

An Anarchist FAQ

An Anarchist FAQ after 30 years

[An Anarchist FAQ blog](#)

It is now 30 years since *An Anarchist FAQ* (AFAQ) was officially launched and sixteen years since the core of it was completed (version 14.0) and published in two volumes by AK Press. It is now at version 15.12 with all the appendices bar one completed.

So, AFAQ is still incomplete as there remains an unfinished appendix on the Russian Revolution. Suffice to say, the key parts of that appendix exist in [Section H](#) (particularly [section H.6](#)). This is for various reasons, not least the other books which have been completed over the years:

- Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* (AK Press, 2011)
- Peter Kropotkin, *Direct Struggle Against Capital: A Peter Kropotkin Anthology* (AK Press, 2014)
- Peter Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchy* (AK Press, 2018)
- Peter Kropotkin, *Words of a Rebel* (PM Press, 2022)
- George Barrett, *Our Masters are Helpless: The Essays of George Barrett* (Freedom Press, 2019)
- Camillo Berneri, *The State - Or Revolution: Selected Works of Camillo Berneri* (Freedom Press, 2023)
- *A Libertarian Reader: Fighting for Freedom, 1857 to 2016* in 4 volumes (Active Distribution, 2023)

In the pipeline are a collection of Emma Goldman's writings and three volumes of Kropotkin's pamphlets (a mix of full, old, editions and new ones translations). However, that is not all:

- Writing for various anarchist publications (including *Black Flag*, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* and *Freedom*) as well as *Anarchist Studies*.
- *Black Flag Anarchist Review* (2021 onwards) - including three specials on Kropotkin (Autumn 2022), Proudhon (Spring 2025) and Bakunin (Summer 2026).
- Various translations (many of which have appeared in *Black Flag Anarchist Review* and *A Libertarian Reader*)
- Various pamphlets (often based on previous articles) published by Active Distribution.

As well as having to work to earn a living, help raise a family and have a life. For, lest we forget, *AFAQ* is a product of voluntary effort by people who worked or work on it in their spare time. This, I hope, explains the uncompleted nature of *AFAQ* - but I am happy to report that every section and complete appendix has been revised (although I am sure typos still exist).

When *AFAQ* was started, Stalinism in Eastern Europe had just collapsed. This, needless to say, empowered the ideologues of capitalism. Since this period of smugness, capitalism has went off the rails somewhat. Fringe notions from the raving right have bubbled to the surface, situations have developed which would have been dismissed a few years before as unrealistic farce. Winning the cold war and reaping the benefits of success in the class war (at least for now) has produced an even more dysfunctional system.

Now, after three decades it is clear that neo-liberalism has failed - no “property owning democracy” was produced. Rather, wealth became concentrated in fewer and fewer hands by a combination of different forces - not least, the weakening of the power of labour (by State intervention) which ensured that more and more of the wealth our toil creates is monopolised by the property-owners and their agents. Likewise, privatised industries in the UK fleeced their consumers - the example of the privatised water industry being an exemplar of the process. It is so bad that even right-wing media complain about the reality of their long-desired system while obscuring how it came to be and denouncing anyone who suggests an alternative as being worse than Stalin. Ironically, a robust capitalist system cannot be produced by the ideologues of capitalism being in charge.

Talking of alternatives, the collapse of the Stalinist bloc in Eastern Europe and the defeat of social democracy at the polls in the West saw many proclaim “socialism” dead. The former had a wider impact on the left, with even allegedly anti-Stalinist groupings (like Trotskyism) suffering. The latter adjusted to neo-liberalism as it had previously adjusted to capitalism itself, embracing it while seeking to mitigate its worse effects. Neither is appealing. The best that can be said of social-democracy is that it is not as bad as the right - but we are far from the socialism which aimed to transform the world.

With the fate of socialism confirming the anarchist critique, it is understandable that many confuse the mainstream forms of it with socialism *as such*. Some anarchists also do this, contrasting anarchism and socialism. Given that “communism” in popular language generally means the USSR, seeking distance from it makes some sense. Indeed, I remember reading a leading neo-classical economist being puzzled by anarchist-communism given that “communism” (i.e., the Soviet Union) was based on central planning. The lack of curiosity as to the origins and (various) meanings of communism is significant. Yet certain words used by anarchists generally mean something radically different in common language - not least anarchy.

So it is understandable to distance anarchism from “socialism”, if wrong. To do so means to reject much of the anarchist tradition which consistently stressed that it was anti-state, or free, socialism. This allowed “anarcho”-capitalists a superficial legitimacy by giving the illusion that anarchism is purely “anti-state” rather than anti-state *and* anti-capitalist. Ironically, it also repeats the regular Marxist claim that anarchism is not socialist, that Marxism *is* socialism, that anarchism considers “the state” as the main - if not only - enemy, and so on.

Yes, maintaining our position within the wider socialist movement may involve a lot of explanation but so does proclaiming ourselves anarchists or recommending pamphlets such as Kropotkin's *Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles*. As such, we will not avoid misunderstandings by avoiding certain terms - rather, we should embrace our socialism and explain why other schools of socialism really aim for state-capitalism, whether consciously or unconsciously.

