



everything you ever
wanted to know about
anarchism, but were
afraid to ask...

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The Happy meal

There was this enormous company who had earned its wealth from using underpaid workers, hassled by middle managers (with a vague promise of a career), to produce low cost, fast food. It had worked a treat for decades. And then came an annoying increasing tendency of criticism, questioning and even boycotting of the company's food and premises. The company had to do something. Marketing was the answer, again. Make people believe, again. Imagine the meeting with the marketing person and the executive.

- Who's your target market?
- Everyone.
- That's pretty ambitious.
- We've got hungry shareholders.
- OK, there's a lot of good food around. We need to point to the unique quality of your specific product here. What is so special with your product that would make everyone want it?
- Huh, nothing really, it's just mechanically reconstructed dead animal, slabbed with the odd fatty sauces, a fraction of salad (for those whingy health bastards) and squeezed into a bun. We're just making it, it's your job to make it special.
- There has got to be something special that you can use in your marketing. A potential customer satisfaction.
- They get loads of calories from 'em.
- I'm looking for a sense of uniqueness, yet variety ...
- Small, medium or large?
- Sorry, there has to be something ... something that adds to the meal experience.
- Funny hats?
- Food. Sort of goes with taste, mental and physical pleasure ...
- Plastic toy?
- I need something bit more ... something metaphorically eternal. ..
- We're everywhere! Everywhere! Everywhere!
- Maybe we can try something about the genuine touch, something that gives the customer the feel of him being individually catered for ...
- Every hamburger is individually wrapped?
- Let's just focus on the meal environment, yeah?
- Frankly, we just want people to leave as quickly as possible.
- But maybe a little something to cheer customers up and make them feel welcomed?
- Oh yes, of course. We always have a swarm of colourful flyers bobbing from the ceiling.
- Listen, at least service must be essential in a place where people come to satisfy one of the fundamental needs of life - hunger. People who greet and listen. Someone who puts effort into making the stay memorable.
- I'll have you know, our people at the counter have strict orders to smile. Waiters? Man, this is a fast food chain. The customers don't have time to sit around and wait for a waiter. Fucking expensive those people too, I tell you. We let the customer be his own waiter instead. That's restaurant progress. You're asking for staff effort? Try to smile at the same time you have to work out all those specific menu buttons on the cash machine. Or to smile while getting rid of soggy wrappers and wiping grease off the tables. Those efficient smiles illustrate the fundament of our business.
- I take it they're paid accordingly.
- Absolutely.
- Can I just sum this up? You have a chain of restaurants, which has forced out genuine local competition, and you use underpaid staff selling to world-wide customers you want to pop in everyday, serving, sorry, handing them a limited choice of uninspired mass-produced calorie shocks, in such a tedious environment that they feel uncomfortable enough to leave their seats next to instantly.
- Now, that's a winner.
- Yes ... However, we need to rephrase it slightly. What about:
"Havin' fun; McDonald's is one of life's many small pleasures that millions of people around the world enjoy every day. Great food. Fun to eat. Casual environment. Local and familiar. And always something new." What do you think?
- I'm loving it!

This is not just about an infectious spread of McDonald's. This is the world we live in. Misery sold as happiness. Exploitation sold as care. Us paying for our own manipulation. It's a worldview, a way of doing things. It's the shit jobs and the shitty lives.

You can swap the hamburgers for any modern mass-produced product, the smiling staff for any underpaid labour sweating away without being trusted to think for themselves. You can swap McDonald's for any big single-minded company, the single-minded shareholder for any single-minded shareholder. You can swap the company for institutions, the army or the church, the executive for parents, head masters, generals, the prime minister, the pope... You can swap the middle managers for teachers, politicians, policemen, traffic wardens, colonels, priests... It's the world. Not how we designed it to suit us, but how it was organised for us to fit into their agenda.

But on the whole, doesn't capitalism work?

It works, but for whom? For a tiny, comfortable self-selected few. A tiny, laid-back elite that lives and prospers from the rest of us. It's a world structured for market shares and expansion. Our present system spends a fortune trying to convince us that this is how it has to be: that it is the 'natural' way. In essence, the system is based on controlling the majority of people to benefit the minority. Big business is built on the hierarchy of command that runs right from the chief executive to the poor sod deep-frying. People do what they are told or they are sacked. Customers are 'told' through marketing. We are offered a passivity, a fear of losing what we have, and scapegoats to focus that fear. We are fed an illusion of a contentment and satisfaction that is just beyond our reach. Our lives can only be fulfilled with this product, this holiday, this person.

So how do anarchists want it to work?

