

# WHAT is ANARCHIST COMMUNISM?

*BY TOBY*



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★ FURTHER READING

This text is based upon the non-market anarchist communist theories of Kropotkin. His most important book is *The Conquest of Bread*, which is absolutely essential reading if you are interested in anarchist communism. Other important pamphlets by Kropotkin are his 'Anarchist Communism' and his 'Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal'. The best overviews of Kropotkin's anarchist communism are in Alain Pengam's 'Anarcho-Communism' (available from Zabalaza Books) and John Crump's chapter on anarchist communism in his *Hatta Shuzo and Pure Anarchism in Interwar Japan*.

This text was downloaded from the website of the *Northeastern Federation of Anarchist Communists*.

***Northeastern Federation of Anarchist Communists***

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# WHAT is ANARCHIST COMMUNISM?

***by Toby, Thrall (Aotearoa)***

What? Anarchist Communism? Surely that's a contradiction in terms. Doesn't communism mean a draconian police state, and anarchism the destruction of the state? Surely then the two are incompatible? Well, this text argues the opposite. A stateless and voluntary form of communism is an essential complement to anarchism. I believe anarchism is impossible without it.

From my experience in anarchist circles in Aotearoa all too often many anarchists seem to be stuck in a simplistic notion that anarchism is just something to do with forming small collectives of friends (affinity groups) who have occasional meetings where everybody sits in circles and tries to be non-authoritarian. If pressed, most of these anarchists will say anarchism is something to do with getting rid of authority and respecting individual liberty. I think we need to transcend this crude anarchist theory and practice - and here anarchist communism is very useful. Anarchist communism gets beyond the liberal notions outlined above - that anarchism is a nice idea of individual liberty, an idea that is almost inevitably detached from the struggle of the oppressed. So the purpose of this text is to outline the basics, in very broad brush strokes, of anarchist communism and in particular non-market anarchist communism to an audience unfamiliar with this type of anarchism. Then it offers some brief observations on the potential for an updated anarchist communism today.

★ ORIGINS

Anarchist communism did not appear until the mid 1870s in Europe. It arose against the backdrop of the rise of industrial capitalism, with all the exploitation, alienation, poverty and misery that it created among workers and peasants; and the rise of an increasingly powerful and centralised state, which overall served the interests of the boss or capitalist class. Anarchist communism grew out of the anarchist collectivist wing of the First International Workingmen's [sic] Association, a wing

which was expelled from the International by Karl Marx and his supporters.

Peter Kropotkin, perhaps the most influential anarchist communist theoretician, claimed that the real origin of anarchism was in the “creative, constructive activity of the masses”. He contended “Anarchism originated among the people, and it will preserve its vitality and creative force so long only as it remains a movement of the people.” The Dielo Trouda (Workers’ Cause) group of exiled Russian anarchist communists, a group which included Nestor Makhno - a peasant leader who fought the Bolsheviks and the Whites after the Russian revolution - wrote in a similar vein in their Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists (1926) that “The class struggle created by the enslavement of workers and their aspirations to liberty gave birth, in the oppression, to the idea of anarchism: the idea of the total negation of a social system based on the principles of classes and the State, and its replacement by a free non-statist society of workers under self-management. So anarchism does not derive from the abstract reflections of an intellectual or a philosopher, but from the direct struggle of workers against capitalism, from the needs and necessities of the workers, from their aspirations to liberty and equality. The outstanding anarchist thinkers, Bakunin, Kropotkin and others, did not invent the idea of anarchism, but, having discovered it in the masses, simply helped by the strength of their thought and knowledge to specify and spread it.”

Thus we see that anarchist communism cannot be viewed as a nice idea detached from the struggles of the oppressed. The fortunes of anarchist communism are intimately related with developments in the class struggle. Anarchist communists learnt from the content and form of the struggles of the oppressed. Thus we tend to find that following the 1871 Paris Commune, anarchist communists adopted the ‘commune’ as their model of a future classless and stateless society; and after the Russian revolution of 1917, workers’ councils.