After all, it is not as if the problems anarchists have condemned capitalism for producing have gone away. How could they, when their root causes - hierarchy, private property, wage-labour, the state - all remain? With the collapse of the USSR there was talk of a "peace dividend" but war soon returned - with billions spent on war or preparing for war rather than being used to improve the living conditions and well-being of people or the health of the planet, not least in reducing the amount of time we spend working as churning out more goods is not an end in itself. Under capitalism, there is always money for death while money for life is considered unsustainable and wasteful.

The contrast between market and need remains, with - for example - homeless people and empty housing co-existing. Resources that could be used to meet needs are idle because it is private property and its owners cannot make a profit from it. In the USA after-tax profits as a share of national income keeps rising - from around 6% in 2000 to around 11% in 2025. These profits have enriched the oligarch class - as workers ability to keep the wealth we create in our own hands was eroded, it has flooded upwards (we await it "trickling" back down). As Proudhon noted long ago such is the inevitable outcome of wage-labour:

"There is theft, in commerce and industry, whenever the entrepreneur withholds something from the worker's wages [so they no longer equal their product]...

"I have proven, in dealing with value, that all labour must leave a surplus; so that assuming the consumption of the worker to be always the same, his labour should create, in addition to his subsistence, an ever greater capital. Under the regime of property, the surplus of labour, essentially collective, passes entirely, like rent, to the proprietor: now, between this disguised appropriation and the fraudulent usurpation of a communal good, where is the difference?

"The consequence of this usurpation is that the worker, whose share in the collective product is constantly confiscated by the entrepreneur, is always in poverty, while the capitalist is always in profit... and that political economy, that upholds and advocates that regime, is the theory of theft, as property, the respect for which maintains such a state of things, is the religion of force." (*des contradictions économiques* [Paris: Guillaumin, 1846] II: 315)

So, there has been a long and growing divergence between wages, which are a declining share of national income, and property-incomes, which are taking an ever-larger share. It would be surprising if this division of the economic pie between capital and labour were not driving economic discontent and anger, indeed there is a growing sense that the system is unfair and rigged against working class people. Moreover, as a growing share of income accrues to property, within this growing upwards distribution of income there is growing concentration of wealth at the very top. In other words, a rising share of unearned total income is going to a very small number of people. This is a striking confirmation of the anarchist critique of capitalism.

The promises of neo-liberalism have not come to pass. Thatcher promised a “property-owning democracy” but home ownership grows always harder to grasp, former council homes are rented at exorbitant rents, foodbanks proliferate, inequality soars, and so on. In terms of economics, inequality soared and property became concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, unsurprisingly as property is the source of unearned income, the exploitation of labour. Politically, state power was increasingly concentrated and centralised in Westminster and the executive, local government was marginalised and controlled. The advocates of “the free market” imposed more and more anti-union laws, so regulating the labour market. Whether this came as a surprise to those involved is hard to say - it was probably their plan all along - but they made no attempt to change these outcomes.

Needless to say, in the preface to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman did not dwell on those aspects of his book which had been proven completely wrong - including the assertion that free market capitalism would be more equal than any other system. This may have been plausible if you looked only at, say, Stalinist Russia, forgot the pre-war period and the impact of progressive taxation as well as strong unions in retaining more of the wealth workers created in their hands, but it clearly became untenable after the neo-liberalism he so inspired was applied. Sadly, he did not think it of note to ponder why, say, CEOs went from being paid around ten times the average wage of the workers they control to over a hundred (if not more). Strangely he did not even utilise the classic escape route - in spite of the reforms, the system was still not pure enough....

Likewise, the early anarchist concern over green issues has been validated while capitalist corporations would sooner see the world burn than deny themselves profits. Just as with exploding inequality, global warming is being denied whilst the evidence for it is being experienced more and more every year. Needless to say, if the evidence is not denied, its root-causes usually are - and any solutions suggested limited by being premised upon keeping the socio-economic system that creates them.

The last decade also shows that bigotries whose open expression was rarely tolerated have come back. Trump amongst others changed that. As is well-known, after Trump won in 2020 a top banker told the *Financial Times* that “I feel liberated. We can say ‘retard’ and ‘pussy’ without the fear of getting cancelled... it’s a new dawn.” Social norms that were the product of intense social struggles were violated by right-wing leaders, so allowing their followers to likewise express bigotries in everyday life. That this was often justified by appeals to “free speech” were never convincing, as they were premised on the assumption that others should keep quiet. Still, a striking confirmation of the oft noted truism that equality can feel oppressive to those who have power. The sanitisation of America’s history Trump imposed did produce some grim humour - after all, officially proclaiming Rosa Parks simply refused to vacate her seat on the bus showed what a mockery such attempts were. Of course, racism, sexism, and other social hierarchies and bigotries remained, which the erosion of social norms painfully exposed.

The growth of intersectionality is also to be welcomed, although claims to its originality are not. Anarchists have been stressing this for many decades - indeed, Marxists attack the likes of Emma Goldman for advocating what became known as intersectionality as, somehow, denying the class struggle (that this requires a, let us say, selective reading of her works goes without saying). As *AFAQ* argued, anarchists have long stressed that social hierarchies cannot be reduced to economic ones even if these are important and simply abolishing private property will not automatically solve all social problems or end all social hierarchies (it will

not even solve economic problems and hierarchies if state ownership replaces private property).

