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Interview with RUTH KINNA, Professor of Political Philosophy at Loughborough University in the United Kingdom, editor of *Anarchist Studies*, and author of many books and articles about socialism, anarchism, and the history of radical thought.

HELLO, RUTH KINNA, thank you for agreeing to this interview! You are interested in the history of ideas and political philosophy. How do you view the relationship between the two? How important is it that political philosophers are informed about the historical roots of political ideas?

Hello, thanks for the invitation! I'm a historian of ideas by training and come to political theory with a historical bias. The historical bent of my work is largely explained by the long neglect of anarchist thought in the academy, as well as in accounts of socialism, and the tendency, more pronounced in the 1980s than it is now, to analyse anarchism 'philosophically' as a form of anti-statism or antiauthoritarianism, in other words, to strip anarchism of the anarchist critique of property and domination and focus exclusively on issues of obligation. On the one hand, I'm interested in showing that anarchism is not a-theoretical, just an impulse or a kind of practice that is either indistinct from Marxism or in need of external theorisation. On the other, I'm interested in anarchist accounts of anarchy and the state. Anarchists argue, contrary to mainstream political theory, that anarchy is not the condition that the state remedies. How then, should we theorise it? For me, it seems obvious to work with the history of ideas rather than try to reinvent the wheel or adopt approaches that are antithetical to anarchism. More generally, I think political traditions emerge from

histories and that, however malleable these histories are, political philosophy and political theory extend from historically constructed traditions. It's hard to imagine liberal political philosophy without the history of liberalism. While political theory can proceed without engagement with historical text – we can have Rawls without mention of Mill or Marxism without Marx – detachment risks distortion.

You mentioned a once prevalent tendency in academia to analyse anarchism in a way that strips it of its broader critique of property and domination. Can you perhaps elaborate on this and mention some commonplace misconceptions about the central ideas of anarchism?

I think the main distortions come from treating anarchism as unordered rather than self-ordering. The best known variations stem from Hobbesian or Rousseauian conceptions of anarchy as an a-social or pre-social condition. The question that arises is how anarchists provide the order that the state guarantees without using its instruments. For example, one of James Scott's concerns about anarchism is how rights are protected: he gives only 'two cheers' to anarchism because he fears a loss of amenity.[1] If we don't start with the state, and begin with anarchy – which is I think where anarchists like P.-J. Proudhon take us – we can re-think rights, duties and obligations as part of the social fabric, regulating social relationships and evolving through contestation over time. This approach focuses attention on institutional arrangements, rather than 'nature', and on the analysis of the causes of social tension and antagonism, not the inherent failings of human beings. Proudhon's argument in *What is Property?* is that the constitutional guarantee of exclusive property rights creates a class division between owners and non-owners, entrenching inequality and necessitating the introduction of a plethora of repressive controls.[2] Instituting patriarchy or racial hierarchy leads in the same direction. The denial of self-government is a denial of the capacity of people to resolve their differences without permanent arbitration (or arrive at 'the right' answer) and it amounts to an assertion that enforced arbitration is neutral between the contending parties. Anarchists typically reject both arguments.

Anarchism is misconstrued as a state of a-social or pre-social disorder. In contrast, you propose that anarchism is a movement striving for an order based on self-governance, rejecting the kinds of social hierarchies represented by racism, patriarchy, and class divisions. Even among readers who are sceptical of these particular hierarchies, there will be those who struggle to envision a society completely devoid of any hierarchies. Could you help them by clarifying what hierarchies are and why anarchists see them as undesirable?

Yes, they would be right to be sceptical. Let me try to clarify. I think there's a difference between anarchy as a self-ordering condition, and anarchism, which is a doctrine or tradition that rejects domination. Self-government is a process, not a condition of non-domination. Conflict is part and parcel of the process. The anarchist argument, as I see it, is that those conflicts are tempered by institutional arrangements that enable and facilitate change to address dominating practice. Statist systems are not only slow to respond to claims of injustice, but also constitutionally limited in their redress: they protect sets of basic rights that entrench inequalities and are enmeshed in relationships of domination (through histories of colonialism, imperialism, enslavement).

But are there not forms of hierarchy and domination that may be good or necessary? Some Marxists seem to think hierarchy is necessary within the context of organising or defending the revolution. Others think hierarchy is good within the context of certain kinds of social relationships, like the one between parent and child. How do anarchists respond to these views?

On hierarchy: I take hierarchy to mean some kind of ordering system that ascribes rank or status. It can be formal or informal. For example, universities have formal ranking systems – professor, reader, lecturer etc. – which may or may not correspond to the status that comes from reputation (publishing, public profile). I can see that these divisions can be useful – universities can enhance their reputations by showing how many non-white, non-male professors they have on their staff

and individuals can pay bargain on the basis of their reputations. But that doesn't make them good and, in any case, it's not clear who decides on the rankings in the first place.