Anarchism is about human potential and the belief that everyone, not just a small elite, is entitled to a satisfactory life. The best way to have satisfying and fulfilled lives where people work in a positive way, is where people get together voluntarily. Every person can make their own decisions, and actions carried out by people committed in their own minds have a real power and beauty. Anarchism is the belief that people are at their best when not being forced in a particular direction or to do something. Anarchists have got nothing against people listening to each other and taking advice. It's just that we don't want the advice to be compulsory. Instead we could become active partners in a world by the way we listen and choose.

Wouldn't there be any businesses in an anarchist society?

Anarchism is not a vision of a smallholder society with everyone growing their own food and just existing at a subsistence level. Finding human potential means finding what we are good at and what we enjoy. Factories destroy humanity, but there are lots of complex establishments complete with highly specialised roles that would do things for other people with them doing other, specialised things in return. This specialisation is natural: it adds to the diversity and sophistication of a society. You can be the artist, mechanic, builder, farmer or chef - as long as you appreciate it.

What would be so different with the anarchist version?

The big difference from the present business and service world would be that a free association of people would not tolerate one of their group getting powerful and rich while the others don't. The well-off are well-off because they (or more likely their ancestors) have ripped off others. A society without compulsion wouldn't tolerate one person getting above themselves and ordering people about. It would not tolerate people getting a lot for doing little, while others have to overwork to get less.

For example, we need and want hospitals, and our existing health service is resourced by us through taxes and donations. But somehow the process of caring for people is hijacked by remote, centralised administrations and managements, transforming patients, medical staff and activity plans into dehumanised figures and charts, exchangeable pawns in a game of tight budget medical care domino. Anarchists believe in putting decisions and planning in the hands of the people who are assigned to carry out the actual work. Only they have the in-depth knowledge and a hands-on experience of the complexity of needs and resources. They are also the ones who are the most likely to find creative and alternative solutions to problems.

During the Middle Ages, when the people of the village of Gheel, Belgium, said "send us your insane" they took into their homes people previously regarded as demons. Their successful and humane care contrasted with institutions that put the mentally ill in chains. It's the individual human scale that scores and the inhumanity of the institution that destroys.

How is a world without compulsion going to produce anything?

This is a world with potential. We have tremendous capacity, skills and strengths and yet at the moment our system doesn't even let us feed, clothe and house the world. All that productivity and yet what we have is poverty, hunger, fear, boredom and ignorance. People are thrown on a rubbish tip of unemployment and prevented from contributing because of the nature of a system that treats famine and wars as changes in the markets.

Let's say that everyone is entitled to the necessities of life, not because they have the buying potential, but because they are human beings. Forget money and the market. Forget the IMF and the G8. Forget the dirty stain on the earth that's modern industrialism. Forget that mass marketing of those calorie shocks to people who really don't need them.

I'm sorry, but in my 'free group', I'm going to lie under my tree and just contemplate the universe.

I've got nothing against tree-lying and maybe for poets and Buddhas it's an essential contribution to life and I don't think the tree-lyer should be denied stuff they need to live just because they are not working. It's a good reaction against the tedium and uselessness of today's work. But you want it to be your life? Personally it's not going to work for me for more than a few days. You would need to be a very special person to be that lazy or that deep a thinker.

Our urge to work and create has been destroyed by the modern world of work. But people still have that need to work deep inside them. People endure the mind-numbing drudgery of their paid employment and they go home and work with passion and dedication on their hobbies and interests. People cook, they make furniture, create art, and they build. You name it and we do it. We want to grow, we want to develop, overcome challenges, create beauty and be appreciated. Instead they have us in some call centre doing something we don't believe in, bossed around by people who believe in it less.

A real desire for work is nothing to do with wanting power, wealth or status. That's just the way it gets perverted today. We're sold this illusion: if we put up with enough, we can get the money to do things that we really want outside work. It's the idea that if we claw our way up some hierarchy we can get the money or power to do what we really want. Even those weeks in the Bahamas for the privileged few are not a fair price of unfulfilled human potential.

I met this drains inspector once. There was something deeply odd with him, but I couldn't put my finger on it. It was only when he's left that I realised what it was: he loved his job. He lived for drains, their complexities and their usefulness: they enriched his life. He had something that I envied. How many people do you know that are in love with their jobs? Even if we did once, our existing system can suck that out of you.

Oh, come on. If people are housed and clothed why should they work at all?

Yes, people do try and minimise their work while maximising their wealth and power. In today's alienated society you're sometimes pushed to act like that. Plus, people are sold this image as a modern survival strategy. If you're coming together voluntarily with people you know and want to work with, not only is this selfish behaviour less likely to be tolerated, but you are less likely to want to behave like that.

Take away armies, governments, police, judiciary, prisons, managers, bosses, bureaucracy, advertising, insurance, junk food, dream consumerism and life-stylism, and you are left with a lot less non-productive work. If everyone had the necessities and the free choice, work could be about play, beauty and creativity. Expressing our humanity.

Isn't it just fair that some jobs are better paid than other less important ones?