In short, all the problems of liberalism which social-democracy had reduced have returned with neo-liberalism - all the reforms made turned out to be removable. This means that it is understandable that there has been a return to radicals seeking to use elections. There has been some excitement, for example, caused by electoral victories of various socialists in America recently. It cannot be denied that it shows a rise in anti-capitalist sentiment in the population (so showing that some people, at least, have been paying attention) but it is a pale shadow of the real work that needs to be done, namely organising direct action and solidarity in our workplaces and communities.

Moreover, these candidates aim at nothing more than reforming capitalism - unlike the original social democrats who claimed to be aiming at creating socialism. Which means that the new ones will have less far to travel in terms of adjusting themselves to the reality of their situation than the original ones did. Looking at the fate of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, the greatest threat they face will be within their own party and its machine. Unsurprisingly, the problems associated with radical electioneering we discuss in [section J.2.6](#) have been confirmed again and again, for example with a 2008 popular revolt against austerity in Greece seeing the election of SYRIZA only for it to end up imposing the very austerity it was elected to stop.

While it is understandable to seek to use the State to regulate capital and to further social progress, such a perspective forgets that it is the *capitalist* State which is being empowered. It should come as no surprise - although it does to those seeking such reforms - that these powers are used *against* the working class or to bolster capital. Yes, even capitalists can see the benefit of nationalising industries (particularly natural monopolies) so that services and products can be provided at a better price. After all, as argued in [section B.2.6](#), securing the system as a whole (and sometimes at the expense of parts of the capitalist class) is one of the functions of the State. This can make it appear that the State is somehow above classes and the class struggle, but this is an illusion - if it does favour progress, it is only because of outside pressure *by the people* and if this pressure stops, then its underlying mission will return to prominence.

Given the failures of, say, water and railway privatisation in the UK, it is understandable that calls are made to re-nationalise them. However, that does not change the social relationships within these industries and so are perfectly acceptable for capitalism. Moreover, we cannot ignore that the more responsibilities and powers given to the State, the more weapons it potentially has. Nationalisation may be better than privatisation (and given the many failures of privatisation in the UK, this will not be too controversial) but the problem is that any government that decides to use these resources for its own ends can inflict a great deal of damage. The example of Trump springs to mind, showing how apparently neutral bodies can be abused by the government, using powers and finance initially garnered for positive reasons for reactionary and personal purposes.

Still, voting and letting others act for you (if they do) is easier than organising in the workplace and community while giving the illusion of activity. Yet, even if voting is considered an option the fact remains that without outside pressure, our so-called representatives will face pressures from the state bureaucracy, the influence of wealth, and so on. They will need help to overcome these challenges, so we are back at organising in our

communities and workplaces. Without extra-parliamentary activity, parliamentarianism will amount to little. Ironically, with parliamentarianism, extra-parliamentary activity declines as people who voted expect their representatives to act *for them*.

Electioneering undoubtedly gives the *appearance* of activity but, as anarchists have long argued, ends in reformism. One of Marx's contributions was to provide an ideology by which the descent into reformism can be hidden in revolutionary rhetoric. Indeed, the dominance of Marxism within the socialist movement is little more than the definitive step onto the path of reformism. Still, these words by Colin Ward resonated with me when I first read them in the late 1980s:

“commenting on the events of May 1968 in France, Theodore Draper declared... that the anarchists did not have much staying-power in the nineteenth century and that it is unlikely that they will have much more in this century. Whether or not he is right about the new anarchists depends on a number of factors. Firstly, on whether or not people have learned *anything* from the history of the last hundred years; secondly, on whether the large number of people in both east and west - the dissatisfied and dissident young of the Soviet empire as well as of the United States who seek an alternative theory of social organisation - will grasp the relevance of those ideas which we define as anarchism; and thirdly, on whether the anarchists themselves are sufficiently imaginative and inventive to find ways of applying their ideas today to the society we live in in ways that combine immediate aims with ultimate ends.”
(*Anarchy in Action* [London: Freedom Press, 1982], 26-7)

This remains true and will always remain true - anarchism will succeed if anarchists apply their ideas in everyday life and everyday struggles. If there are no outlets for your ideas, no practical work to do, then you will turn to something else which has - even if that alternative has proven the anarchist critique correct time and time again.

The Anarchist movement itself has, as always, its ups and downs - its prominence in the so-called anti-globalisation movement at the turn of the century being an example of the former. Anarchists need to have a strategy that while the usual ups and downs continue the movement itself grows, meaning that it is larger in the next downturn than in the previous one and that its growth in the upturn persists more, leaving a bigger organised movement even if inevitably numbers fall somewhat from the peak. Part of this is remembering that no one is born an anarchist and we have to work with people *as they are*, not as they will become as a result of their participation in self-activity and self-organisation.

