

Horizontal Democracy: A Manifesto on Self-Government, By Thomas Pulliam

individualist anarchism, anarcho-synthesis, decentralization, direct democracy

but how do I sign up for revolution?
and how do we get rid of the pollution?
when everybody knows that there's a problem
but nobody knows of a solution?
waiting gets old so let's change the world right now.
if there's a will there's a way, if there's a why there's a how.
painting my soul on every day makes me feel like a slave
and I won't do it again.
— "Don't Wait" by Bob! Loudly, a family friend and Dustbin veteran

We should take into consideration the issues people face on the journey towards a conscious anarchist perspective. There is no doubt that it commonly reserves an important place in the story of individuals. My personal experience with it began in middle school. My family lived in a dirty broken-down house in Boise, Idaho, which by the summer of 2012 evolved into a shelter for borderline homeless punk rockers. People called us "the Dustbin"—which was coined by the psychedelic punk band Mind Drips, who performed there on occasion—or "Dirty-6th" because of our location on 36th Street. One year, over a dozen dirty teenagers crashed there at once. Most of them were friends of my older sister, others were strangers. Practically all of them were self-described anarchists.

The political values of punk thus became a significant part of my upbringing. The general opposition to materialism and hierarchy appealed to me. An important soundtrack I heard from this time came from a scratched CD labeled folk-punk. It included songs by various well-known anarcho-punk groups, including Ramshackle Glory, AJJ, Days N' Daze, Mischief Brew and others. They covered the topics of homelessness, train-hopping, addiction, nihilism, the spectacle¹, and especially anarchism. It would take years before I understood

¹ In *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord defined the spectacle as "the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign."

anarchy as a developed socio-political theory. Regardless, I began to associate the word with feelings of angst and alienation in an imposing society.

If you were to ask those who were there, they would describe the Dustbin as a time of individualism and fraternity. I would be lying if I said I didn't romanticize it similarly. However, as a young teenager, I was not able to experience it quite the same way. To some extent, it robbed me of security at a time when I needed it. Chaos filled the house, and our mother's depression kept her from being fully present most of the time. On the other hand, I was provided a great deal of freedom for someone my age. I was able to leave the house at any time and roam freely around the city. When people spoke to me, they treated me like an adult. Things this simple taught me how to handle and appreciate independence. That which threatened my personal autonomy became a lifelong concern.

At the age of fourteen, I moved north to Council Valley to live with my hippie grandmother. Council, Idaho is one of those tiny, impoverished towns where organized religion and alcohol are the top industries, and the only pastimes besides drinking are gossip and hate. The main source of excitement for folks under 21 was therefore limited to a lifestyle of delinquency and I was no exception. My relationship with the local sheriff's office quickly turned antagonistic. Bored, brutish bastards, their ranks consisted of officers who relocated from neighboring states for behavioral problems. Like most police, they did not care about your concerns or want to help you. Their lack of stimulation and unchallenged authority led them to act aggressively and abuse locals. Just months before I arrived, two deputies murdered the rancher Jack Yantis. My mother moved to the area soon after and became an organizer with the Justice for Jack campaign, calling for police accountability. This branded our family permanent enemies to the department, who ended up harassing us for years.

The swine grew to hate me especially because of my trouble-making and open disrespect towards them. They would circle our block, enter our home without warrants, and stop me nearly every time we crossed paths. I returned the favor with targeted vandalism, trespassing, resisting arrest, and on one occasion stealing a bulletproof vest and ammo out of a police shed. Mostly this was to alleviate my existential boredom, but there was always an unconscious political motive. I considered them nothing more than a gang of kidnappers whose actions were not vindicated by any empty sentiment of justice.

In my school, which was among the least funded and possibly the most conservative in the country, I noticed authoritarian elements. I have always thrived in environments where I'm left to manage myself without authority figures breathing down my neck. I don't think I'm alone in this. Meanwhile, the U.S. education system goes to great lengths to suppress natural curiosity and promote conformity and obedience. I was prevented from pursuing my interests while forced to accept nationalist propaganda against my own terms.

It wasn't a place to grow, but a place to be molded into a passive drone, an institution bastardized by arbitrary practices in the name of spreading arbitrary beliefs with little

concern for individuality, growth, or truth. Stand up for the special flag and never for yourself, tell us why America is a harbinger of goodness. I resisted everything I disagreed with and many teachers hated me. In retrospect, I probably would have preferred something similar to Spanish anarchist Francisco Ferrer's model, where the classroom is structured horizontally and inquiry is encouraged. It became clear that the institution was a waste of time and I had to take responsibility for my own education. At sixteen, I finally dropped out.

Writing constantly was the easiest and most effective way to self-educate. I would research topics—especially history and philosophy—and type out essays accordingly. Some days I would get stoned and write dozens of pages just for fun. I learned more in one year than in my entire public school experience. It was only a matter of time before I considered doing this professionally. Not long before I turned seventeen, I printed my first article with *Adbusters*, the Situationist-inspired magazine famously responsible for sparking the Occupy Wall Street movement. I became a regular follower of their work (at least as much as I could), which pulled me even more towards an anti-establishment direction.