These days jobs are seen as important when they are well paid. But the really important jobs are at the bottom of the heap not the top. Today, rewards go with power. People get paid more because they have the power to reward themselves more. Men getting paid more than women reflects power distributions. Gates' millions are down to his control of technology. The creatives, carers and contributors are stuffed: the nurse at the bottom end of a rubbish deal. These differences between those at the bottom and those at the top are obscene. Why do we tolerate them?

We seem to have ended up in a system where we reward the parasitic and useless, while penalising those who work at something society needs. 'Our' chief executive get paid up to a hundred and seventy times more than those who really do the work. If something is vital to our society (like dealing with rubbish), you can guarantee it will be badly paid. How could it be done differently? The rubbish could be collected with a rota. Just appreciating the work for its real value would produce a change. Communal effort, a rota, specialists that get appreciated? They're all improvements. If work is vital, people can come together and sort it out themselves. Somebody standing over us getting disproportionately rewarded for ordering people about? It has never really helped.

But don't we need some kind of management?

Managerial skill (when it's not just an illusion) is often their acquisition and ownership of knowledge and skills that come from the workforce. There have been management consultants who have been employed and they have discretely asked the people at the bottom how it should be done, and then they have charged of fortune for these stolen ideas (just with fewer staff). Managerless nightshifts have been seen to play around with technology in their factory and improve the productivity and management takes fright and puts in a night manager to get that productivity back to its previous low levels. There are even managers who know that they don't contribute anything anymore. It's just more money and no stupid hat.

It's not that anarchists don't see the need for organisation and leadership. On the contrary, anarchists believe in real organisation where decisions and actions emerge from the group. Actions and decisions that are imposed by threats and sanctions represent the opposite of real organisation.

You give people a crisis and they can work together and find a solution. They do that without authority, without orders, without someone getting all the power and all the rewards. Even the army has a system of 'Chinese parliament' where they dispense with trappings of rank of authority so that they can sort out how to do something. The British and Australian armies in the Second World War selected leaders by giving 'leaderless groups' difficult tasks but no structure. They just waited to see what organisation emerged and then codified it with rank markings and pay differentials. Anarchists would argue that it is those rank markings and pay differentials that destroy the natural organising skills of groups that even the most authoritarian of organisations recognise. Any organisation, however repugnant, has people that can 'get things done'. And these people are rarely the people at the top of the hierarchy.

They are just people who understand personal contacts, relationships and reciprocity. People 'in' authority lack authority of their own.

It's possible that in the past owners of factories and industries had some belief system driving them to discipline the workforce and screw as much out of them as they could. These days, owners are anonymous funds, a tight legal framework, a series of formulas on computer systems, government procedures. Humans are caught in a machine with our actions controlled, our thoughts channelled and our impulses drugged. And all the time, we're watched, monitored, surveyed, measured, counted and bio-tagged. All the time we are being 'done to' rather than doing. If we had control *over* our own lives we would never need to be counted again. Counting is what the machine does to us.

What is so bad with having people telling us what to do?

Behind every authoritarian there is a hollowness. If someone is ordering you what to do, that means that their arguments and reasons just haven't worked. He may *even* be convinced of the rightness of his case (most of them are), but he has still failed to convince: 'Do it because I say so!', 'Littering £50 fine'. The flash of a speed camera. These are all statements about failure. 'But it's for your own good!' whines the rule creator as the rules are ignored. That's the essence of an authoritarian system: some one or group that 'knows best', tells others how to behave, and then backs their orders up with a system of punishments. There are always people that 'know better' but the genuine article always seems to me to use persuasion, questioning or example.

Just ordering people about creates it's own dynamic of rebellion. It's a good reason to do things when *you've* been ordered not to. It's about keeping the individual spirit alive, showing that you're not in their control. So much of our petty theft and destruction is about people showing that they can't be pushed around. And the authoritarian reaction to this is just more newspaper editorials leading to another cycle of rules, punishments, fines and human reactions.

In our society, anything that is done is done despite the formal structures, not because of. Codes are broken, rules bent, bosses ignored and laughed at behind their back. Mission statements a subject of derision, logos suggestions for unnatural practices. Rules are best seen as a list of what really occurs, not as a list of prohibited behaviour. Breaking the rules is the mark of the risk-taker: insider trading, cheating in exams, dealing in drugs. There may be a risk, but there are rewards too. What do those rules do apart from increase the possible rewards? Do they change behaviour? Will they ever? But there's another angle in all of this and that is the motivations of those few people trying to control the behaviour of the many. OK, so everyone may be entitled to think they have all the answers, but it becomes more than peculiar when winning some sort of election legitimises your power to impose those answers. What is it inside of them that makes them want to impose?

