

Defining Anarchism

Jason Justice

Anarchism has been defined many ways by many different sources. The word “anarchism” is taken from the word “anarchy” which is drawn from dual sources in the Greek language. It is made up of the Greek words *αν* (meaning: absence of [and pronounced “an”]) and *αρχη* (meaning: authority or government [and pronounced “arkhe”]). Today, dictionary definitions still define anarchism as the absence of government. These modern dictionary definitions of anarchism are based on the writings and actions of anarchists of history and present. Anarchists understand, as do historians of anarchism and good dictionaries and encyclopedias, that the word anarchism represents a positive theory. Exterior sources, however, such as the media, will frequently misuse the word anarchism and, thus, breed misunderstanding.

A leading modern dictionary, *Webster’s Third International Dictionary*, defines anarchism briefly but accurately as, “a political theory opposed to all forms of government and governmental restraint and advocating voluntary cooperation and free association of individuals and groups in order to satisfy their needs.” Other dictionaries describe anarchism with similar definitions. The *Britannica-Webster* dictionary defines the word anarchism as, “a political theory that holds all government authority to be unnecessary and undesirable and advocates a society based on voluntary cooperation of individuals and groups.” Shorter dictionaries, such as the *New Webster Handy College Dictionary*, define anarchism as, “the political doctrine that all governments should be abolished.”

These similar dictionary definitions of anarchism reflect the evolution of the theory of anarchism made possible by anarchist intellectuals and movements. As a result, dictionary definitions, although fair, only reflect watered down definitions of the word “anarchism”. Professor Noam Chomsky, in fact, has refuted the definition, as written in the *New American Webster Handy College Dictionary*, describing anarchism as a “political doctrine.” According to Chomsky, “...anarchism isn’t a doctrine. It’s at most a historical tendency, a tendency of thought and action, which has many different ways of developing and progressing and which, I would think, will continue as a permanent strand of human history.” Other modern definitions of anarchism are thoroughly explained, not as a word, but as a history of movements, people and ideas. *The Encyclopedia of the American Left*, in fact, gives a three page history of anarchism, yet does not once define the word.

Prior to the existence of the word anarchism people used the term “Libertarian Socialism,” which meant the same thing as anarchism. “Libertarian socialism” was used largely by Mexican

radicals in the early eighteenth century. William Godwin was the first proclaimed anarchist in history and the first to write about anarchism. He was born in 1756 in Weisbech, the capital of North Cambridgeshire. He later married feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and had a daughter, Mary Shelley — author of *Frankenstein*. Godwin published a book called *Political Justice* in 1793 which first introduced his ideas about anarchism, Godwin was forgotten about, however, and after his death Pierre Joseph Proudhon became a leading anarchist figure in the world. His book *What is Property?* incorporated greater meaning to the word anarchism; anarchism became not only a rejection of established authority but a theory opposing ownership of land and property as well.

Anarchism fully blossomed as a defined theory when Russian anarchists Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) and Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) started to write and speak. Bakunin had a major influence in the world and introduced anarchism to many people. Kropotkin was one of the many people inspired by Bakunin. Kropotkin wrote many books on anarchism, including *Mutual Aid, Fields, Factories and Workshops*, and *The Conquest of Bread*, and greatly aided in the evolution of the theory of anarchism. Kropotkin wrote the first adept encyclopedia definition of anarchism in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1910. His definition was fifteen pages long. He started the definition by introducing the word anarchism as:

the name given to a principle of theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government — harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of the needs and aspirations of a civilized being, In a society developed on these lines, the voluntary associations which already now begin to cover all fields of human activity would take a still greater extension so as to substitute themselves for the state of its functions.

Following Kropotkin, Leo Tolstoy furthered the ideas which make up the meaning of the word “anarchism”. Tolstoy introduced Christian anarchism (rejecting church authority but believing in God) and broadened anarchism’s meaning. Tolstoy, in favour of the growth of anarchism, wrote “The anarchists are right in the assertion that, without Authority, there could not be worse violence than that of Authority under existing conditions.”