Unfortunately, this process is often ignored or mentioned in passing in many of the classics of anarchism. Kropotkin is a particular example of this, with *Words of a Rebel* and *The Conquest of Bread* being almost completely silent on the subject (*Modern Science and Anarchy* is somewhat better but it is not the main focus of the book). The same can be said of his most famous pamphlets, which are very general and theoretical. This has meant that until recently Kropotkin's most accessible writings were *not* those dealing with the concrete political and strategic issues facing the anarchist movement. This allows him to be cast as a visionary rather than as an anarchist militant, actively grappling with challenges facing the workers' movement and anarchist strategies within and outwith it to produce social transformation. Yet these writings *do* exist but have tended to be excluded from collections: a lack I have tried to amend in both *Direct Struggle Against Capital* and my edition of *Words of a Rebel* (which includes as supplementary material such articles from *Le Révolté* written

between 1879 and 1882 but sadly not included by its original editor, Elisée Reclus). This shows how he followed Bakunin in what would later be termed a syndicalist strategy of anarchist involvement in the labour as well as other social movements, albeit with an awareness of the need for anarchists to organise *as anarchists* (what is now known as “organisation dualism”).

The same can be said for other anarchists - Bakunin's *God and the State* has been available since 1882 whilst “The Protest of the Alliance” which discusses anarchist involvement in the Geneva labour movement was published in volume VI of his *Oeuvres* in 1910 and was finally translated into English only in the 1971 (in Dolgoff's *Bakunin on Anarchy*). In *Anarchism and Other Essays*, Emma Goldman mentioned her syndicalism in passing in one essay leaving her readers having to consult *Mother Earth* or her pamphlet *Syndicalism: The Modern Menace to Capitalism*, something which became increasingly difficult to do as the decades passed.

It cannot be stressed too much how social struggle is key to anarchism both as a movement and as a goal. Its radicalising effect is well-known, changing how people view the world as well as what they consider desirable and possible. Likewise, it produces alternative organisations which *both* challenge social hierarchies and have the potential to end them. As Bakunin put it:

“The International, by thus placing the proletariat outside the politics of States and the bourgeois world, constitutes a new world, the world of proletarian solidarity across all countries. This world is that of the future... it is *the organisation of international solidarity for the economic struggle of labour against capital*. (*Oeuvres* [Paris: P.V. Stock, 1910] IV: 437)

It is precisely this “new world” that needs to be created. Also, this indicates why finding such writings of previous anarchists can be so rewarding. Indeed, one of the joys of having all these old papers, pamphlets and books available on-line now is seeing how arguments developed in *AFAQ* unknowingly repeated them. For example, this anonymous article in *Freedom* from 1892 (which could have been written by Kropotkin, given its themes) states the *AFAQ* position on social revolution being a process rather than an event and that expropriation is its start not its end over a hundred years before writing it was started:

“No, a government or a law cannot carry out expropriation. Expropriation must be the work of the people...

“In every direction they will take possession of land, workshops, machinery, mines, everything needed to set about organising production at once.

“Again, no waiting for orders. During a revolution men must *act*. Those who have initiative will set the example; the factory hands will only have to go on working on their own account, instead of working for a master; new associations of workers will turn up and set to work with the materials they have collected or received from other associations. Production also will be organised ‘Anarchically,’ for it would be madness to wait for the permission and regulation of a central authority. A government may organise tyranny, oppression, the exploitation of the masses by a class: but as for organising the real interests of the people, it is not able to do anything of the sort.

“We shall be met with the objection that the organisation of labour is a very complicated matter... Let us reply... that just because the organisation of labour is a complicated affair, and differs much from one industry to another and one locality to another, it cannot be done by a general law and under the orders of a central government...

“We must further remark that the point of departure of the future organisation of labour will be the existing organisation. The factories are there, the machines are fixed in them; it is known how much coal an engine consumes, how many hours of labour such and such a quantity of produce takes, etc. Here is a basis to go upon. Doubtless in time much of this will be changed: some products will be limited, some stopped altogether, others increased and developed, more will be thought of the necessary, less of the superfluous; production must be decentralised; no more enormous factories built to provide articles of commerce, no more excessive subdivision of labour, killing the worker’s intelligence and undermining his health. There must be alternation of work, and intellectual must be combined with manual labour, that the worker may exercise all his faculties.

“But all these changes will come afterwards, little by little. At the beginning, what is most pressing must come first... for the associations of workers... to come to a common understanding, federate with one another, for the purpose of putting the respective products in common, exchanging with other federations, and in general for all common interests: dwellings, means of communication, education, public health, and social security....

“It is for us to strive that the spirit of solidarity, the conviction of its advantages and its necessity may penetrate the masses and modify the various organisations formed at the moment of the Revolution, in the direction of Communism and of Anarchy.”
 (“Must We Pass Through State Socialism?”, *Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Communism*, January 1892)

Noam Chomsky once noted that social change is like chess in the sense that it involves strategy and takes time to win. Impatience is often the enemy of new anarchists but as *Freedom* indicated, the role of anarchists is to seek to influence social movements towards anarchism - or, more correctly, to encourage the anarchistic elements which are contained in every social movement, revolt or revolution. This means raising anarchist alternatives - if politicians urge nationalisation or bailouts, anarchists should respond with demands for workers’ management, if workplaces close, anarchist should respond with expropriation, if homelessness exists, anarchist should respond with squatting. Any and all alternatives should aim to empower the masses in both winning and running them as well as reduce capitalist and state power.