This is really what sets anarchists aside from other political groups. Fascists, socialists, Christian Democrats, Labour Party activists, Greens, Liberals and Conservatives see government at the core of their systems. They all see their ideal government as reflecting the will of the mass of people, but if that is the case why would they even need that government?

Christian Democrats may not love interfering in markets but they tend to be unwilling to let people smoke what they want in their own homes. Social Democrats may be unclear over which rules to have, but they are very clear that these rules should cover very wide areas. The Greens in England may be a little way from really getting serious about rules though they do believe that the military should be used to apprehend criminals attempting to by-pass immigration.

Government grows. Every year it absorbs more of the national economy and the real difference between the other political groups is the rate of expansion. Anarchists are different. No government, just a world where individuals and communities decide where they will put their own energy and resources.

Hang on a minute. Won't people just selfishly pursue their own agendas?

Isn't this what we have at the moment? We have a world where most wealth is inherited by a tiny proportion of the population, and this tiny proportion is then licensed by law to pursue its own selfish agendas against the interest of the majority of people. Every advert on TV, every pound collected in tax and then spent on propaganda or the military, every chairman's bonus, every unwanted new motorway is the triumph of some relatively privileged person's selfish agenda.

US presidents invade other countries, Africa slides into poverty and starvation, Prime Ministers lie, chief executives fiddle their accounts and feather their nests. Selfish and destructive behaviour is all around us, how do we handle that? Is it really best done by setting up systems that give one person power over another?

Yes, individuals are capable of selfish and destructive acts, but in an anarchist society the individual has less potential for destruction. It's not the Hitlers that are the real problem, it is the people who just do what they are told and are tied into an evil worldview through a system of government. Without that elected position Hitler would have continued being this sad, demented figure wandering the streets. It was the state apparatus that gave him his destructive power. Nothing is as selfish and destructive as a government convinced of its moral superiority and its mission in history.

Seems to me that for anarchism to work people must be good?

[Otherwise known as the 'all right in theory, but wouldn't work in practice' argument.]

Personally, I think that people are neither good nor bad; they're both. Government, like the authoritarian father, works on the principle that people have a tendency towards the bad and that needs to be controlled, in the end through violence. This begs the question of the politician's own tendency towards the bad. If we're so bad that we need governments then what makes the politicians so good?

The state is a recent phenomenon - it's only in the last few hundred years that it's really got its act together. Has it made the world a better place? Yes, materially we might be better off, but it is difficult to put all that down to the state. The horrors of our age are Auschwitz, Hiroshima, My Lai, Gulags, Killing Fields and trench warfare to name a few. Everyone was a tool of the state. They were devices for getting where they wanted to go. Just stepping stones for the modern governments. Mobs of ill-informed people can commit horrendous acts of violence. Name me one that has created just a fraction of the misery represented by that list above?

You think you're not going to have murderers and rapists in an anarchist society?

Yes, but I would expect to have fewer. In the way that paedophiles are often abused as children and murderers tend to have violent childhoods, a better society produces fewer victims and victim creators. People who hurt people, tend to be doing what they think has been done to them. Our present society, with its values of oppression and violence, creates its own criminals. Free people grow up happier.

Don't we need the police to deal with criminals?

One of the biggest arguments for the police force is built on the fear of the anonymous murderer who could hit on anyone. But in reality murderers know their victims. Crimes of passion linked to the hot-house of the family could never be prevented by the police.

Crime, including murders, is often the product of the drive for power, money and status. Crime mirrors the values of our present society: that you succeed in a competitive race by using other people, or getting rid of them. Businesses are successful to the extent to which they exploit individuals, and crime is just business carried on by other means.

Our present system of control is an illusion. We spend a fortune of our money (three billion pounds just on London policing alone) and in return what do we get? There's a huge volume of crime. Yet police and judiciary cost us ten times the total value of goods stolen. That's another crime all on its own. The police was created for the privileged: a fungus grown out of their fear. It's there to protect those who have grabbed a disproportionate share of society's wealth. This is a society that puts property over people. Crime that faces ordinary people is not solved: the police struggle just to record it.

Crime existed before the police, but it is questionable if there was more crime then than now. Certainly the fear of crime is greater now than it was in the 18th century when the government was trying to persuade doubting public opinion that the creation of a police really would make a difference... Another reason why our existing system doesn't work is that it's based on vengeance. It's supposed to be about deterrent, but it doesn't work. Convicts who spend time inside come out angrier and more likely to commit crimes. How is locking people away with other people with problems (including the wardens) expected to make people grow? They want to kick the society that kicked and is still kicking them. A world of impersonal control takes away the tools that make people able to cope with the outside world.

On our planet of endless potential there are currently ten million people locked up in prison. Almost a quarter of these are in the States, which always strikes me as ironic as it was originally a dumping ground for transported English criminals. The end result of all this prison is always more crime. The vast majority (58% in England) of ex-prisoners re-offend and are caught. For imprisoned young people the chances of re-offending can reach 98%. If you wanted to increase crime then you would use imprisonment.