Around this same time, a series of coincidences led me to a book that inspires me to this day. It was a copy of *Anarchism and Other Essays* by Emma Goldman in worn DIY binding, given to me by my older sister when she was visiting from Portland. I became instantly infatuated with her work. What struck me most of all was her relevance. Before reading her biography, I thought she belonged to the New Left movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It shows how anarchism is just as pertinent to the human condition today as it was a century ago. This stood out in her 1917 essay *The Psychology of Political Violence*: “A free Republic! How a myth will maintain itself, how it will continue to deceive, to dupe, and blind even the comparatively intelligent to its monstrous absurdities. A free Republic! And yet within a little over thirty years a small band of parasites have successfully robbed the American people, and trampled upon the fundamental principles, laid down by the fathers of this country, guaranteeing to every man, woman, and child ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’”

In *A New Declaration of Independence*, she described the American state of affairs, which is not unlike what we see today: “The history of the American kings of capital and authority is the history of repeated crimes, injustice, oppression, outrage, and abuse, all aiming at the suppression of individual liberties and the exploitation of the people. A vast country, rich enough to supply all her children with all possible comforts, and insure well-being to all, is in the hands of a few, while the nameless millions are at the mercy of ruthless wealth gatherers, unscrupulous lawmakers, and corrupt politicians. . . . The reign of these kings is holding mankind in slavery, perpetuating poverty and disease, maintaining crime and corruption; it is fettering the spirit of liberty, throttling the voice of justice, and degrading and oppressing humanity. It is engaged in continual war and slaughter, devastating the country and destroying the best and finest qualities of man; it nurtures superstition and ignorance, sows prejudice and strife, and turns the human family into a camp of Ishmaelites.”

I saw her as an expert when it came to locating and dissecting the problems in our society. My natural skepticism of authority drew me to her views on political alienation and the nature of property and bureaucracy. However, at the time I thought her solution, anarchy, went in the opposite direction. This conclusion was influenced by her definition of anarchism as the opposition to government, society, and man-made law. I mistook this as opposition to all forms of organization, when she meant administrative monopoly, social influence over individual thought and expression, and oppressive means of maintaining order. I didn't consider government as something alien to a system of doing things. In my mind, even private enterprise was a type of government. As if it wasn't part of the point, I fell into saying "but humans are inherently social, so we will always form government."

I hadn't overcome the misconception that anarchism was the absence of systems and order. The highly functional anarchistic societies in Catalonia and today's Rojava, let alone how they ran, were unknown to me. I would need to know what it might look like in practice before I could consider it, and Goldman never attempted to champion anarchism from that angle. She even explained why she did this, saying she didn't believe anarchism could "consistently impose an iron-clad program or method on the future," and that different systems were unique to different situations. Even though this is probably the most appropriate stance, it still wasn't what I needed. I now realize that she just isn't a good introduction for some people, even if she's perfect for others.

In the months following my eighteenth birthday, I was forced to choose between staying in Council as a fiscal burden or becoming homeless with my sibling in Portland. I had no doubt about my decision. I'd read the Communist Manifesto by then and was curious about Marxism, so I was excited to learn that Portland was a hub for activism and radical thought. Spending my nights in a shelter, I surrounded myself with eccentrics and street kid philosophers. Most of my evenings were spent reading downtown, hopping transit as an advocate of the "Never Pay" movement, stealing vitamins and alcohol to give to the homeless, and wandering from drop-in to drop-in across the city. The experience was similar to college, except with debilitating poverty and violent police sweeps. One of my closest friends was a Neo-Luxemburgist I met at shelter. She was always concerned with showing me new perspectives and theory. Once she gave me two books she found at a shelter in Washington: a USSR-issued collection of V. I. Lenin and "On Anarchism" by Noam Chomsky.

I chose to begin with Lenin because of his political influence. It didn't take long before I regarded his ideas as antithetical to what I had previously seen in socialism. I already knew that Marxists considered state and often party dictatorship legitimate forms of social ownership. This is because they view the state as an institution any class can use to manifest power over society. According to Marxist theory, socialism can only be achieved by a state apparatus that dominates society and the bourgeoisie, which is supposed to "wither away" into the equal distribution of wealth and power (communism). This state is referred to as the

dictatorship of the proletariat. Since Marxism is loose with its definition of the state, this can be interpreted as minarchist and even anarchist in nature. From the beginning, I considered it practically synonymous with democracy and unionism. Leninism, meanwhile, advocates party dictatorship meant to act on behalf of the proletariat. They do this with the flawed conception that liberated democracy and free association is more prone to opportunism than top-down authority. I recognized that they put too much faith in the rights and virtue of party elites and not enough in the intelligence of the working-class.

I could not understand how a community so against classism could resonate with Lenin's words. In *What is to be Done?*, he asserted that workers are incapable of self-liberation and needed to be led by a *bourgeois intelligentsia*, "educated representatives of the propertied classes." In *Against Revisionism*, he condemned unorthodoxy and free criticism, treating his own revisions as sacred doctrine meant to replace all others. Demonizing aside, it's true that Leninism and its variations—characterized by centralization, bureaucratic-collectivization, and a vanguard party—have never inherently been against certain democratic principles. None of this matters, though, when decisions must be approved by a totalitarian party whose fundamental purpose is to limit democracy in the name of rigid ideology. Time and time again, these views have created organized violence that cannot be easily restrained by the masses; consistently they have undermined human needs and potential.