The Marxist argument, it seems to me, is about discipline. That's the gist of Engels' critique of anarchism in On Authority.[3] And the traditional anarchist counter, is the that self-appointed disciplined elite may deliver significant change, but not the revolution. There is another Leninist argument about hierarchy, in *What is to be Done*.[4] That's the claim about the necessity of the educators to bring the workers to consciousness, something they cannot attain by their own efforts. Anarchists flatly dispute the claim about incapability and reject the hierarchy between the elite and the mass that it justifies. Kropotkin uses the construction of the Forth Bridge in Edinburgh as an analogy. The workforce collectively realised the novelty of the engineer's design through their practice. In other words, it's possible to recognise different capabilities, but a mistake to entrench them in hierarchy.

Informal hierarchy is more difficult to deal with because it's often presented as 'natural'. From William Godwin onwards, anarchists have spent a lot of time thinking about parental and teacher relationships and pedagogy. Louise Michel, Francisco Ferrer, Leo Tolstoy and, in the twentieth century, Paul Goodman, Colin Ward and Herbert Read have all written about this.[5] It's hard to summarise it but I would say that the broad view is that the best form of education recognises that the relationship is hierarchical and authoritative in order to enable the challenge. It may be impossible to close the gap, but the acknowledgement of its existence opens a space for questioning and dialogue. On a slightly tangential note, Paul Goodman wrote something to the effect that a parent or teacher may use force to stop a child from running into a road, but that gentleness was the principal rule of the relationship. The idea is that gentleness enables the child to understand the dangers of the road thus militating against the emergency.

A commonplace criticism of anarchism is that it is utopian. In some of your papers, you point out that there is a strong strand of anti-utopianism in anarchist thought. Would you care to explain what utopianism is and what you think of the relevant sort of criticism?

It's difficult for me to respond to the question without going into a bit of the history, so forgive me if this is slightly tedious. The argument about utopianism turns on a typology introduced in the *Communist Manifesto*. According to this, communism is distinguished from other forms of socialism as a science. Utopian socialism is one of the categories that Marx and Engels identified as a precursor. They associated it with Charles Fourier, Robert Owen and Henri St. Simon.[6] They didn't put Proudhon in the same category. I think he was categorised as a bourgeois socialist. In any event, when Engels restated the thesis in the 1880s he did so to discredit anarchists as utopian: Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin were all labelled utopians. The label was a stick to beat the anarchists with. It meant that they refused to accept the 'science' of Marx's theory of history. In common with the early 'utopians', they dreamt up images of ideal futures, or blueprints for socialism.

The anarchist reply was that Marx's 'science' was entirely spurious, in the sense that there were no 'laws' of historical development, and that the idea that there was simply tailored socialism to dominant trends that were unattractive, destructive and unimaginative. William Morris, who accepted the credibility of Marxist 'science' nevertheless argued that socialists should push against the dynamics of capitalist development – socialism was nothing without the rebirth of art.[7] Gustav Landauer called the Marxist vision of the socialised industrial future 'spiritless'.[8] In both cases, the argument was that it's possible to shape material forces by injecting utopianism into sociological analysis. There was never limitless scope to do this, but the fact that real life imposed constraints on ideals, did not mean that the ideals themselves were redundant. Ideas were forces too. Anarchists were utopian in that sense: they did not rely on 'blueprints' but rejected the integration of capitalist modes of production into socialism, as if there was only one model for production and consumption. The argument had significant ramifications outside Europe, where anti-colonial activists debated the value of traditional culture, modes of work and modernisation.

Anarchism is often presented through a European lens, as a reaction to industrialisation in the late 19th and early 20th century,

and as having taken shape in the hands of people like Proudhon, Kropotkin, Bakunin, Goldman, Malatesta, de Cleyre, and so on. Can you say more about those anarchist traditions that developed elsewhere, e.g., in countries affected by European colonialism? What were some of the influential anarchists in those traditions?

Yes, I think it's reasonable to call it European, but I don't think it was narrowly 'western'. Russian born anarchists, especially, were enmeshed in the intellectual debate that divided 'westernisers' from 'Slavophiles'. They were very conscious of the prejudice against traditional ways of life and pushed back against the idea that rural life was 'idiotic'. Elisée Reclus's work and Malatesta and others made significant efforts to close the gap between the urban worker and rural workers. Landauer, mentioned earlier, also tried to unpick civilisation theses by showing how our inherited constructions of the past limited our visions for the future. Europeans typically traced their origins to ancient Greeks and Romans and regarded these ancestors as 'neighbours'. At the same time, they looked on Native Americans as 'strangers'. There was a lot to learn from the excluded and marginalised.[9]