And there's another reason why this expensive and barbaric paraphernalia, the law, fails. The definition of a criminal is very much conditioned by the unequal society we live in. If you're rich and steal you're less likely to go to prison than if you're poor and steal. And your skin colour is another factor. 'Criminal' is not a measure of how much harm you do people, but how near you are to the bottom of our oppressive social hierarchy.

We also have a vast crime industry of lawyers and law-enforcers, journalists selling their papers on the fear of crime, and politicians selling themselves as 'tough on crime'. Would these people really like an end to crime? They'd lose their privileged little jobs in a second.

... you want your society policed by a mob of tabloid readers?

It already is. We used to have a system of 'hue and cry' where the whole community pursued a thief. If the thief ran into a house the 'mob' would wait outside, as it didn't feel right to invade someone's home. Communities know what is going on. They know what harms peoples and they know both the victims and the people that commit the crimes. The police and law just get in the way of this process. The stupid, antisocial boy with the knife does need to be confronted and dealt with. But anything we did that was different than locking him up and making him more bitter, more isolated and more trained in criminal methods, would be an improvement.

But we live in cities now. Surely anarchism better suits some bygone world of little country villages?

A world of settled communities where people know everyone else and can deal with issues like crime is more associated with villages than the city. But the problem is not the city itself: just its modern version.

There is something about the anonymity of large cities today that can work for us in a positive way. We have the illusion of doing what we want without anyone on our back. But, in our current urbanism, for all the facilities and freedom of the city, there is a deep hollowness, and that hollowness is a lack of human contact. It's fear and alienation and the mind-numbing brutality of the commuter as they sit in their cars. It's loneliness and isolation where the pet becomes the substitute. An isolated person cannot develop any more than someone who's chained.

Today, our cities are serviced and we are separate from that process and don't feel involved. In the same way that dealing with crime is seen as down to the police, we divorce ourselves from real responsibility. The result is a world with no care. We drop litter because it's not our place. We tag because it's our only way of putting our name on the town. We fight because we want that recognition. I'd like a city of communities where what happens in that locality is down to the people in it. We'd sort out the traffic, and the rubbish, and the crime, and the housebound elderly, and the education. It would be our borough and we would express what we want and how we want to do it. It wouldn't be perfect and it's possible that not everything would go smoothly, but to feel that sense of ownership! Your home, in your area.

People must have lived in free communities before. Why was the modern state invented?

Watch the way the modern state is extended. Behind every growth there is always a threat of the 'other'. What this threat is varies considerably. Vikings figured big in the birth of the English government. The weather and seasons might have been a threat in pre-history and there is some evidence to link the growth in authority with a minority keeping information on the seasons. But the modern manufactured threat trend appears to be a shift from communism to muslims. My guess for the future manufactured threat will be the Chinese. The 'other' could also be asylum seekers, the

Russian mafia, criminals travelling from the capital, people of different colour, or different sexualities, travellers, or the latest youth culture. All these can be made into a threat that needs a defence, and that need for defence is always used to extend centralised power. There are not many governments that say 'yes, we had a big hand in creating this problem and we need to acknowledge that and withdraw'.

The ultimate in the manufactured threat is the war. It doesn't matter that one decade's mass civilian bombings is the next decade's economic ally. War brings a country together behind 'our boys' as yet more of them arrive back in body bags. War distracts and disciplines and is the real engine of growth for the state. It doesn't even have to be a real war as long as it plays well in the media.

What about personal relationships?

Anarchists have long attacked the role of power at the personal level as well as the political. The patriarchal family is the state in miniature with the policing so often done by the fist. The traditional nuclear family is dying: women don't tolerate it anymore, children don't tolerate it anymore and most men don't want it. The idea that one (potentially violent) man knows best is no longer acceptable in the family. The child about to touch the hot fire can be warned, but that is not the same as punishing the child for reaching out their hand. So many children being hurt as a response to a parent's fear. It's not 'if you touch that I'll hit you', but 'if you touch that you'll be hurt'.

Relationships are about people and they grow, change and flow with time. They can't be frozen into an institutional framework. To do that is to lose their creativity and humanity. There is no possibility of a free society while the family is a system for oppressing women and children.

Are you going to bother with education, then?

Our present education system is about keeping children off the street, while trying to make them well-trained subjects of the state. Otherwise known in England as 'keeping up with the Germans'. Education for ordinary people was only introduced in England after our rulers noticed how powerful Prussia's army was, with its educated and technically proficient soldiers. Today, 'our' National Curriculum sees its core values as promoting the institution of marriage, the rule of law and participation in the democratic process. Current education is a tool that enables people to engage in the 'continued globalisation of the economy and society.'

