

Encapsulating Anarchism

A practical guide to answering, “What is anarchism?”

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a review of

Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction by Alex Prichard. Oxford University Press, 2023

Anarchists have been devising short guides for the anarcho-curious practically since anarchism existed as a coherent ideological thread. They date back at least to Kropotkin’s contribution to the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1911) and including Alexander Berkman’s *ABC of Communist Anarchism* (1929), Colin Ward’s *Anarchy in Action* (1973), and Cindy Milstein’s *Anarchism and its Aspirations* (2010).

But that’s because anarchism itself—as political theory, as direct action and organizing—keeps evolving. Milstein’s book came out shortly before Occupy Wall Street burgeoned, before Arab Spring, and before the Kurdish liberation movement blossomed into the at-least-quasi-anarchist Rojava polity.

We always need to update ourselves, and this new book, by a University of Exeter academic and co-editor of the journal *Anarchist Studies*, does a fine job of bringing the story into today while adding some useful new angles. It also brings today to bear on anarchism’s historical origins.

A Very Short Introduction takes the novice reader through the life and thought of the usual progression of Dead White Anarchist (Mostly) Males—Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Berkman, Goldman, Bookchin—but it emphasizes from the start that anarchism has always been a culturally diverse, global movement, reaching into Latin America, India, and the Far East almost from the moment Proudhon declared that “Property is theft.”

Most of its major figures were political exiles, often several times over, and wherever they went, their ideas took root. Prichard points out that unlike Marxism, anarchism didn’t have its origins in the Industrial Revolution even though it was a product of the first great era of globalization in the mid- to late 19th century. Many of the countries where it flourished were then barely industrialized, and anarchism appealed to the rural populations of Eastern Europe or Andalusia as much as to factory workers in London, Lyons, or Chicago.

Opposition to the State is one of two elements that distinguish anarchism from Marxism and social democracy (we’ll get to the second of these later), but Prichard stresses that anarchists have always viewed the State as something more complex than mere government; a dense web of power relationships that extends deep into the society it purports to embody.

“Structural domination is exercised indirectly by politicians and bosses,” he writes, “because of the inherited historic privileges that have been won at the expense of women, colonized people, slaves, and labourers. But anarchists see archos [suzerainty or overlordship, in Greek] potentially exercised everywhere, including in personal relationships, friendship groups, in the intersecting structures of racialized, gendered, and cultural power that shape our highly unequal life chances. Anarchism is an ideology that seeks to understand how that happens, and how to mitigate it.”

Even Proudhon’s famous slogan (and book) was not as simplistic as it’s often taken to be. Why is property theft? Because property “was always social. Private property was impossible.” Even the biggest fat cats “rely on others to

enforce that right and have to pay them for it. This is a social, negotiated agreement. But everything we have ever produced has been made more or less collectively.”

Anarchists, starting with the French geographers Elisée and Elie Reclus and continuing through the radical environmentalist Murray Bookchin, contrast the dense but fragile web of the State and capitalism with the “radically interconnected, complex, and dynamic”—and much more resilient—natural ecosystem in which humans originally evolved. “This complexity presupposes diversity and variation, which is integral to the mutual resilience of each part of the system” (Prichard’s words): the opposite of the monoculture that the State and capitalism grimly push us toward.

A refreshing aspect of Prichard’s book, however, is that he recognizes anarchism where he finds it, which is not only in the mouths of people who call themselves anarchists. These include the political economist Elinor Ostrom, who studied how small communities, even in conditions of scarcity, could share resources equitably and efficiently without government; Dan Cook, who writes on how universities, which began as cooperative institutions, can return to that tradition; and Charles Tilly, a political scientist who nevertheless found the State to be akin to “organized crime.”

Prichard doesn’t press the point, but it’s striking how frequently contemporary scholarship either backs up anarchist thinking or contributes to it, wittingly or otherwise. In his book, he notes that anarchists have long stressed health over illness as the proper focal point for medical care, restorative and transformative justice over criminal injustice, respect for cultural diversity rather than ethnocentrism, the encouragement of imagination over rote learning in education, respect for the environment, and global cooperation between working people instead of the violent, undemocratic, chaos of state-level geopolitics.

As a program for progressive change, the foregoing would be right at home on many a progressive Democrat’s wish list. But this brings us to the second big element that distinguishes anarchism from other political philosophies: its intense devotion to grassroots organizing, thought, and decision-making.

Addressing the challenge that automation and artificial intelligence pose for human society, Prichard says, “Responses to any transformations in capitalism must be democratically negotiated from the bottom up”: through labor action such as a general strike, cooperative economic organizing, or other initiatives. “What these have in common is that they refuse to wait for the capture of state power to institute changes and initiatives.”

This vision stands in sharp contrast to every other 20th century -ism, including Marxism, social democracy, so-called liberal democracy, and even libertarianism, all of which hand power to experts, technocrats, and Elon Musk-type “disruptive” innovators. Anarchism, both theory and action, has always developed in just this bottom-up manner. “The next chapter of anarchist thought,” Prichard predicts, “will be shaped by serendipity and cross-pollination, as much as by rational analytical thought or careful historical analysis, and the same goes for the anarchist movement.”

Not that anarchists aren’t capable of designing rational, carefully analyzed alternatives to the State and capitalism. Prichard, who has written extensively on how anarchists devise systems of rules and laws, ends *A Very Short Introduction* by examining anarchist constitution-making—loosely defined—noting that “anarchists have been some of the most imaginative constitutional theorists and practitioners in modern history,” in part because they have been “more acutely aware of the regimes of domination that structure our lives.”

Both the Paris Commune and Occupy Wall Street spent a great deal of their short lives as social and political entities in constitutionalizing, and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, or Rojava, is a remarkable instance of on-the-fly constitution-making. But the most ambitious such experiment, which Prichard helpfully brings back from obscurity in his final pages, was the attempt by 19th century anarchists to win European radicals over to their plan for a federated, decentralized United States of Europe.

At the International League of Peace and Freedom’s inaugural congress in Geneva in 1867, Bakunin laid out 13 principles for European peace to an audience that included Giuseppe Garibaldi, Victor Hugo, and John Stuart Mill. These included “the socialization of property by the workers, atheism, the constitutionalization of regional identities as the basis for regional autonomy,” and a decentralized, federal system of decision-making.

Bakunin’s proposal was rejected, and the world is still waiting for a peaceful alternative to the state system that doesn’t include either US hegemony, a volatile superpower multipolarity, or some sort of world government.

Prichard's very short but very useful 160-page book reminds us that while the anarchist vision is always evolving, it's always been clear about the general outline of that ideal.

Eric Laursen writes frequently for the *Fifth Estate*. His new book, *Polymath: The Life and Professions of Dr. Alex Comfort*, author of *The Joy of Sex*, is available from AK Press.

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