On the question about non-European voices: there's a growing literature on anarchist movements in the non-European world. Much of this focuses on the movements rather than the individuals, but there are some well-known historical figures who gravitated towards anarchists as antiauthoritarians. Kōtoku Shūsui, an anti-imperialist later syndicalist, executed for his part in the High Treason plot in 1911 (the 'crime' was to contemplate the assassination of the Emperor and the evidence of actual plotting was very flimsy).[10] He was a translator and introduced a lot of European socialism into Japan. Ole Birk Laursen has done a lot of work on the life and ideas of M.P.T. Acharya, an Indian revolutionary and anticolonial anarchist.[11] I like the work of Ananda Coomaraswamy, a historian of Indian, Persian and Islamic art and philosopher. He read anarchism through a Nietzschean lens but was also inspired by William Morris to adapt his ideas of arts and crafts to promote traditional cultures.[12] He-Yin Zhen's work is becoming quite well known in anarchist histories: she was a feminist and antimilitarist. She wrote some blistering critiques of patriarchy and also examined the construction of the Chinese language to expose its entrenchments.

The historians who have translated her work point out that she was erased from conventional histories of Chinese feminism and that the male translators of J.S. Mill's work were instead credited with that.[13]

I think it's important to note that while European anarchists often failed to engage with non-Europeans, there was an exchange of ideas. Non-Europeans read and translated European literature – Tolstoy and Kropotkin were favourites in Japan, I think – but they adapted it. Similarly, European writers read the work of non-European intellectuals and engaged with non-European literatures. Rudolf Rocker borrows from Rabindranath Tagore in his book *Nationalism and Culture*.[14] Tolstoy's Letter to a Hindu is another example.[15]

You and other anarchists often emphasise the ideal of equality. How does this relate to the critique of domination and hierarchy? In the anarchist picture, is equality meant to have inherent (perhaps intrinsic) value, or is it just that the kinds of practices that give rise to inequalities are unjustified?

That's a great question. I suspect that you can find both views expressed in the literature. My own view is that inequalities give rise to practices and behaviours that are divisive. This is the gist of Rousseau's argument in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*[16] and I think it's also Kropotkin's argument: inequality supports competition at the cost of mutual aid. Insofar as domination is concerned, the argument about property is that it is a form of enslavement that leaves the propertyless at the beck and call of the propertied.

Like many works about anarchism, yours emphasise that it involves both a practice and a tradition of thought. If you were to consider these aspects separately, how would you judge anarchism's present health and relevance?

I think the health of the tradition is more straightforward to assess than the practice. On that: I would say that anarchism is very healthy. It's possible to find work published by movement, academic and trade publishers and in all manner of fields. There are fantastic online archives and libraries, journals, magazines, blogs, podcasts. There are

even university courses. Chomsky or Bookchin are no longer the only anarchists anyone can name. In some ways, the health of the tradition reflects the health of the practice: anarchists are behind a lot of the libraries, social centres and publishing ventures that keep the tradition alive. However, the practice is less straightforward if you think, as I do, that anarchism is not exclusively the practice of anarchists and that it refers more broadly to anarchistic activity in grass roots organising or everyday mutual aid. It's often said that you see mutual aid in times of crisis, when state services break down or are overwhelmed. Covid was an excellent example. Almost immediately, mutual aid groups mushroomed in Europe and across America. Not all of these were 'anarchist', but anarchists were involved in a lot of those initiatives. If you take the view that the capacity to self-organise testifies to the health of anarchism, then these are good signs.[17]

On the relevance. I think there's still a disconnect between the health of anarchism and the appreciation of anarchist theory and practice. Anarchism is more visible but not integrated in political debate. Politics still defaults to representation, just as order defaults to law, even when these systems are crumbling or under attack from the right. There's still a lot of scope to show how anarchism speaks to everyday experience.

By what methods do anarchists wish to bring about their ideal society? Your prior response suggests that anarchism happens when people come together in everyday life to form mutual aid organisations and build alternatives to state services. Is there something more to the anarchist idea of revolution?

There are two different ideas at work: one is the 'signs of life', namely that we can assess the health of anarchism by looking in part at the extent of grass roots activism, which may not be explicitly anarchist (so this follows the thinking of Colin Ward in *Anarchy in Action*)[18] and the other is about promoting anarchist transformation. I'm not sure how useful 'revolution' is to describe this: it tends to conjure romantic visions of dramatic moments of change or rebirth. There's definitely a revolutionary streak in anarchist literature, but it usually serves a rhetorical function. The central concept of change is direct action

is key to both and this is more helpful because it lends itself to lots of different scenarios, both individual actions (for example, attacking patriarchy by refusing marriage or adopting 'free love') and collective (organising a union).

Direct action plays out in different ways, depending on the resistance it meets, the context in which it operates and the principles people bring to it. Ordinary mutual aid does not usually cause a lot of pushback, though it may be regulated out of existence. Historically, explicitly anarchist initiatives have met with systematic violence. Anarchist unions have routinely confronted militias and police. Across the world, individual organisers have been imprisoned or executed for merely propagating anarchism.