Schools are still too much like factories where children are taught the value of silently receiving authorised wisdom. Intricate hierarchies are developed based on the ability of a pupil to regurgitate back selected information. Those that can't or won't recite fall to the bottom of the heap and are kicked out early. And this school hierarchy is replicated in people's working life. Truly, modern education is for life. Young children have such a thirst for knowledge and it's destroyed by our school system. Knowledge becomes a mark of status, skills a mark of hierarchy. And the end result is some bored functionary force-feeding sullen resisters. It's a waste. Education should be part of life, not some fenced off imitation factory.

To anarchists education is crucial, but it's a different vision to what we have at the moment. For me education comes back down to the question of human potential: it's about exploring the world. No compulsion, exams or regimentation, just the playful, enquiring mind. It's one of the most special things in the world. Personally, I want to see that tree shade (remember lying in it?) being used for groups of people hammering something out. Not necessarily agreeing, but learning and expanding.

What's your problem with Marxists?

Well, theoretically we want the same thing. Marx wanted a classless, equal society without government. The problem is, how do we get to this point? Marx wanted a temporary revolutionary government as part of the process. Anarchists said that this would just lead to a form of authority that would not relinquish its power. Governments act for themselves and it's no different whether it's degenerate capitalist or revolutionary proletarian.

This is an old argument but the anarchists were right. At some point in the creation of a more equal and more free society (let's call it a revolution for short), authoritarian institutions are introduced and become a handicap for the process. The revolution is not the expression of what people want; it becomes what a few men in beards (traditionally) think it should be.

So when the Marxist paper sellers (or the 'managers in the wings') suggest that it is time to get some 'discipline' and 'proper organisation' it's time to worry. They will point out the danger of both 'irresponsible' revolutionary elements and the danger of infiltration by forces of the privileged and powerful. They will point to the need for pragmatism and the need for sacrifices to be made. They will suggest the need for a few wise men (sorry, but it's always men) to oversee and manage the process. And somehow, through some mysterious process, those few wise men will turn out to be themselves and their friends. And the thing that always gets me, the thing that really sticks in my throat is their final definitive argument: "But we're all on the same side". Let's make it clear: "You're not".

So, has anarchism ever existed?

Well, bottom line: we lost. Anarchism has been a mass movement at times: 1930s Spain and 1910s Russia were probably the high points. But each time the movement has been violently suppressed. There's a tendency (after the third pint) for anarchists to get all misty-eyed about these periods and how they were cruelly betrayed (usually by Marxists). May '68 also pops up in the wet dreams of older anarchists.

Truth is, anarchism hasn't just existed in obscure historical periods where large groups of people waved black or red and black flags. It exists all around us. Every time people come together to freely sort things out without authority and without orders: that's anarchism. It's the group of friends meeting for a common purpose, work colleagues meeting in a corridor to sort out what really needs doing, children playing together, or an un-policed internet. It's that marketplace I saw in Africa where thousands of vehicles of all types and pedestrians went round this huge unmarked roundabout with a civility and kindness that shames any technologically sophisticated, heavily policed, western traffic system. It's the bus driver that breaks his regulations to do a courtesy because he knows he's dealing with real people. It's the person that stands in front of tanks (only do it when the cameras are on please). It's the government scientist that tells the truth. It's any person that stands up for people against the forces of order. The English anarchist Colin Ward calls anarchism the cement that holds the bricks of society. I like that.

There's also an anarchism today in the influence of ideas. Ridiculed anarchist ideas of the nineteenth century are now the conventional wisdom. Emma Goldman talking of free love and the tyranny of the family would recognise modern changes. Sexuality is a more liberated area. Democracy as fake is a more recognised idea. Environmentalism and concern for animals is more widespread than it ever was. Punishment as justice is being questioned more. The idea of education as a process of growth, rather than receiving, is out there somewhere.

Are there different types of anarchism?

As many varieties as there are anarchists. Anarchist-individualists take the philosophy 'nothing is more to me than myself' and run with it. But that doesn't mean that anarchist-individualists are opposed to associations of egoists working together. Anarcho-syndicalism is a strand based on workplace organisation and using it as a suggestion for post revolutionary organisation.

There are anarchists that have come to the movement from the ecology or animal liberation struggles and prioritise this approach. This can be taken to the anti-technological current of anarcho-primitivism. You can check out their views on their websites. There are anarcho-feminists, federalists, mutualists and anarcho-communists. Situationism is an anarchist-linked approach that's quite influential. It's an analysis that emphasises the illusory nature of the 'spectacle' that we're fed.

Get anarchists down the pub and these differences can be seen as irreconcilable differences. In reality they are little more than different emphasises. The interests, backgrounds and passions of each anarchist create a unique approach. It's diverse and argumentative and it does make street selling the standardised message paper a little tricky. On the other hand it's creative and human. Current anarchism reflects the society we live in. It changes with the society.