And while revolution may seem a distant dream, it does not disappear for in order to reach our full potential as unique individuals, our material necessities need to be met. Capitalism is wasting wealth in armaments, vanity projects for the rich and powerful, multiple mansions, luxury yachts, and private islands, to name a few of the more obvious examples. Meanwhile, the people whose labour keeps the world going find it harder to make ends meet, facing an increasingly uncertain future.

These inequalities are often termed “market failures” but, in reality, they are no such thing - is this how (capitalist) markets are meant to work. For those who say people are too “selfish” for libertarian socialism, well, it is hard to see how toiling to make a boss or other property owner rich equates to being “selfish” - rather, it amounts of the stereotype of altruism (letting others take advantage of you).

Bakunin, then, remains correct when he proclaimed that *“freedom without socialism is privilege, injustice; and that socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality”*. He is still correct on *“the need for a radical social and economic reform, aimed at the liberation of the people’s labour from the yoke of capital and proprietors, based on the strictest justice, not legal, nor theological, nor metaphysical, but simply human, on positive science and on the most absolute freedom.”* (“Fédéralisme, socialisme et antithéologisme”, *Oeuvres* [Paris: P.V. Stock, 1895] I: 59) Likewise with his hopes for a free socialism:

“The socialist... draws upon his positive rights to life and to all pleasures of life, intellectual, moral, and physical. He loves life, and he wants to enjoy it to the fullest. His convictions being a part of himself, and his duties toward society being indissolubly linked to his rights, to remain faithful to both, he will know how to live in accordance with justice, like Proudhon, and if necessary die like Babeuf; but he will never say that the life of humanity must be a sacrifice, nor that death is the sweetest fate.” (“Fédéralisme, socialisme et antithéologisme”, 42-3)

In terms of *“freedom without socialism”*, capitalism has progressed as the anarchist critique suggested it would. Increasing inequality, exploitation, injustice, privilege and so on. A few things should, however, be noted.

The Covid-19 lockdowns showed - at least for anyone who was not blinded by ideology or was paying attention - that the wealth of the mega-rich did not reflect their contributions to society but rather what they could extract from wealth produced from the workers they controlled. After all, they were still in their usual positions in the social hierarchy, the “capital” they owned remained, the workplaces existed during the lockdowns and yet there was a massive economic slump. This showed that the true “wealth creators” are those who do the actual work and whose toil is exploited by the capitalist class and their agents.

Recent events also have the merit - in the sense of “every cloud has a silver lining” - of showing that the mega-rich are not in their position due to their superior intellect. They are rich because they own property and monopolise the surplus labour produced by others, not because they are better than the rest of us. That these people are not geniuses became clear whenever they opened their mouths. No, they are not playing some game of “five-dimensional chess”, they are stupid - so stupid, they do not realise it and so utter their stupidities openly.

So, the last decade or so has exposed the myth of Ayn Rand’s glorification of the capitalist class - many of the rich showed the world beyond doubt that they are not very bright. Their higher wealth is not a product of being superior individuals but simply other factors - luck, state contracts, inheritance but also industrial hierarchies that allow them to monopolise the surplus value that their workers produce. They cannot be even said to warrant a reward for any contribution to organising labour, as they have hired others to do that (while workers try to make the workplace work in spite of the official structure rather than because of it).

Likewise, the notion that “government should be run like a business” should be never uttered again. Capitalist firms are dictatorships and suggesting that governments should be run like one means advocating despotism. And despotism is subject to the whims of the autocrat and the fear that power generates. The autocratic, arbitrary and wasteful Trump Administration also shines a light on the capitalist company - how much labour and resources are wasted by the decisions and whims of mini-Trumps across the economy? As Proudhon noted long ago:

“Thus property, which was supposed to make us free, makes us prisoners. What am I saying? It degrades us, by making us servants and tyrants to one another.

“Do we really know what wage-labour is? To work under a master, watchful of his prejudices as much and more than of his bidding; whose dignity consists above all in demanding, *sic volo, sic jubeo* [*Thus I wish, thus I command*], and never explaining; that we often scorn and mock! having no thoughts of your own, constantly considering the thought of others, knowing no stimulant but [your] daily bread, and the fear of losing a job? (*Système des contradictions économiques* II: 295)

It is quite amazing to see how the prejudices, whims, bigotries and stupidities of a single man can push a major world power and its economy down a retrograde path. Yes, like any President Trump has significant financial backing from certain sectors of capital but this is not what is driving the decisions. Other sectors of capital are being harmed, along with the long-term viability of the national economy, yet he is allowed to do so. It took a long-awaited supreme court decision (which was not even unanimous given the law) to reverse the imposition of tariffs by someone who publicly and repeatedly showed the world he did not understand how they worked. Clearly the “deep state” - reflecting in a distorted manner the simple reality of bureaucratic power - only acts when it is not the right in power (the Democrats are not “radical left” even if they are to the left of the Republicans, which would not be hard).