There is a live and fractious debate in the anarchist movement about the legitimate response to repressive violence and significant currents reject violence. My own view is that it's for activists to decide how best to defend themselves.

Speaking of practical principles, you recently co-authored *Anarchic Agreements: A Field Guide to Collective Organizing*[19] with Alex Prichard and Thomas Swann. Can you tell us a little bit more about this guide and its principal aims?

The guide came out of a project involving the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)[20] and the housing and worker co-op Radical Routes[21] and it was developed with the advocacy group Seeds for Change.[22] The key aim was to show that anarchist or anarchistic groups constitute themselves to enshrine and maintain principles of non-domination and that they do so without relying on permanent fixed authority. The guide attempts to explain how constitutional mechanisms constrain power to address problems that arise in practice (for example, about burnout, trust and cooperation). Rather than relying on sympathy or shared values, constitutionalising involves making rules, establishing institutions and norms and adopting decision making processes. We called it constitutionalising to highlight the necessary imperfection of all systems of self-government and the fluidity of processes that don't rely on single points of authority (and violence) to resolve differences or disputes.

The book is made up of two pamphlets: one looks at processes for groups and the other for developing federal relationships.

When we started doing research on the project, we also looked at the General Assembly minutes of Occupy Wall Street, London St. Pauls and Oakland. In each case, we came to the conclusion that 'real democracy' – the concept used at the time to describe the occupations – concealed more complex constitutional practices. Even in the short periods of time the camps were able to function, the occupiers adopted and adapted core principles (from the Declaration of Wall Street), ran multiple institutions (from camp kitchens to social media accounts), formulated rules (about noise, conflict resolution, drug use) and instituted consensus decision making.

The field guide focuses on contemporary movement practices, but we're also working on a project to recover the constitutional theory in anarchism and show how it complicates conventional constitutionalism.

In both your guide and your introduction to anarchism, *The Government of No One*, you describe democratic voting as a method for collective decision-making. Given the strong denunciation of "majority rule" by some classical anarchists, this might seem surprising. How do you perceive the relationship between anarchism and democratic ideals?

I think of anarchy as a principle of self-government in which democratic process plays a part in decision making. I don't believe that democratising the state is an anarchising move: it does not alter power balances or enable self-government. Nor do I think that democracy is a synonym for anarchy – which is the argument I think David Graeber makes in the *Democracy Project*.[23] For me, the risk of the conflation is that it doesn't help anyone understand what's distinctive about anarchy or anarchism and that it tends to couple anarchist practice with a single model of decision making. I see constitutionalising as an effective way of avoiding 'majority rule': if you don't want elites to dominate informally or formally by virtue of faulty process, then you need to think about developing mechanisms to deal with the problem – individually and collectively. Anarchists rejected the democratisation of

the state as a ruse – and they were right. But the underlying complaint was that democratisation did not challenge the principle of sovereignty – it simply (and misleadingly) redesignated the people as king – and it was not going to alter the constitutional settlements that entrenched inequality and domination through the protection of rights. Their answer, then, was to abandon the idea of the sovereign and the concepts of individual freedom and common good that democrats variously prompted. But that didn't mean abandoning the idea of constitutional politics – that is, the idea curbing arbitrary power. It meant inventing different mechanisms to constrain power and prevent its concentration (or, as Kropotkin and many others argued, relearning techniques developed by indigenous communities and supressed by colonisers). Unless you think that anarchy is somehow populated by different beings or that politics disappears, the problem of power remains. We can reshape our environments and change moral norms, but I don't think that's enough. There have to be constraints on power. If they're not agreed, they're imposed or simply accepted as tradition. The dispute about imposition never goes away. One of the arguments for anarchy over the state is that change is facilitated by the absence of law. But I think that that reflection means that parties to the dispute have to think and rethink rules and principles.

Thank you once again, Professor Kinna, for sharing your insights with us. As we conclude this interview, do you have any recommendations or words of encouragement for those readers who are interested in exploring anarchism, whether as a theoretical framework or as a practical approach? What should one keep in mind so that one engages with it thoughtfully and effectively?

Thank you very much! Recommendations: there are so many excellent online libraries, projects, bookfairs and information sources[24] to tap into and take inspiration from and I would encourage everyone to do that and just keep the traditions going: exchange, discussion, practice. What should you bear in mind? Usually no one's right and no one's ever right all the time. →|

Andrés Garcia

Notes

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4. V.I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (1901–2): https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/
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16. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1754) University of Oxford e-text, trans. Ian Johnston: https://ota.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/repository/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12024/2524/seconddiscourse.htm?sequence=4&isAllowed=y

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20. IWW: https://iww.org.uk/

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