As the 20th century emerged anarchism began to peak and the definition of anarchism became concrete with the growth of new anarchist writers and movements. The execution and imprisonment of eight anarchists in Chicago in 1886 sparked anarchism’s growth in the United States. The “Haymarket Eight” flourished anarchists such as Voltairine de Cleyre and Lucy Parsons. Parsons was born into slavery and later became an anarchist and an ardent speaker and working class rebel; the Chicago police labelled Parsons, “...more dangerous than a thousand rioters”. Emma Goldman also became a part of the anarchist movement due to the Chicago Martyrs. Described as a “damn bitch of an anarchist,” Goldman also broadened the meaning of anarchism and introduced the greatest and most important ideas of anarchist feminism in history which prevail, as a result of Goldman, to this day.

Emma Goldman’s life-long comrade, Alexander Berkman, played a major part in helping to define the word “anarchism”. He wrote a book called *ABC of Anarchism* which defined and describes anarchism and is still read today. Berkman wrote, “Anarchism means you should be free;

that no one should enslave you, boss you, rob you, or impose upon you. It means you should be free to do the things you want to do; and that you should not be compelled to do what you do not want to do.”

Anarchism was put into action by giant movements throughout history which proved its definition was more than theoretical. The communal efforts of anarchism were seen in the Paris Commune in the early 19th century, the revolutionary organizing of Mexican working class rebels was proven possible by anarchists such as Ricardo Flores Magon and revolutionaries like Emiliano Zapata, and the Spanish Revolution of 1936–39 proved anarchists’ capability of creating anarchism within small sectors of the world. Certainly today we can see anarchism in action in places like Mon dragon, Spain, where anarchists are working in collectives and trying to live free of authority.

Although the word anarchism is understood by many in its classic sense (that defined by dictionaries and by anarchists of history), the word is often misused and misunderstood. Anarchism, because of the threat it imposes upon established authority, has been historically, and in still, misused by power holders as violence and chaos. As anarchist historian George Woodcock put it, “Of the more frivolous is the idea that the anarchist is a man who throws bombs and wishes to wreck society by violence and terror. That this charge should be brought against anarchists now, at a time when they are the few people who are not throwing bombs or assisting bomb throwers, shows a curious purblindness among its champions.” The claim that anarchism is chaos was refuted long ago by Alexander Berkman when he wrote:

I must tell you, first of all, what anarchism is not. It is not bombs, disorder, or chaos. It is not robbery or murder. It is not a war of each against all. It is not a return to barbarianism or to the wild state of man. Anarchism is the very opposite of all that.

These refutations of stereotypes associated with anarchism are sometimes trampled by the popular misuse of the word anarchism. It is not uncommon for a Middle Eastern nation in the midst of US-imposed turmoil to be labelled by the media as “complete anarchy,” a phrase which undermines the true definition of the word anarchism and all those who toiled, and who do toil, to make the word anarchism mean what it does today.

Modern anarchists still work hard to help anarchism maintain its validity and history. Anarchism today is being used to find solutions the problems of power; not just state power, but corporate power and all immediate forms of domination among individuals and organizations. Anarchists such as L. Susan Brown have introduced ideas such as existential individualism, while other anarchists remain loyal to anarchy-syndicalism and class struggle. Anarchism has also been spread around the world through music and bands such as Crass, introducing anarchism and anti-speciesism and urging self-sufficiency among workers and community members. Other anarchists such as Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin, an ex-Black Panther, are introducing new means of organizing and directly challenging racism. Furthermore, anarchism has become integrated into ecological issues thanks in part to eco-anarchist ideas and freethinking organizations such as Earth First! Also, we see anarchists working to keep anarchism, in theory and practice, alive and well around the world with anarchist newspapers such as *Love and Rage* in Mexico and the United States, anarchist book publishers such as AK Press in the U.S. and the U.K., and political prisoner support groups such as the Anarchist Black Cross.

As documented, the word anarchism has a long history. Although the word is simply derived from Greek tongue, the philosophy and actions of anarchists in history and present give the word

“anarchism” proper definition. Dictionary definitions, as quoted, are sometimes fair to anarchism, but far from complete. The misuse of the word anarchism is unfortunate and has been a problem anarchists have had to deal with for the last century. Because of the misuse of anarchism, the simple dictionary definitions of anarchism, and the different interpretations of anarchism the word can take on many meanings, but the truly accurate meaning of the word anarchism can be found in anarchist history, anarchist writings and anarchist practice.

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