Political parties and central administration always end up creating their own class, their own bourgeoisie, which tramples on the rights of ordinary people. Even in labor, capitalist bosses are merely replaced by bureaucrats, and workers' unions are often met with the same level of hostility as under capitalism. When you go to Leninists about these problems, you see how they are often unable to differentiate between society, individuals, and the state. It's confusing to them that what's good for the state wouldn't automatically be good for the people; despite everything they believe about capitalism, they refuse to see how hierarchical administration and ideological worship can produce negative results. I began to understand a sentiment that Mikhail Bakunin put like this: "When the people are being beaten with a stick, they are not much happier if it is called 'the People's Stick'."

My brush with Leninism was my first push towards eventually breaking with the word socialism and other identities, including anarchism in some contexts, with a conscious fear of what Max Stirner referred to as "sacredness" and "sacred socialism". This occurs when social constructs, or "spooks" as he called them, are internalized to the point where they lose their original meaning and usefulness. For a long time, my mind was haunted by these constructs, and I experienced a dangerous separation from myself as a result. It seemed that many leftists—and most political positions for that matter—were indifferent to the core values of what they claimed to believe in. Many self-described socialists proved they can be just as elitist and hero-worshipping as the reactionaries they criticize, aggressively worshipping leaders and flags just as the religious often do with symbols of God and piety.

Chomsky was the next on my list. I was familiar with him as a social critic but didn't know he was an anarchist. His book's introduction by Nathan Schneider was almost convincing enough on its own. It began by discussing the Occupy movement and its flirtation with anarchist principles, how they came to adopt the word "horizontalism" in place of terms like anarchism and socialism which were rendered unusable by propaganda. I was unaware of how much they and similar movements acknowledged the distinction between hierarchy and leadership, which in my experience is made clear in genuine social movements. There was mention of the spokes councils behind the 1999 anti-globalist riots in Seattle: anarchists from Eugene, Portland, and Seattle who came together to devise a comprehensive plan against the World Trade Organization and other transnational institutions. Sometimes referred to as the "Battle in Seattle", it popularized the anti-globalist and anti-corporate ideas that dominate modern anti-establishment discourse, as well as the black bloc tactic that's still widely practiced today. Schneider linked the "amnesia" over these events to the particularly vehement crusade against anarchist thought and the resulting misconceptions.

Getting deeper into the book, I discovered a definition of anarchism that was hard not to accept. Essentially, it's the belief that all power relations are undesirable and dangerous, and that we should aim to replace unjustifiable hierarchical and coercive systems with bottom-up alternatives. Combining communal solidarity with individual liberty, it's the idea that society should be structured so authority comes from the bottom to the greatest extent possible, establishing a network of municipalities and workplaces on the principles of mutual aid, decentralization, individual sovereignty, and direct democracy.

While all anarchists share these common values, the motives and praxis are unique to each person. Anarchism then splits into individualist and social positions. Individualist anarchists tend to place greater emphasis on personal autonomy while social anarchists emphasize cooperation. However, the division between them is mostly false, and values can be borrowed from all corners of anarchist thought. Community-planning can co-exist with markets; liberation from social forces and liberation from antisocial forces are only two sides of the same struggle for self-representation. If authority comes from the bottom to a large enough degree, a marketplace of ideas combined with trial and error can guide us towards where we need to be. And as a general principle for adaptation and personal health, we should consider all ideologies, philosophies, systems, etc., nothing more than tools for individuals to use as they please. Acting otherwise is both dangerous and unhelpful.

Anarchism is generally regarded as synonymous with libertarian socialism, sometimes described as the individualist wing of socialism. Many anarchists would prefer to distance themselves from leftism, but it's generally true that it shares similar egalitarian values. As such, it is an anti-capitalist ideology, thus advocating some level of social ownership. The difference between capitalism and markets, for those who don't know, is that markets are characterized by decentralized and competitive industry, while capitalism is characterized by

private, central control over production, land, and profits. The larger the monopoly, the more true this is. But anarchists, unlike both statist and capitalists, understand that workers do not own the means of production unless they fully possess the right to control it as they please. By its very nature, bureaucracies exclude workers, sometimes more than capitalism, from participating in decisions or receiving the full amount they are entitled to. Because of this, a lot of thought has been put into how to apply horizontalism in economics.

Being opposed to private property—which is not the same as personal property—doesn't necessarily mean anarchism is always anti-market. Proudhonian anarchism, for instance, is both pro-market and anti-capitalist, famously advocating use and occupation property norms and collective planning through a community bank that lends at minimal interest rates. Proudhon objected to the power relations of capitalism, viewing it as neo-feudalistic and prone to monopoly, but he also argued that this was avoidable if property could not be hoarded and workers had access to free credit under directly democratic conditions. He envisioned a cooperative society designed to prevent the accumulation of market and political leverage, which he called mutualism.²

Social anarchists are different because they reject the market economy altogether. Instead, they suggest we should socially own the means of production through large democratic networks, which federate into communities, into municipalities, districts and eventually the entire world. But there are differences in how they think we should handle distribution. Anarcho-collectivists, like Mikhail Bakunin, think we should still use a type of currency, sometimes in the form of labor notes, corresponding to the amount of work each worker puts into the organization. Anarcho-communists, like Petr Kropotkin, think we should instead distribute according to need in a gift economy.