And it's nothing to do with royalty?

I'm afraid not, that's monarchism. We wouldn't even bother with them as symbols for tourists.

How do you get anarchism?

Just refusing to accept things is a start. Our existing system is based on a con with a minority of people bullying, bribing and cajoling us. We don't have to buy into their system. When offered the immortal 'conservative' or 'progressive' choice, laugh at both of them. People who don't vote are making a positive choice and our number is increasing. In Britain and the USA, there are more people who refused to vote than those who voted for any leader. More and more, people are realising that the problem is not that the 'wrong' leader got in. The problem is this idea of the political leader in the first place.

When told that 'this is the way things have always been done' acknowledge your doubts. When you're repeatedly told that we are incapable of running our own lives, look at the type of people making those claims and what's in it for them. People who can't run their own lives gravitate to running other peoples. The only thing they deserve is our contempt.

From that we go to taking control of our own lives. Pushing the managers and the politicians and the priests and the experts to one side. Anyone who tells us that 'this is the way things have to be' is history. There's a power and a force and a creativity in every individual that just needs to be released. From a world where a minority 'knows best' (and does very well out of it), to a world where everyone creates

and shapes their own experience is not a big step away.

I'm not setting out a blueprint. I know what I want for the community where I live: needs of bored teenagers addressed, traffic constrained, rubbish sorted and estate agents executed. But this is one agenda amongst millions. To be free you have to know what to do. I want to work with people who have their own agendas. It's the individual agenda that should count, not some imposed model masquerading as the collective agenda.

What would this mean for you? Your imagination is the tool that counts. We can build new worlds.

. . . and violence?

Our existing system is maintained by violence. If we don't do what we are told then we run into the police. This police may try persuasion but if they don't succeed they will use violence. And if they don't succeed the army will be used. It runs from batons to stun guns, water cannons, plastic bullets, various gases, stun grenades, bullets to helicopter gunships. Nobody should underestimate the determination of the privileged minority to defend their system.

Personally I think that people who are trying to create their own lives will need to protect what they are building. In the same way that every peasant revolt burned the property records, we can't create a peaceful coexistence between the old and the new world. If a minority fights and attacks the majority, then the majority has to defend itself. Berkman called it "rolling up our sleeves" and that's the way I think of it too. Something that needs to be done.

If the majority of people still favour some idea of a state father figure that makes things better for them, then that's not a society that's going to turn anarchist. By the same token if a society is going through transformation then those people that remain committed to the idea of government are more to be pitied than regarded as targets. Any violence can only be a response: defending communities against attacks on freedom. Anarchism can never be about imposing your will on others.

There was this anarchist called Makhno who (with his soldiers) fought off a variety of governments in the Ukraine. The railway workers came to him and asked how he wanted the railways to be run. He looked at them quite puzzled and replied "that's for you to decide". Anarchism is freedom and equality, or it is not anarchism.

I was once at this riot in a rich area (such a depressing rarity) and there was a debate amongst the rioters about the public flower displays. Some saw these displays as a sign of privilege and wanted to destroy them. Others defended the flowers. There's a lot in our society that is attractive but is not available to everyone equally. I can understand the symbolism of those displays and how it leads to this passion for destruction. In this country a nice environment or view is (all too often) something that is bought.

Yet at the same time Anarchism is about a new world and (for me at least) flowers might form a part of that new world. Anarchism is not about mindless destruction. Anyone who trashes a busstop or flower display is making a point about their neuroses, not the new world they want. The drunks at a riot that throw their bricks from the back of the crowd and hit their own front ranks are people that need to be dealt with, not revolutionary heroes. Anarchist violence is not a tantrum at the world. Relatively privileged kids just running around in black hoods trying to demonstrate their essential 'badness' are sad and have no relationship to anarchism.

What's to stop some state walking back into your community and reclaiming it back for the forces of order?

No occupying army defeats a free people defending their homes. The occupying soldiers just don't care enough. A people determined to maintain their freedom can overcome any technologically superior power from the other side of the world. Finland in 1939 resisted the Soviet Union at odds of 200 to 1, and invented the Molotov cocktail in the process as their improvised anti-tank weapon. The Vietnamese eventually succeeded in pointing out to the Americans that 'destroying their country in order to save it' was not really defending 'Democracy'.

It's true that a people can't resist by conventional methods and it becomes a hit-and-run guerrilla war. Instead of tank battles the war becomes a media-led series of attritions. But large superpowers are spread thin: they have a lot to protect. They still have to pretend to their own people and troops that they're on the side of the good. The only way that they can politically defend any occupation is by claiming the occupied country is a threat to their own security. When people fight to free their own homes that lie is exposed and in the end killing more civilians in the name of democracy becomes such a hollow claim.

Isn't total freedom quite scary?