★ **POLITICS: FREE ASSOCIATION / ANARCHISM**

Anarchist communism is composed of two aspects: anarchism and communism. To look at anarchism first, anarchism is the continual forming and reforming of non-hierarchical voluntary groups, of varying sizes, to meet peoples needs. In Kropotkin’s words, anarchism “seeks the most complete development of individuality combined with the highest development of voluntary association in all its aspects, in all possible degrees, for all imaginable aims; [they would] constantly assume new forms which answer best to the multiple aspirations of all.”

So anarchism is the continual prevention of the re-establishment of any authority, any power, any State; and full and complete freedom for the individual who, freely and driven by his or her needs alone, freely bands together with other individuals into a group; then the freedom of development for the group which federates with others within the neighbourhood; then freedom of development for communities which federate within the region and so on; until a world without borders is established.

So in place of authoritarian organisations, non-authoritarian organisations would

entation. Platformists rightly contend that anarchist communists need to be organised into coherent, unified groups capable of putting forward well-defined views. However, the problem with platformist groups is that in general they sacrifice the content of anarchist communism for a fetishisation of their own organisational form, and hence tend to become obsessed with their own internal and external practice, often regardless of the actual level of class struggle in society. They seem to be forever searching for the perfect anarchist communist organisation. While it is excellent that they see anarchist communism as part of the class struggle, often they overlook the necessarily communist (non-market) aspect of anarchist communism, and thus seem to be little more than anarchist collectivists rather than communists.

I believe anarchist communism is not an outdated theory but still has much relevance to today’s authoritarian capitalist society. With the rise of a vague anti-capitalist or at least anti-corporate feeling in society, and a general scepticism towards political parties and unions, and increasing questioning of the militaristic state, the prospects for anarchist communism seem good. Anarchist communism is a viable, well thought out alternative to capitalism that goes beyond the vagueness of just being “anti-capitalist”. The neo-liberal hegemony over society is somewhat skin-deep: it has forced us to work harder for less pay, reducing our living standards and producing a real disgruntlement with work among many people. Who wants to sacrifice 40 years or more of your life doing something you hate (work) for the profit of someone else?

Yet we need to keep our feet on the ground. Disgruntlement against neo-liberalism has not been translated into positive action against the system much. Across the “first world”, the level of working class resistance to capitalism is at historic lows, if strike activity is anything to go by. Many people are today apathetic, alienated, and individualistic; even if many see through the spectacle of modern capitalism and its hollow promise of happiness through enforced consumption, most do not act against it. Once the level of working class self-activity increases, as it seems to be doing very recently, these attitudes will no doubt change, and radical movements like anarchist communism may suddenly become popular once again.

As well, its main rivals on the left have all but faded away: social democratic parties have collapsed or transformed themselves into right wing neo-liberal parties; Stalinists have lost the lure of the USSR; and other Marxist-Lemmingists (Leninists) have been reduced to tiny, irrelevant sects. This collapse of the traditional left offers us an unprecedented opportunity to encourage coherent anarchist communist tendencies among people without power.

Leninist backgrounds, tend to see anarchism only in its economic aspects, thus they focus on the class struggle without any notion of non-authoritarian organisation.

### ★ MODERN ANARCHIST COMMUNISM

There is a tendency for many anarchists today to see anarchist communism as out of date. It was a product of a society torn by vicious class divisions, but since then, they claim, these divisions are not so clear. This view is absurd. First of all, society today is still based on class exploitation much like 100 years ago, and this exploitation under neo-liberalism or the New Right has intensified! Second of all, there is a genuine need to bring class struggle anarchist communism up to date. The working class has changed: the image of a male, white, blue collar, industrial workforce is completely out of date. The working class is now largely dominated by (casualised) service workers, not industrial factory workers; the majority of the working class is female; and a high proportion of the working class in Aotearoa are Maori and Pacific Islanders. Hence we need to see the struggles of working class Maori, Pacific Islanders, the unwaged, and working class women as part of the class struggle. The struggle against class exploitation needs to include not only struggles against the boss class but struggles against the things that divide the working class, like sexism and racism. The class struggle is a struggle to liberate all of humanity, not just one particular class or group (that is, it requires the self-abolition of the working class).