We can see here that anarchists put too much focus on what horizontal government would look like to be anti-government in its most literal sense. The notorious Circle-A, popularized by punk culture and the New Left, symbolizes “Order in Anarchy”, based on the quote by Proudhon, “as man seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy.” In other words, anarchism pursues balance and harmony by replacing monopolistic hierarchy with democracy. Still, the ideology remains falsely associated with disorder, which has been its biggest obstacle since the nineteenth century. Frankly, it could have been avoided by finding a less edgy word—nevertheless, here we are.

In his manifesto, *Anarchy*, Errico Malatesta describes this issue exactly as it is today: “Before [anarchism] had begun to be considered both possible and desirable by a whole school

² In his controversial book “What is Property?” (Qu'est-ce que la propriété?) Proudhon described mutualism as “a synthesis of communism and property”, going on to say: “Property, acting by exclusion and encroachment, while population was increasing, has been the life-principle and definitive cause of all revolutions. Religious wars, and wars of conquest, when they have stopped short of the extermination of races, have been only accidental disturbances, soon repaired by the mathematical progression of the life of nations. The downfall and death of societies are due to the power of accumulation possessed by property.”

of thinkers and accepted as the objective of a party, which has now become one of the most important factors in the social struggles of our time, the word anarchy was universally used in the sense of disorder and confusion; and it is to this day used in that sense by the uninformed as well as by political opponents with an interest in distorting the truth.”

Chomsky explores this relationship between anarchy and chaos in an interview that appears a couple dozen pages into *On Anarchism*. “Yeah, it’s a bum rap, basically,” he said, “—it’s like referring to Soviet-style bureaucracy as ‘socialism,’ or any other term of discourse that’s been given a second meaning for the purpose of ideological warfare. I mean, ‘chaos’ is a meaning of the word, but it’s not a meaning that has any relevance to social thought. Anarchy as a social philosophy has never meant ‘chaos’—in fact, anarchists have typically believed in a highly organized society, just one that’s organized democratically from below.” As proof that this isn’t an academic interpretation of the word removed from the motives of “black bloc thugs”, a random anarchist paraphrased this to me at a 2020 riot I attended in Portland. They said, “People think it’s about chaos and the absence of authority, but all anarchism is is authority—actual authority, derived from the masses!”

With the feeling I was taking a step in the right direction, I sought out more perspectives on the subject. Among the ones I think are worth mentioning were Petr Kropotkin, Max Stirner, and the communalists Abdullah Öcalan and Murray Bookchin. Besides Goldman, Kropotkin’s sociobiological book on mutual aid was the first classical anarchist theory I read. It provided an articulate argument that our natural state, especially when liberated from the shackles of hierarchy, is a social one, and that solidarity can be a source of fulfillment, security, and freedom. He showed the benefits of mutualism and mutual aid, not just in humans but the entire animal kingdom, and why incorporating it in social organization is complementary to the human spirit. This was one of my favorite passages from the book, which helped restore my faith in human potential:

“It is not love to my neighbor—whom I often do not know at all—which induces me to seize a pail of water and rush towards his house when I see it on fire; it is a far wider, even though more vague feeling or instinct of human solidarity or sociability which moves me. It is not love, and not even sympathy (understood in its proper sense) which induces a herd of ruminants or of horses to form a ring in order to resist an attack of wolves. . . . It is not love and not even sympathy upon which society is based in mankind. It is the conscience—be it only at the stage of an instinct—of human solidarity. It is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependence of every one’s happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own. Upon this broad and necessary foundation the still higher moral feelings are developed.”

Stirner and his philosophy of Egoism provided the reminder that—mutual aid considered—we are still individuals, and if we aren’t fighting for our own cause then we’re

likely fighting for the cause of someone else. This does not negate the importance of altruism—I'd argue a strong community, self-government, and direct democracy is necessary for the personal fulfillment of every individual. Kropotkin's theory on mutual aid and Stirner's individualism are not contradicting. In fact, they reinforce each other in terms of survival of the fittest. As inherent individuals, self-preservation is our strongest instinct, and over our evolution this instinct has been most successful with solidarity.

Authorities have always used divide and conquer tactics that depend on the general public experiencing the world in terms of external identity. "Patriot", "Communist", "Christian", etc., whether applied to oneself or another group, are only vague labels for the purpose of propaganda; they continue to exist so rulers can keep us submissive, distracted, and easy to mobilize against political enemies. This doesn't mean there aren't good values associated with certain terms—the issue is that we use them to replace our identity, turning to authorities and sectarian principles instead of ourselves. We are significantly less susceptible to this when we avoid identifying with anything but ourselves and consciously act according to what is right for us, not a political party, not an ideology, not a nation-state. We shouldn't internalize constructs intended—at the best of times—to help us navigate the objective world; it's healthier to view them as tools to better ourselves and our environments. Ironically, to best utilize Stirner's Egoism you also need to eliminate the other definition of Ego, i.e., what we create around who we are in psychic defense against the world.

