This conscious break with rationality may also explain the sudden proliferation of new art-forms and materials in Dada. Our freedom from preconceived ideas about processes and techniques frequently led us beyond the frontiers of individual artistic categories,” wrote Hans Richter, the German avant-gardist.

This experimental approach paid off, leading to and influencing later styles like surrealism and abstract expressionism, fluxus, the pop art of Andy Warhol, as well as the music of John Cage.

The efforts of the Dadaists weren't meant to destroy art entirely, but to break its bones so that they could heal again, knitting themselves back together in new ways. But Dada itself was not art. It was a brilliant, anarchic flash of self-awareness during which artists took conscious control of the human evolutionary process and made it work for them.

Anarchy plays a key role not only in how we create, but also in the ways we discover. The ideological frameworks we use to arrange our societies, organize our perceptions, and guide our actions are important and necessary tools, but they are also limited. A better idea's existence can easily be obscured by our inability to see beyond an old one. To paraphrase Nietzsche, we often fail to see things because we ourselves are standing in the way.

In his 1975, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, epistemological anarchist Paul Feyerabend describes Galileo's confrontation with the Catholic Church—and the scientific process of discovery, in general—as a non-authoritarian effort. Because Copernican heliocentrism couldn't be supported by observations until better telescopes were invented, the Church's ancient Ptolemaic cosmology was more reasonable and more

in line with available evidence. For Galileo to stand by his ultimately more accurate theory, he had to struggle against not only the prevailing astronomical ideas of his time, but also contemporary standards of reason and evidence themselves.

Science proceeds by periodically rejecting the authority of pre-existing paradigms so that humanity can free itself to consider new possibilities. Like the messy and disordered approach of the Dadaists, often scientific progress begins with strange, surreal, controversial ideas that conflict with established orthodoxy. According to Feyerabend, this non-authoritarian approach is not an exception to the rule. In fact, it is the rule.

In some societies, this anti-rule can be seen very clearly. In his analysis of Native American oral traditions, Franchot Ballinger tells us that trickster figures are both rule breakers and a source of order.

Early ethnographic accounts of the Zuni pueblo people, in New Mexico, describe a rigidly traditional community. However, despite strong conservative tendencies, they maintained a sub-society of trickster-like sacred clowns who were given license to break taboos, mock the priesthood, and disregard the otherwise firm boundaries that kept tribal culture stable in an otherwise harsh and unforgiving environment.

Later scholarship recognized that sacred clowns in indigenous cultures throughout the American Southwest occupied a dual role. On the one hand, they were clearly subversive and provided members of society with a cathartic release-valve necessary to living in such a conservative community. On the other, their place in society was institutionalized. Their subversion, paradoxically, was part of the social order and served to help maintain it.

In a sense, clown societies were surrounded by a magic circle in which they were able to release the creative chaos existing beyond the bounds of social structure and rigid belief systems. Because they were confined to this sacred space, their transgressions could be beneficial by providing observable contrasts between both the existing social world and alternative possibilities, yet they were also contained so that this power couldn't spill over into the surrounding society and threaten its stability.

Some cultures, then, have recognized the value of contrarian activity and managed to bottle it up, nurturing it as part of a productive dialectic between tradition and anti-tradition, structure and anti-structure.

Taking a broad view, anarchy is the ever-flowing undercurrent that brings new worlds into being. In some cases, it takes an overt form, as in the disruptive activity of Dada, tribal clown societies, or acts of political protest, separatism, and revolution.

Much more commonly, it works in subtle ways. When people begin to question the received hierarchical ideologies that underlie limiting and oversimplified, socially-constructed generalizations of race, gender, ethnicity, and social class, an anarchic upheaval is at work that can lead to new possibilities for freedom of identity and self-determination.

Like The Fool in Shakespeare's "King Lear," anarchy is a companion as well as a critic of society, constantly undermining existing structure only to improve it. To be an anarchist is to be a participant in that endless adventure of world-making.

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