One particularly valuable attempt to update anarchist communism comes through the work of American eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin. The ecological crisis means that we must not only seek genuinely democratic methods of production, but also produce things in an ecologically sensible way. Bookchin has formulated an eco-anarchist communism, which claims that all forms of hierarchy are interlinked. For example, he claims ecological destruction is rooted in our hierarchical relationships to each other. Eliminate these relationships, and our relationship to nature will be transformed as well. Hence under Bookchin's formulation the struggle is thus to abolish all forms of authority (class, race, gender etc.). The problem with Bookchin is that he rejects the class struggle as the means to abolish authority, and instead places great hope on 'new social movements' capturing local body governments through participating in representative elections! This has failed in the past, or ended up with parties that inevitably move to accommodation with the establishment. A non-class approach almost inevitably fails because it does not seek to abolish the exploitative social relations that underlie capitalism. Revolutionary class struggle, as shown to some extent in Argentina today, is the only means by which anarchist communism can be brought about. Experience shows us that only when the working class becomes conscious of its oppression and acts in a revolutionary manner that abolishing (or to be realistic, minimising to the highest degree possible) all exploitation becomes possible.

Today, many anarchist communist groups around the world are 'platformist' in ori-

be formed by people themselves for the purposes of self-help and mutual aid. The tendency to this free association even exists in modern capitalist society - in the form of people supporting strikes and other forms of working class solidarity, international railway and postal networks, even the Red Cross and lifeboat associations. These voluntary associations are limited and distorted by capitalism; however, they do give us a glimpse of what free agreement has in store for us if we establish a stateless society in the future.

### ★ ECONOMICS: FREE COMMUNISM

The second part of anarchist communism is communism. Unfortunately, communism is now a dirty word. In the sense anarchist communists use it, it does not mean a police state, or barracks style socialism, or state capitalism; it means a free and voluntary communism.

People think economics has something to do with bosses, accountants, economists, money, the market, profits, production, the division of labour, work or wage-labour. Yet anarchist communists like Kropotkin have a refreshing approach to economics. Capitalists claim that all the things listed above, like money and the market, are natural, and it is impossible to have anything else. Yet they are just stuff made up by capitalists, like a veil to cover reality. Lift the veil, and what we have in reality is human beings, with their multiplicity of needs and wants that ought to be satisfied.

Anarchist communism is human-centred and not otherworldly. Anarchist communists do not look to God (if it exists) or politicians or bureaucrats to change society, but instead to people themselves. Thus anarchist communism's approach to economics is to refuse to engage it on its own terms. We don't need to talk of money and the market and so on, we instead need to talk of the economic means for the satisfaction of the needs of all human beings with the least possible waste of energy to achieve them. Instead of the vague and ambiguous aim of some socialists to "the right to work", anarchist communists aim for "the right to well-being" (that is, the satisfaction of physical, creative and other needs).

But to satisfy these needs, we need to re-organise society. We need to have a revolution to abolish all classes and wage-labour. Anarchist communists reject the market, money, and profit as both exploitative and unnecessary. Instead, we need a society of common, voluntary agreement to meet these shared needs and wants. Thus if we solve the social problems of hierarchy and inequality, then 'economics' dissolves into a series of practical questions (how to produce a luxurious standard of living for all with a minimum of labour time; how to make production as safe, clean, and fun as possible; how best to integrate industry and agriculture, how best to integrate manual labour with intellectual labour etc.).

There are two aspects to communism. The first is the taking into possession of all of the wealth of the world, on behalf of the whole of humanity, because that wealth is the collective work of humanity. 'All belongs to all'. This requires the abolition of all property, and the holding of all resources in common for the well-being of all. The

second is organising society around the principle “From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.” This means everything should be produced, distributed and exchanged for free according to need. Everyone would be the judge of their own needs and take for free from the common storehouse whatever they needed. If there was a scarcity, things would be rationed according to need. One of the reasons the abolition of money is a necessity is because there can be no exact measure of the productive contribution of every individual, as production today is so interwoven. These two aspects of communism are intimately related: common possession of the necessities of production requires the common enjoyment of the fruits of production. The abolition of property requires the abolition of the wage system. Retaining some form of private property or monetary exchange would lead to the re-establishment of classes and the state. As Kropotkin noted, “the Revolution, we maintain, must be communist; if not, it will be drowned in blood, and have to begun over again.”