Öcalan and Bookchin introduced me to the concept of Social Ecology and an active example of grassroots government. Bookchin was the first voice I found who connected the importance of anarchism with green politics. In his book *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, he wrote: "It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the anarchist concepts of a balanced community, a face-to-face democracy, a humanistic technology and a decentralized society—these rich libertarian concepts—are not only desirable, they are also necessary. They belong not only to the great visions of man's future, they now constitute the preconditions for human survival." The Kurdish project and Öcalan's Bookchin-inspired theory of *democratic confederalism*³ were what finally convinced me that horizontal direct democracy is possible even in the most uncertain environments. The more I learned, the easier it was to conceptualize anarchist logic. The more confident I became that it could work, the more I came to defend it openly.

It's important to view anarchism from its relationship to democracy. The etymology of democracy comes from Latin and its literal definition is "rule by the people". This makes anarchy—which translates from ancient Greek to "without a master"—the purest democratic

³ The political theory adopted (though not fully implemented) by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, also known as Rojava and Kurdistan, which was organized with the visionary help of Murray Bookchin and Abdullah Öcalan, who was brought to anarchism from Stalinism after discovering Bookchin's work in the Turkish prison where he remains to this day. Despite constant war from multiple directions, the Kurds have consistently pushed advancements in participative democracy, feminism and plurality, environmentalism, communal property, restorative justice, and freedom of thought just to name a few.

idea. Anarchism adheres to a participatory vision of self-government where communities and individuals can directly influence legislation, giving people a voice outside of elections. Swedish political scientist Jörgen Westerståhl identified four manifestations of political participation: electoral participation, referendum, district councils and local assemblies, and participation based on knowledge and interest in politics. None of these have to be exclusive, and the healthiest democracies would need elements of all of them.

Expertise and delegation can still exist in a completely direct democracy. *Abolition of the politician* is a common sentiment heard in some way or another in anarchist communities. This doesn't mean the abolition of delegation or management; it's the abolition of special monopolistic authority, replacing certain roles with grassroots systems. Politicians in an anarchist society are delegates who act in accordance with decisions made and approved from the bottom using general assembly, imperative mandates, and referendums.

This factor of community consent is crucial for social revolution. People don't even need to understand socialist theory to understand their own interests. When I was doing contracting, a fiercely anti-socialist co-worker of mine once proposed a side-job and distributing the pay equally on top of an additional amount based on contribution. He thought up socialism on instinct. Imagine if the average person had a direct say in grassroots democracy. You don't even need a great deal of inner-working knowledge to participate. That's what the delegates and experts are for. You just need to know what you want. Decisions can be formed on a communal level between citizens and elected delegates, and then passed by direct public mandates and referendum to ensure the presence of organized consent. This can be organized on a massive decentralized scale, as a federation of municipal councils, regional parliaments, and general congresses, allowing individuals and communities to exercise a direct influence over their shared environment and day-to-day life.

When it comes down to it, the main argument against this type of society is that humans are incapable of cooperation. However, some might argue that human organization would be impossible if not for our innate social instincts, that society would collapse if not for everyday communism underpinning the foundation those who strong-armed and inherited their way to the top regularly exploit. Additionally, it is rooted in elitism, the belief that other people are too stupid to have a say so it's better to impose your own views indirectly through tyrannical institutions. This argument disintegrates when you consider the constant social conflict, the murder of the planet and its resources, the mismanagement of wealth, weapons, and materials, all in the end demonstrating that politicians and CEOs are consciously resistant to the interests of the public. They are the ones making the "wrong decisions" while dragging the rest of the world into their insanity. Instead of getting to the root of the problem, statist continue to advocate exclusion from the decisions that affect us.

It could be argued that a lot of our cultural problems ultimately stem from top-down administration, the state, which gives destructive values a monopoly. I honestly think that a

directly democratic society would allow us to govern based on core human values, and certain reactionary views that only benefit the elite would have a hard time sustaining themselves. Everyone is a communist without external factors telling them not to be, at least to a good enough extent to work with. Most people care about their community, especially when they are not experiencing alienation. Even if this weren't the case, society could be organized so decisions are confined to their own areas. We should also remember that a good majority of people in communities would have to be ready for this before they would ever fight for it. And if they are beyond consenting to power over their environment, other things have probably changed too. That said, I acknowledge that some places will take larger steps than others, but refusing to fight for individual and community rights just because propaganda has made us distrust one another will be the death of any prospect for a better life.

Top-down administration does not entail better decisions. It cannot represent any individual. All states are founded on monopoly and power, and like all monopolies, they undermine the rights of the individual as they stray towards centralism and globalism in the gluttonous pursuit for wealth. Once a monopoly has concentrated enough power at the top, once it uses its power to betray any possible image of its goodness, it is doomed to fall apart. This has been clear in every case from the Romans to the USSR. Too much violence, too much alienation, and too much corruption are the rightful nail in the coffin for every state. But even then, this same trend will survive unless change is forced alongside social revolution. Power doesn't give up power, and it acquires more at every opportunity no matter the cost. It will continue to exist this way until one way or another the monopoly is dismantled.