This period has also shown that it is difficult to remove someone from an office they are clearly not fit to hold (on *any* level). The lack of effective recall procedures has been shown by numerous incumbents, a problem made worse the more centralised the office. That federalism can mitigate some of the damage of incompetent or vindictive regimes has also been shown. Thus, key aspects of anarchist organisational theory have been proven to be extremely relevant.

Nor should we ever forget that as a proportion of the whole, there are vastly more psychopaths in politics and management than in society more generally. Ultimately, if anarchists did have the naive view of “human nature” that some assert, then we would have no issue with giving a few people power over the rest. The decade confirms (again!) that anarchists are right - it is never wise to empower the few at the expense of the many for they will basically do whatever they want for as long as they can. Hence the anarchist stress for bottom-up federalism, decentralising and decentring power and the use of elections, mandates and recall - all of which date back to Proudhon’s writings during the 1848 Revolution before being championed by Bakunin and subsequent anarchists.

Still, even after Trump and others like him, Leninists seem puzzled with anarchist opposition to majority rule - which in practice almost always means the rule of those elected by the majority, often not even that - in spite of being happy to rationalise the Bolshevik dictatorship’s crushing of the Kronstadt revolt because soviet democracy would have seen the

end of Bolshevik rule and, they claim, the victory of reaction. Such paternalism should horrify any genuine socialist, along with the notion of a benevolent dictatorship. As we discuss in [section H.2.11](#), Leninist critiques of anarchist views on democracy (not to be confused with majority decision making) always end up in self-contradiction.

More generally, it should be noted that much of what passes for right-wing thought these days amounts to denying reality in favour of what is ideologically correct. As such the elevation of such serial liars Donald Trump and Boris Johnson should not come as a surprise, although their ability to garner voters was. It is also manifestly obvious that all claims to hold such things as “freedom”, “the constitution”, “states’ rights”, “the free market”, “morality”, amongst many, as sacred are so much bunkum. Power and privilege alone drive them - as shown by their capitulation to Trump and his cult.

In terms of “*socialism without freedom*”, a few words are also needed beyond noting that Marxism in all its forms has proven anarchism’s critique prescient.

We have now arrived, we are told, at a “post-truth” world. It is certainly true that we have had a British Prime Minister and an American President who lie as easily as they breathe, even on things that are easily checked or are part of daily experience. Their minions in the right-wing media and party follow this, repeating and justifying the lies. However, if you are aware of your typical Marxist critique of anarchism, then the notion that we are *now* in a “post-truth” world is laughable. Anarchism has been subject to a “post-truth” narrative for some time - indeed, from 1847 if you compare what Marx wrote about Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy* with what Proudhon actually wrote. We have also been subject to the notion that if you repeat a lie often enough, then it somehow becomes true - as seen by the repetitive nature of said critiques. Indeed, the plan to add appendices debunking Marxist attacks when they appeared soon ended due to the repetitive nature of such attacks.

Marxists clearly never read anarchists, given how confidently they regurgitate the same claims by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky as if anarchists have never replied to them. Many of the attacks, sadly, are of a personal nature, noting the personal failings and bigotries of specific anarchists (Proudhon and Bakunin, in the main). As such, there is a certain poetic justice when Marxists who have spent so long “critiquing” anarchism by noting the personal failures of anarchists get to experience similar “critiques” by the right who quote the racist words of Marx and Engels. It is notable that anarchists do not critique Marxism by noting the banality that Marx and Engels were men of their time and so often expressed views we now find distasteful.

When attempts are made to refute anarchism in an apparently more serious fashion, it usually ends badly for Marxism. For example, a few Marxists have taken to arguing that the social anarchist vision of revolution is simply a State because it involves collective decision making, self-defence against counter-revolution and so on. This is strange because they, being Marxists, are meant to believe that the State will “wither away” - yet here they are in their rush to critique anarchism effectively dismissing a key notion of their own ideology. Part of the problem is the assumption that any social organisation is a State. In reality, while the State is *one* form of social organisation not all social organisations are states. Yet reading, say, Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* should be sufficient to expose the flaws of such a “Marxist” argument - his description of the stateless Iroquois Confederacy reflects anarchist views of social organisation during a revolution. Worse, if the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is just the people armed and organised then the Bolshevik

regime was no proletarian dictatorship yet most Marxists proclaim it was suggesting that the notion is, let us say, flexible.

This rejection of their own ideology comes from Engels' *On Authority*. If we take this seriously - and as we show in [section H.4](#) of *AFAQ* there is no reason to - then the worldview it produces is distinctly uninspiring for it concludes all social interaction, all organisation, is "authoritarian." The notion that agreeing to meet with friends at a certain time and place to play a game with common rules involves "authority" is an impoverished perspective, to say the least. Likewise, the lack of class analysis when it comes to a social revolution is depressing - although seeing others parrot these arguments is more so. While it is tempting to just shrug our shoulders at its banality, such notions have a real-world impact by underpinning and justifying authoritarian rule during a revolution - after all, from this perspective workers' self-management is just as "authoritarian" as one-man management so there is nothing to choose between them. This is no academic debate, given the Bolshevik destruction of workers' self-management in favour of one-man management.