Yes, it is. There's something very scary about freedom. A sense of an infinite world: anything can happen. In a way it's easier just to take what we're given and complain about the scapegoats provided. Miserably packed into our mass transit, taken to places we don't want to be. We can comfort ourselves with our victim status: it's being done to us. The bastards are grinding us down again.

Anarchists are talking about a world of infinite possibility. If disasters happen we can't comfort ourselves with the illusion of 'just getting the system right'. We won't be able to say "they should get it right". We become the 'they'. Of course the idea of 'they should fix things' is an illusion, from thinking that police can control crime, intelligence services can control terrorism, to thinking governments can make people happier. Still, it's a comforting illusion. We have governments and authority because people have bought that illusion. Sometimes people can like just doing what they are told. Everything becomes somebody else's problem. Half the time Government survives out of sheer laziness: not so much state activity but our passivity. We can't blame the state anymore. It exists because we let it.

OK, I'm convinced. Where do I sign?

Get lost. This isn't some token gesture towards radicalism. It's not some 'pay your dues' student paper-selling, before you disappear to get your professional job. This is about a whole new world. Nobody is going to tell you what to do. Just make sure you do it.

There was this English anarchist called Larry Law. Down his street was this overhanging hedge and he noticed this blind person get entangled in it as their stick was only picking out ground-level obstacles. He got out his shears and hacked the overhanging hedge down. A neighbour asked him why he bothered and he replied: "because I'm an anarchist". I doubt it made the neighbour any the wiser, but just do what you have to do. It can help to find like-minded people, but just do it anyway.

'Everything you need to know about anarchism' isn't in this pamphlet. It's in your head. It's your dreams and desires. It's your passion and creativity. Do things differently.

More Information?

If you want an up-to-date listing of anarchist activities in the UK, check out the listings at the Anarchist Bookfair website: www.anarchistbookfair.org The Bookfair itself is the largest gathering of anarchists in the country. For an antiauthoritarian listing have a look at www.enrager.net.

If you're looking for anarchist literature check out the list on the next page. All these titles are available at Abooks: www.abooks.org for mail order anarchist books, postage-free within the UK.

Want to read more?

Introduction to Anarchism

ABC OF ANARCHISM, Alexander Berkman, Freedom Press, £4.90
ABOUT ANARCHISM, Nicolas Waite, Freedom Press, £4.20
ANARCHISM: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION, Colin Ward, OUP, £6.99
ANARCHY: A GRAPHIC GUIDE, Camden Press, £5.95
PROLEGOMENA, Rebel Press, £4.50

Classics of Anarchism

ANARCHISM AND OTHER ESSAYS, Emma Goldman, Dover Publications, £5.55
CONQUEST OF BREAD, Kropotkin, Elephant Editions, £3.95
FIELDS, FACTORIES AND WORKSHOPS, Kropotkin, Freedom Press, £9.00
GOD AND THE STATE, Bakunin, Dover Publications, £4.43
MALATESTA, LIFE AND IDEAS, Malatesta, Freedom Press, £8.85
MUTUAL AID, Kropotkin, Freedom Press, £10.00

Anarcha-feminism

UNTYING THE KNOT, Rebel Press, £0.90
WOMEN AND THE SPECTACLE, Spectacular Times, £0.60

Anarcho-syndicalism

ANARCHISM AND ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM, Rudolf Rocker, Freedom Press, £3.00

Individualism

EGO AND ITS OWN, Max Stirner, Rebel Press, £8.50

Situationism

BIGGER CAGES, LONGER CHAINS, Larry Law, Spectacular Times, £1.80
LEAVING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, Chris Gray, Rebel Press, £9.90
REVOLUTION OF EVERYDAY LIFE, Raoul Vaneigem, Rebel Press, 8.99
SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE, Guy Debord, Rebel Press, £6.99

Anarchist History

ANARCHISTS IN THE SPANISH REVOLUTION, Peirats, Freedom Press, £11.95
ANGRY BRIGADE, Elephant Editions, £2.00
BONNOT GANG, Richard Parry, Rebel Press, £5.50
DYNAMITE, Louis Adamic, Rebel Press, £5.50
LESSONS OF THE SPANISH REVOLUTION, Vernon Richards, Freedom Press, £6.00

Anarchism Today

ANARCHY IN ACTION, Colin Ward, Freedom Press, £5.95
ON FIRE, One-off Press, £3.00
SUMMER IN THE PARK, Tony Alien, Freedom Press, £8.50
TAZ THE TEMPORARY AUTONOMY ZONE, Hakim Bey, Autonomedia, £5.55



anarchism is not

Chaos within a bloody struggle for survival.

That's what we have at the moment.

The pursuit of your selfish interest
over the needs of others.

That's what we have at the moment.

A state of total disorganisation.

That's what we have at the moment.

The triumph of the strong over the weak.

That's what we have at the moment.

so what is it?