This is where anarchism's belief in horizontal government and community decision-making comes into play. From the anarchist perspective, it is imperative to the human condition that every individual can directly represent themselves, and being forced to cooperate with institutions that impose social, material, and psychological conditions is a natural violation. If the goal is to give people a voice to the same degree they're affected, then democracy must occur on the smallest possible scale. Our communities and workplaces should be our own spaces, not to be interrupted except on the grounds of human rights. As Bookchin put it: "The overriding problem is to change the structure of society so that people gain power. The best arena to do that is the municipality—the city, town, and village—where we have an opportunity to create a face-to-face democracy."

States are not normal by any means. The majority of anthropologists agree that for almost all of human history, until about the end of the Neolithic Age, human societies were communal and consensus was equivalent to government. Obviously, this indicates that anarchism is inextricably linked to human nature, probably more than our egoism. Sociological studies have found, for instance, that in nearly all instances of crisis and natural disaster mutual aid and solidarity increase, and communities often respond more efficiently than government. I've witnessed this first-hand amidst the riots, extreme pollution, and

pandemic in Portland, Oregon's houseless community. Even after the arrival of the state, there have been countless large-scale stateless societies that have flourished only to be destroyed and white-washed by hegemonic governments around the world.

Let us remember that modern nation-states and capitalism are less than five hundred years old. Highly egalitarian societies existed on American soil until about a hundred years ago, when they were finally destroyed by colonialism and the genocide of Manifest Destiny. Among them was the Iroquois Confederation, described by colonial emissary Cadwallader Colden as having "such absolute notions of liberty that they allow of no kind of superiority of one over another, and banish all servitude from their territories." Communitarian and democratic, the Iroquois were among the most complex governments in the world at the time, known as the longest recorded example of direct democracy, which is even longer considering that it had been practiced by the same tribes for thousands of years.

These same values are no stranger to the present. We see them in action today with the Zapatistas and the Kurds. But the most famous modern example is Anarchist Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War. The anarchist movement in Spain was the product of generational oppression carried out by the monarchy, capitalist robber-barons, and the Catholic Church⁴, which pulled peasants and the urban working-class towards radical thought for an alternative. The ideas of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Marx, Proudhon, Stirner, Élisée Reclus and others became very popular over a few decades, especially in Barcelona. By the 1920s, revolutionary trade unions across Spain carried out massive general strikes and sabotage campaigns at growing numbers, and in 1931 the monarchy was overthrown.

The Spanish population quickly established a democratic republic and began making progressive reforms. This created a sense of alienation among reactionary currents—i.e., fascists, monarchists, liberal capitalists. By July 1936, Francisco Franco, a fascist general under the old monarchy, united these groups to execute a coup, facilitating his power with the aid of Nazi and Italian forces. Push-back was higher than anticipated. Those loyal to the Republic—or at least against the fascists—scrambled to form a resistance. The Republic became the least influential faction as Marxist and anarchist organizations established territories across northern Spain. Practically overnight the entire region of Catalonia and Aragon founded a network of free municipalities on anarchist principles.

The anarchists in Spain wanted to distance themselves from the bureaucratic interpretations of socialism and communism. In his book *After the Revolution*, published shortly after the uprising, economist Diego Abad de Santillan wrote: "We are guided by the vision of a society of free producers and distributors in which no power exists to remove from them the possession of the productive apparatus. In the Russian example, the State has taken away from workers' associations and peasants the free decision over everything relating to the

⁴ Many anarchists opposed to the Church were Catholic themselves, although some people, like George Orwell in his memoir *Homage to Catalonia*, claim that anarchist values replaced Christianity to a certain degree.

instruments of labor, production and distribution. The producers there have changed their masters. They do not even own the means of production nor the goods they produce, and the wage earner, who is subjected to as many inequalities or more than in the capitalistic society, is living under an economic order of dependency, servitude and slavery.”

Much of the economy in Spain was collectivized and many resources were distributed on a communal basis. Workers and communities seized 75% of the economy in the anarchist stronghold of Barcelona, most of which in one grand sweep at the very beginning of the war. Since the collectivization was directly democratic in nature, workers on the ground floor were able to personally influence decisions with their unique perspectives. Conditions also improved and changes were made to make labor a more welcoming and voluntary task. According to Emma Goldman, who visited Catalonia between 1936 and 1937, productivity rose by 30–50% across the entire region despite wartime interference. In a publication for the *Workers' Solidarity Movement*, Eddie Conlon said this on the Spanish economy:

“Collectivisation was voluntary and thus different from the forced ‘collectivisation’ in Russia. Usually a meeting was called and all present would agree to pool together whatever land, tools and animals they had. The land was divided into rational units and groups of workers were assigned to work them. Each group had its delegate who represented their views at meetings. A management committee was also elected and was responsible for the overall running of the collective. Each collective held regular general meetings of all its participants.

“If you didn’t want to join the collective you were given some land but only as much as you could work yourself. You were not allowed to employ workers. Not only production was affected, distribution was on the basis of what people needed. In many areas money was abolished. People come to the collective store (often churches which had been turned into warehouses) and got what was available. If there were shortages rationing would be introduced to ensure that everyone got their fair share. But it was usually the case that increased production under the new system eliminated shortages.

