Anarchy and anarchism

What is anarchy?
Anarchy is the absence of centralized authority or government.

The term was first formulated negatively by early modern political theorists such as Thomas Hobbes who regarded it as a condition of chaos, terror, and violence.

In the nineteenth century, however, it came to be seen as an alternative to state coercion and economic exploitation. Historically, anarchism is based on the assertion that people are capable of harmony but are deformed and oppressed by political and economic institutions.

Its most active early promoter was Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), whose influential “What is Property?” (1840) argued that “property is theft” and proposed that small associations of free producers replace capitalism and the state.

In the next generation, the more radical Mikhail Bakunin proposed the complete replacement of private property by collectivism.

Anarchism gradually lost ground to socialism and particularly communism during the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Revolutionary anarchism peaked in the West with a wave of assassinations around 1900.

Anarcho-syndicalism, which drew on Proudhon’s ideas and advocated the devolution of power to workers’ councils, played an important role in the short-lived Spanish republic of the 1930s.

Contemporary anarchism
plays a role in opposition to globalization and neoliberalism on the world stage.

Socialism

**question** what is socialism?

A form of social organization that prioritizes the common ownership of property and the collective control of economic production.

Socialism emerged from a diverse array of social experiments and doctrines developed in the 1820s.

These reflected both excitement about the possibilities of a rational, ordered, industrial society… and growing concern about the actual effects of industrialization under the conditions of private accumulation and market capitalism.

**question** what are the ill effects of industrialization?

During its first decades, socialism was pursued primarily by small, utopian communities.

The transformation of socialism into a political doctrine occurred in the 1850s-70s, especially as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels developed their own account of socialism as the outcome of a revolutionary class struggle between workers and capitalists.

By the late nineteenth century, socialism had developed into a political doctrine associated with newly formed trade unions and mass political parties (e.g., the Social Democratic Party in Germany and the Labour Party in Britain).

These groups supported diverse views of socialism, from the incremental and ameliorative goals of many trade unionists to the radical, revolutionary agendas of Marx, Engels, and the anarchists.

These divisions became increasingly pronounced over time.
Moderates [like Karl Kautsky and Eduard Berstein] advocated working for socialism within the democratic political process (a model increasingly known as social democracy).

Others, such as Lenin, advocated violent revolution.

**question** how would bakunin and kropotkin align with this?

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the end of World War I marked the definitive split between moderates and revolutionaries.

Post 1945: West, welfare state
East, state socialism

Noncommunist socialist parties remain prominent in many countries in Europe and the rest of the world.

Most now pursue agendas associated with increasing social welfare rather than fundamental economic transformations.

**Bakunin, Mikhail** (1814-1876)

**question** what do you know about him?

A Russian anarchist and revolutionary who developed an influential critique of the state and vied with Karl Marx for control of the First International (1864-1876).

**question** what was bakunin’s problem with marx?

Bakunin saw authoritarian tendencies in Marx’s socialism and especially opposed Marx’s emphasis on the need for a centralized proletarian regime.

**question** what were bakunin’s problems with ‘the state’?

For Bakunin, the state in any form became a mechanism of mystified power, controlled by an elite.

In this respect it mirrored religion—indeed Bakunin saw the two as parallel historical developments.
question what is the alternative to the state?

The alternative, Bakunin suggested, was a decentralized federation of communes that guaranteed relative autonomy and control over the means of production at the local level.

The State and Anarchism (1873)

Bakunin directed a similar critique against scientific elites, the social sciences, and the scientific pretensions of Marxism.

Bakunin also stressed that the destruction of the old order was a prerequisite for socialism…

and thus he strongly opposed Hegelian and liberal reformist notions of progress

question did you note any contradictions in his ideas?

His theory of revolution was contradictory, however… sometimes leaning on the notion of spontaneous action and at other times emphasizing the need for conspiracy and careful direction.

The latter, in any event, better characterized his actions during the First International.

Ultimately, Bakunin’s apocalyptic views and associations with nihilists such as Sergei Nechayev (accused of murdering a fellow conspirator)…

contributed to a gradual loss of credibility and to his eventual expulsion from the First Intl. Although Bakunin’s split with Marx fragmented the revolutionary movement in Western Europe, he had a lasting effect on the anarchist movements in Russia, Italy, Switzerland, and Spain.

Throughout his career, he founded actual and sometimes imaginary revolutionary networks, whose varying degrees of political realism often perplexed his followers.

Among his more effective organizations was the International Alliance of Social Democracy, which he conceived as a forward-thinking movement
within the First International…

the alliance advocated the definitive abolition of classes
and the political, economic, and social
equalization of the sexes.

**Kropotkin, Peter** (1842-1921)

Russian nobleman, and main proponent of anarchocommunism.

He was a geographer who carried out explorations of Siberia, Finland, and Manchuria before devoting his life to political activities.

**Modern Science and Anarchism** (1903)

**question**  *did you pick up on his interest in darwin?*

Kropotkin believed that Darwin’s theory of evolution, properly applied, showed that human beings are social creatures who flourish best in small communities cemented together by mutual aid and voluntary associations.

The centralized state…
with its apparatus of coercion…
represents a backward step, or obstacle to the implementation of this ideal.

Reading question:

What is the flaw in Winnie Verloc's character?
21G.061 Advanced Topics: Plotting Terror in European Culture
Spring 2004

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: http://ocw.mit.edu/terms.