In short, what should be seen as an expression of freedom, the ending of classes and their authoritarian social relationships and hierarchies, the creation of new social relationships and organisations based upon co-operation and the free association of equals is turned into an authoritarian act which, at best, changes authority but cannot end the imposition of one will upon another. This leads to the truly bizarre conclusions that a group of individuals freely co-operating in a joint task is, at root, identical to one individual ordering the rest to toil for them and that resisting authority and imposing authority are equally "authoritarian". Marxists, then, are like the bourgeois economist who "confounds the most disparate things, association and wage-labour, usury and partnership." (Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques* II: 46)

I did come across one Australian Leninist article attacking anarchism which did reference *AFAQ* a few times while regurgitating usual Draper-inspired distortions, but it was so selective that I had a hard time recognising its arguments - so selective, it was misleading as anyone who actually read *AFAQ* would know. A comrade in Australia took the time to debunk the article, thankfully (see Daniel Rashid, "The Poverty of Mick Armstrong's Polemic", *Black Flag Anarchist Review*, Volume 5, Number 1 [Spring 2025]). That *AFAQ* quotes Stirner and Proudhon appears to have caused it author to lose whatever critical faculties he may have had but it did allow him to trot out (pun intended) the usual Marxist myths about both. Suffice to say, the beloved Marxist notion that Stirner is the basis of all forms of anarchism is hard to maintain once you realise Proudhon never mentioned him (and starting writing years before *The Ego and Its Own* appeared), Bakunin mentioned him once (in passing) and his work quickly disappeared and was rediscovered in the 1890s, to be embraced by a small minority within the movement and rejected by far more. Indeed, the only people who can be said to have been influenced by Stirner before then were Marx and Engels. Still, why let facts get in the way of a good polemic?

Still the attempts to denounce anarchism as being "individualism" are revealing. For you must understand, when anarchists talk of individual freedom, the full development of the individual, that individuals must free themselves (all in the context of recognising the necessary *collective* conditions needed for all these), we are "individualists". When Marxists quote Marx on "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" then they are most definitely *not* individualists even though the concepts are the same. Needless to say, if they proudly note that Lenin was willing to violate party discipline for the

higher cause of the revolution, they fail to note that any mere mortal who does likewise will be denounced as an individualist and petty-bourgeois. Ultimately, attempts to portray anarchists as “Individualists” simply expose the state-capitalist nature of most forms of Marxism.

It is not just anarchism that most Marxists are ignorant of. It becomes clear that, when actually investigated, many of their claims are simply stories repeated to make themselves feel better. For example, in spite of it being an obvious critical event for their ideology, most Leninists know very little about what actually happened during the Russian Revolution, the regime the Bolsheviks created and the ideological shifts it produced. Instead, we get platitudes and inventions - much repeated, of course, but repetition does not somehow make the inaccurate somehow accurate. Suffice to say, the eye-witness accounts of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman provide a better insight into the realities of Bolshevism than the ideologically correct articles of its proponents.

Before returning to anarchism, I should note that when the London Anarchist Bookfair was looking for a new venue in the 2000s, they approached UCL but were refused. They asked why: *anarchists advocate revolution*, came the response. To which it was noted that the university had allowed the SWP to hold its *Marxism* event there and it advocated revolution. To which came the response: *but anarchists mean it*.

The last thirty years have seen a debate arise over the definition of anarchism. Some have argued for a contextualised definition, stressing its roots in the (First) International. Others suggest that anarchism has to include all movements and thinkers who have raised anarchist ideas even if they arose long before the term “anarchism” was coined. Both sides point to specific anarchist thinkers to bolster their position (Kropotkin, somewhat incorrectly as I will show, is often invoked by the second camp).

As for me, both sides have a point. Of course, people have drawn anarchist conclusions before anarchism existed as a named theory and movement and without reading anarchist thinkers - you would have to despair for humanity if those subject to hierarchy, the state and class-rule did not draw the conclusion that these and the oppression and exploitation they require should be ended. These, however, are better termed anarchistic (or libertarian) rather than anarchist. This explains why Kropotkin differentiated between anarchism and “*modern anarchism*” which he stressed “developed” within the International. (“Anarchism”, *Direct Struggle Against Capital* [Edinburgh: AK Press, 2014], 170)

Anarchism, then, is a specific tendency within the labour and socialist movements which, like those movements, arose in response to the rise of capitalism. We can call previous thinkers and movements “anarchist” only because this tendency arose. However, unlike some in the contextual camp, I include Proudhon as a foundational thinker of anarchism rather than the forerunner he is so often relegated to. While I can understand why some do this (his sexism and racism *are* abhorrent), the collectivist-wing of the (First) International cannot be understood without Proudhon who gave it its basic principles of anti-state socialism, federalism, associationalism, etc. - and, ultimately, the name of anarchism. Hopefully my work debunking some of the myths as regarding Proudhon will help others appreciate his ideas and their importance to anarchism (and see that his personal flaws are very much at odds with his ideas).