“In agricultural terms the revolution occurred at a good time. Harvests that were gathered in and being sold off to make big profits for a few landowners were instead distributed to those in need. Doctors, bakers, barbers, etc. were given what they needed in return for their services. Where money was not abolished a ‘family wage’ was introduced so that payment was on the basis of need and not the number of hours worked.

“Production greatly increased. Technicians and agronomists helped the peasants to make better use of the land. Modern scientific methods were introduced and in some areas yields increased by as much as 50%. There was enough to feed the collectivists and the militias in their areas. Often there was enough for exchange with other collectives in the cities for machinery. In addition food was handed over to the supply committees who looked after distribution in the urban areas.”⁵

⁵ *The Spanish Civil War, Workers Solidarity Movement, 1986.*

The anarchist associations in Spain were not perfect. They were deeply ideological, suffering from the habit of fetishizing constructs only present in our minds. As anarchism replaced the moral authority of the church, people sacralized it similarly, creating another conformist culture based on anarchic doctrine. Despite its strong adherence to egalitarianism and opposition to imposed authority, this culture nonetheless had dogmatic elements in which individuals are pressured by external voices they mistake for themselves. My criticism follows illegalist and egoist-anarchist Renzo Novatore's point: "Since the time that human beings first believed that life was a duty, a calling, a mission, it has meant shame for their power of being, and in following phantoms, they have denied themselves and distanced themselves from the real. When Christ said to human beings: 'be yourselves, perfection is in you!' he launched a superb phrase that is the supreme synthesis of life."⁶

My issue is not with anarchism and not even with social anarchism, but with people losing touch with their inner authority. The heteronomy in Spain—which harmed the individual psyche above all else—occurred partly in celebration of the revolution, a perceived time of Enlightenment after generations of oppression. There was even evidence it was declining after the "honeymoon stage" in the first few months, which George Orwell references in his memoir on the war. But even so, this phenomenon was still rooted in the philosophical and ecclesiastical trends rotting our culture for thousands of years—the notion that legitimacy comes from collective identity and supremacy. As much as they stayed true to the anarchist spirit and organizational style, as a group they found it difficult to "reject the black flag." This may be a side-effect of every social movement for a long time; the development of better habits for ourselves and our communities begins now.

Apart from these cultural issues, which were still naturally occurring and minimal compared to state-enforced ideology, we can still admire the Spanish anarchists' systems of doing things. The anarchist organizations in Spain nevertheless demonstrated that freedom and equality are interdependent and mutually reinforcing goals, that real revolution is abolishing alienating institutions and not "seizing control" of them. Everything about their decentralized, consensus-driven methods proved promising, even considering the moments of confusion at the beginning of the revolution. History might have looked considerably different if Comintern (controlled by the Soviet Union) hadn't threatened to withhold subsidies if Leninist factions didn't repress the anarchist communities. Civil war erupted amidst civil war, making the resistance even more vulnerable to fascist forces. The anarchists fell on February 10th, 1939, marking the end of the golden age of classical anarchism. Franco's army took total control of Spain by April 1st, a little under two months later.

Many people today would consider their level of egalitarianism impossible. In the United States, although radicalism has been spreading as our corporatocratic police state continues to push its luck, there are multitudes of people who can't even imagine what a

⁶ *Anarchist Individualism in the Social Revolution, Il Libertario, 1919.*

minor difference to our model of government would look like. Like Emma Goldman wrote: “Rather than to go to the bottom of any given idea, to examine into its origin and meaning, most people will either condemn it altogether, or rely on some superficial or prejudicial definition of non-essentials.” This is largely due to the propaganda intertwined with our culture, in some cases going back thousands of years, barely held back by humanity’s idiosyncratic passion for love, investigation, creativity, and liberty. Anarchism, perhaps more than any other belief system, is subject to this ugly phenomenon.

For the most part, many people have moved on from capitalism and neoliberal politics, and great breakthroughs such as ranked-choice voting are becoming more accepted. But there are many mistakes we can make from here, such as placing production in the hands of bureaucracy and national powers, and (god forbid) left-wing MMT, which does not care whether currency and taxes equate any real value besides debt. People have the social values but the tendency towards authoritarianism does not escape any group in American politics. It’s about time the apparatus of direct democracy is taken seriously.

Although on one hand it saw many significant movements and victories, anarchism struggled throughout the 20th century. The decades of suppression, deportation, and humiliation began to take their toll, and the rise of the welfare state practically bribed the public into submission to keep the corporate-capitalist economy alive. Anarchy mostly played underappreciated roles in the civil rights, anti-war, anti-corporate, environmentalist, and anti-globalist movements from the late fifties to present. Social libertarian movements re-emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in response to the political corruption, consumer culture, and conformity of the post-war world. Despite not utilizing their full potential, they were recognized as a substantial threat to corporations and the state. But as the number of anarchists declined over the following decades, several long-standing internal problems in the movement became more challenging. Many anarchists began inserting themselves into rigid categories and arguing over petty and often imaginary differences.

