

Why I am an Anarchist

But you don't look like an anarchist, think—if not say—most people who hear me use that self-description. Experience, stereotype, so some combination of both tells them an anarchist must have tattoos, piercings, and an aversion to basic hygiene. I have none of those things, despite my enduring affection for the music of the Sex Pistols and slam dancing.

And I'll freely admit: part of my reason for identifying as an anarchist is provocation. As David Graeber once noted, thousands of academics readily identify as Marxists or socialists of various shades, but the number who openly call themselves anarchists likely hovers in the dozens. Some of this is simple ignorance. The word *anarchy* conjures images of chaos, violence, and collapse—what supposedly erupts when the firm, controlling hand of God, Man, or State is withdrawn.

But for me, anarchism is simply a more honest and direct way of speaking about *democracy*—democracy as a fundamental ideal and a way of living, not a hollow political formality of the sort that exists in most countries, including the United States. One of the central problems with democracy today is that it is structurally embedded in the modern state, which itself serves the logic of capitalism. And capitalism cannot coexist with democracy. (As we are witnessing in 2025.)

Democracy, if it is to be worth the name, is the collective, participatory decision-making about the things that matter to all of us. It is neither tidy nor easy. Communal self-governance is difficult. But anarchist thinkers since the mid-19th century have insisted that genuine democracy demands a continual critique of all systems of domination—especially those so normalized that they vanish into the background, like capitalism and the liberal state. Like socialists and communists, anarchists view economic inequality as a central site of struggle. But unlike their statist cousins, anarchists are skeptical—if not outright dismissive—of the belief that seizing control of the state can solve the problem of power. The history of 20th-century communist revolutions tells a different story: one of betrayal, centralization, and the reconstitution of domination in new forms. Anarchists were often the first to resist—and (sigh) the first to be crushed.

But let's take a step back. Anarchism is not only the inheritance of white European thinkers—though the writings of folks like Kropotkin, Morris, Carpenter, and Goldman remain deeply important. Look past the word itself, and anarchism, in its most basic form, may be our species' original and natural mode of life. For roughly 100,000 years—throughout nearly all of human history—we lived in relatively small, egalitarian groups, often as foragers, without states, organized religion, militaries, or writing. But we did have language, and with it the means to create and transmit shared norms: rules for living well together.

What does *living well together* mean? Students in my Utopia seminar often say that everyone has their own definition of the good life. But that's bullshit. Yes, there are subjective preferences. But when it comes to the fundamentals, people across cultures and eras tend to converge: we want enough food

to eat, shelter, relationships of care and affection—whether family, friends, or chosen kin—and the freedom to pursue creative and meaningful projects, often in collaboration with others. That’s it. The tragedy is that we’ve built vast and seemingly inevitable systems that prevent most people from attaining even these basic goods. These systems—capitalism, empire, the state—are not natural. They were built. Often consciously. Often with the explicit intent to pacify, discipline, and dominate: women, colonized peoples, the poor, the vulnerable.

Anarchism, for me, is a response to this reality. One might even say a *conservative* response, since it taps into what I believe are our most natural and socially evolved tendencies. It begins with the refusal to treat hierarchy and injustice as inevitable. And it insists that any viable politics must reckon with the deep damage done by the modern systems of control—economic, racial, patriarchal, epistemic. Some anarchists lean too far toward a radical individualism, but this, too, is a distortion—a product of the same neoliberal delusion that imagines us as atomized, Hobbesian beings who flourish only in isolation. Read anthropology. Read history. Read your own heart-mind. Human beings are interdependent. As both Marx and Kropotkin understood—and as most people know, deep down—we thrive through social cooperation. Freedom is not the absence of others; it is *interdependent flourishing*. Which is why the only freedom worth fighting for is democratic freedom.

(And no: “anarcho-capitalism” is not anarchism. It’s an abomination—a fantasy usually conjured by ridiculous men who understand neither anarchism nor capitalism.)

So how did I—a middle-class, overly-educated Canadian white guy—become an anarchist? Slowly, and over time. Reading the classic thinkers helped—especially Kropotkin, Morris, Carpenter, and Goldman. Studying anthropology as an undergraduate helped even more. I found far more anarchists among anthropologists (and the communities they studied) than among political theorists. Reading Graeber’s *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* was a turning point. It showed me that anarchism is not an eccentric ideology but a widespread human tendency: a shared impulse to create cooperative, non-hierarchical ways of living.

Finally—and I admit this with some ambivalence—I am drawn to the tragic nobility of anarchist defeat. The Russian anarchists who initially supported the 1917 revolution, only to be betrayed and crushed by the Bolsheviks. The anarchist fighters of the Spanish Civil War, who mounted the fiercest resistance to Franco’s fascists, only to be again betrayed—once again, by communists. These are stories of loss, yes. But also of courage, principle, and clarity. Anarchists, at least the ones I admire, are committed to ideals even when they lose. Especially when they lose. Perhaps too willing to assume others will meet them in solidarity and good faith. Perhaps naive.

But I’d rather be naive than cynical. I still believe in human goodness, joy, and in the possibility—however fragile—of solidarity. Because without God or the State, that’s what we have left. And maybe it’s enough.