It does not help that some comment on anarchism without knowing anything about it. J.R.R. Tolkien, for example, wrote in a letter that his “political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs) - or to ‘unconstitutional’ Monarchy.” Given that constitutions are generally framed as restricting the power of monarchs or others invested with similar powers, he seems to be favouring both the abolition and strengthening of authority. Or, to put it plainly, indicating he did not know what anarchism is. This is confirmed by what he immediately adds: “I would arrest anybody who uses the word State (in any sense other than the inanimate realm of England and its inhabitants, a thing that has neither power, rights nor mind); and after a chance of recantation, execute them if they remained obstinate!” (*The letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981], 63)

Sadly, this has not stopped some claiming on one sentence alone that he should be considered an anarchist author (his fiction suggests that he was fine with idealised monarchies headed by those born to the position - power corrupts but not, apparently, the rightful monarch). Suffice to say, I agree with Michael Moorcock (an *actual* anarchist Fantasy writer) on his evaluation of Tolkien but we should all avoid attempts to add writers to the anarchist tradition based on whether we like their literary works or use the word (as “anarcho-capitalism” shows - along with “tory anarchism”, “national anarchism”, “anarcho-fascism” and “anarcho-monarchism” and other stupidities - using the word does not equate to understanding it). In short, we should never forget that anarchism is a specific socio-economic theory and movement and we must evaluate specific writers based on whether they meet the criteria of anti-capitalism and anti-statism.

In terms of better understanding anarchism through its leading thinkers, here are a few works which I think are essential:

- K. Steven Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)
- Richard B. Saltman, *The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983)
- Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872-1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)
- Davide Turcato, *Making Sense of Anarchism: Errico Malatesta's Experiments with Revolution, 1889-1900* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2015)
- Rachel Hui-Chi Hsu, *Emma Goldman, **Mother Earth**, and the Anarchist Awakening* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021)

All these are, I think, key reading for anyone seeking to understand the ideas of these specific thinkers and their impact on anarchism. This does not mean that I agree with everything argued, simply that they are generally correct and illuminate the ideas of the people discussed.

Finally, a few words on *AFAQ* itself.

It is of note to see the arguments and quotes from *AFAQ* appear elsewhere, showing that its goal of being a resource for the movement has been successful. It has also been referenced in

a few academic books on politics. Given this, outwith the pleasure gained in researching and writing it, these and other things show that it was a worthwhile project.

It is fair to say that *AFAQ* is too big and, sometimes, addresses somewhat obscure topics (its size issue became more obvious after it was moved to its new home - <https://www.anarchistfaq.org/> - and sub-sections were combined into a single file) This was because it aimed to be two things - an introduction to anarchism as well as a resource for the movement. The latter often causes its length - critiquing economics or Marxism, debunking attacks on anarchism and so on can be time consuming. Suffice to say, a single sentence can take many, many sentences to debunk. Then there is its history, its origins as an anti-“anarcho”-capitalism FAQ (which explains [section F](#) and the size of [section G](#)). This seems less important now than it did originally. Then there is [section H](#), on Marxism, which also seems less important given the general decline in its influence (which also, in part, explains the incomplete nature of *AFAQ*). Still, adherents of both still exist and they continue to make demonstrably false claims about anarchism, so there is a need to address them - although perhaps not at the length *AFAQ* has done so. Still, fewer numbers take their claims seriously - something *AFAQ* can take some credit for - but we do need to keep watch as many hide their reactionary and authoritarian ideology under labels like “market anarchism” and so associate themselves with, and discredit, genuine market anarchists.

Some may disagree with *AFAQ*’s approach of finding what the different schools of Anarchism have in common. I note they rarely object to doing so with, say, collectivist and communism Anarchism. It is of note that Anarchists so apparently different as Benjamin Tucker and Peter Kropotkin both called themselves socialists. I see as little point in denying the links as for favouring members of diverse schools being in the same group or federation (I am no advocate of the “synthesis”). Let each plough their own field and time will tell who is right. This does not mean an uncritical acceptance, simply tolerance and an awareness that there are more important things to do.

Given this, there is a case to be made for re-organising *AFAQ*, shifting certain sections to appendices, while updating others - particularly given the new and rediscovered material available. For compared to when *AFAQ* was started, we have easy access to far more writings previously stored in archives. I have tried to make current activists aware of these writings in *Black Flag Anarchist Review* but their use in *AFAQ* would not go amiss. The aim is not nostalgia, rather to provide a foundation for new struggles and theorising.

What next? The aim remains to complete the unfinished appendix. Other than that, posting more frequently to the [AFAQ blog](#) is a goal. At some stage, a general revision of the main sections of *AFAQ* may be done - not least, updating references to more recent editions and replacing those with web pages to actual publications where possible. Likewise, recent developments within the movement and within wider society should be mentioned. So, there is much which could be done. Whether they will be is another issue!

Still, I think that *AFAQ* - for all its flaws - remains relevant and of use by current activists, a resource for everyone seeking to make the world a better place, one fit for humans to not only live in but thrive in. There are no easy answers, but we have an interest in working them out - for no one is going to do it for us. It may be daunting and difficult, but hope always remains - and as Kropotkin continually stressed, it is hope which inspires the struggles and movements that change the world.

Iain McKay

<https://anarchistfaq.org/>