Communism is not some impractical dream. Even in today’s capitalist society, we have public bridges, beaches, roads, parks, museums, libraries and piped water (at least in some cities) which are free for anybody to use according to their needs. For example, the librarian does not ask you what your previous services to society have been before they get you a book from the shelves or stacks. Again, these are token examples that give us a glimpse of what is possible under a classless and moneyless society.

One of the most common misperceptions about communism is that it means a draconian police state where a small party elite exploit the majority of population, as what happened in the USSR, its Eastern European colonies, and what is happening in China, North Korea and Cuba. There are many theories on just what type of societies the above countries were or are, ranging from libertarian socialist Cornelius Castoriadis’ ‘bureaucratic capitalism’, to those of anarchists who claim it was ‘state capitalist’, but all are agreed that those societies are or were capitalist not communist.

John Crump lists five criteria for (libertarian forms of) communism:

1. The means of production will be owned and controlled communally, and production will be geared towards satisfying everyone’s needs. Production will be for use, and not for sale on the market;
2. Distribution will be according to need, and not by means of buying and selling;
3. Labour will be voluntary, and not imposed on workers by means of a coercive wages system;
4. A human community will exist, and social divisions based on class, nationality, sex or race will have disappeared,
5. opposition to all states, even the ones who falsely proclaim themselves to be ‘workers’ states’.\*

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\* Crump, *Non-Market Socialism*, MacMillan, 1987, pp. 42-46

On the basis of these criteria, we can now see that (say) the old USSR run by the Bolshevik elite from 1917 was a class society where the state, market and wage system were retained, enabling a small bureaucratic elite to be able to force the majority of the population to work for them. As a group of council communists said in the 1930s: “The socialisation concept of the Bolsheviks is therefore nothing but a capitalist economy taken over by the State and directed from the outside and above by its bureaucracy. The Bolshevik socialism is state-organised capitalism.”

### ★ SYNTHESIS: ANARCHIST COMMUNISM

Anarchism and communism are a necessary complement to one another. A synthesis of both are required for a free and equal society. To Kropotkin it is “communism without government, free Communism. It is a synthesis of the two chief aims prosecuted by humanity since the dawn of history - economical freedom and political freedom.”

On the one hand, communism needs to be anarchist or else it will become authoritarian communism. Communist economic arrangements without free, voluntary agreement could easily lead to dictatorship by a minority. Communism needs to be free, non-statist and voluntary from its outset. As Kropotkin noted, “communist organisations cannot be left to be constructed by legislative bodies called parliaments, municipal or communal councils. It must be the work of all, a natural growth, a product of the constructive genius of the great mass. Communism cannot be imposed from above; it cannot live, even for a few months, if the constant and daily co-operation of all did not uphold it. It must be free.” Communism could not exist without anarchism, without thousands and thousands of voluntary associations formed and reformed to meet people’s needs.

On the other hand, anarchism by itself, without communist economic arrangements, would perpetuate class divisions. If private property or money was retained in some form, it would be used by some groups to exploit others. It is futile to speak of political liberty when economic slavery still exists. The abolition of the state requires the abolition of capitalism. Anarchism needs communism because, by satisfying basic human needs such as food and shelter for all, communism provides the material basis for anarchism or political liberty.

Once both capitalism, the wage-system, and the state are abolished, individuals will be truly free to develop their own potential as they wish. Anarchist communism aims to produce the greatest amount of individuality combined with the greatest amount of community, and in the process create well being for all.

Now we are in a position to see that many modern anarchists lack any notion of communism, or socialism for that matter. Anarchism to them is reduced to the formation of liberal non-authoritarian groupings, based upon people’s subjective tastes. It is seen as a purely anti-authoritarian & anti-governmental idea, rather than an expression of anti-capitalist/anti-statist or communist tendencies in society. On the other hand we see that some modern anarchists, particularly those from Marxist or