At times merely getting together can feel like a victory. But as a habit developed out of stagnation, it is dying with action. Today the community is finding more and more direction, and minor differences don’t matter as much when you hit the streets. Platforms and mutual aid groups are popping up in many areas, as well as worker, housing, and houseless unions. Nearly every major city has an anarchist bookstore and collective. Black Rose and PDX Radical Houseless Collective are two groups I know of in Portland who work along social libertarian lines. Even among unconscious anarchists, anti-work⁷, anti-policing, decolonization, and illegalism are becoming more popular in political discourse and activity. People are getting

⁷ Work is not the same thing as labor. Anti-work, an idea which goes back to the ancient world, is the complete opposition to compulsory labor where others own and control what you do. In Bob Black’s essay “The Abolition of Work” he argues that work is the greatest source of misery across the world as well as unnecessary, and that the struggle to freedom involves resisting work to devote time towards what we enjoy and what is under our control.

used to the ideas of sabotage, black bloc, rioting, grassroots organizing, and spontaneous general strike. As urgent as the future seems, it's easy to lose yourself in hope when you're right in the thick of things, which is my best advice for the angry and terrified.

Of course, we first need to consider how we would manage to realistically overturn things under a highly developed surveillance state like ours. Centralized, top-down tactics would make us an easy target in five seconds. Right now, the best thing would be to start from the bottom, spreading the word and building local affinity groups—unions, platforms, mutual aid, and insurrectionary militias—to replace the legitimacy of capitalism and the state. The goal of these organizations should be putting communities in the saddle around the idea of horizontal government. “Freedom cannot be ‘delivered’ to the individual as the ‘end-product’ of a ‘revolution’; the assembly and community cannot be legislated or decreed into existence,” said Murray Bookchin. This doesn't mean fighting for a transitory state or a representative who isn't ourselves. This means fighting for direct democracy and horizontalism. Anything else is just another transfer of control over our lives and communities.

As both a revolutionary and post-revolutionary structure, horizontal participism would be our method of organization. Decentralized insurrectionary groups have proven themselves the one thing the U.S. government isn't skilled at destroying. America's defeat in Vietnam and Afghanistan was largely due to the difficulty infiltrating, tracking, and identifying confederal militias. This organizational style has shown potential in movements like Black Lives Matter and Antifa, but alone they will never be able to make significant changes in a world this totalitarian. Not without disciplined commitment to a better world. Not without dropping out of social servitude to build dual power.⁸ Not without meaningful action, education, and adaptation, nor without the support of every frontline activist, diligent medic, and passionate orator that I am proud to see in some cities. There would also need to be a surplus of involvement, because support is not cheering at the sidelines for a cause you've done nothing for. Take this as an invitation. The experiences found in the heart of community and direct action are inspiring, just as much as the reasons are often enraging; it makes it easy to witness the difference between leadership and hierarchy.

We need to know when to be passive and when to be assertive, when to break a window and when to fix one. Realistically, we need to at least build the foundation of the replacement before we can really get down to overthrowing the status quo. Every branch of everything must be fulfilled by autonomous revolutionary associations, without permission from the government. It would probably be pointless and even dangerous to put too much faith into any

⁸ Although dual power originally appeared in Marxist-Leninist theory, besides some loosely similar theories from proto-anarchists such as Charrels Flourier, it quickly became an accepted idea among anarchists as a tactic for achieving a direct democratic society. Dual power is the act of creating alternative organizations to both fulfill the needs of the public and seize power from the bottom-up in the inevitable case that the state finds itself in crisis. Unlike Leninists, dual power for anarchists is meant to adopt a deliberately decentralized model.

one strategy, but whatever happens we need to highlight horizontal and grassroots principles as much as we can. Establishing a network of mutual aid groups, self-defense militias, unions, community services, and underground co-operatives would be a good start. I know there are already people on top of this, so we just need to find and join them.

These networks must have a purpose. We gather support by acting, not merely existing. The situation demands a campaign of direct action, community support, and consistent provocation, challenging the state and uniting communities from below, waiting for the existing government to find itself in crisis to overturn things and institute a better society on the basis of participatory and horizontal principles. Some seats in local, non-monopolistic government could be filled, for the sake of finding security in existing structures without extreme risk of disappointment, but this always requires caution. Once we reach a certain level of trust, support, and organization, we should let the state act as it will; at a certain point, offensive action will be understood as defensive action.

All of this would be relentlessly attacked. Even if completely peaceful all the way through, it would be attacked. Most things worth doing are going to be difficult, but remember that at the very least it will help spark movements that would inevitably result in progress if careful and consistent enough. Our campaign must be strong. We can't hide behind—and therefore legitimize—the violence of our corporatocratic state. We should never cheer for the oppression of one group over petty squabbles or prejudice. We should never snitch or otherwise collaborate with our oppressors. We can never condone it, we can never condone others doing it, no matter how they try convincing us it's in our best interest. This means no censorship, no wars, no iron-fist leaders, no imprisonment, no interrogation, no neglect, and no coercion imposed by or against any member of our communities.

If it has the potential to threaten the status quo, authorities will ruthlessly try to stomp it out and prevent it from spreading. The anti-police movement here in the U.S., for example, is consistently met with violence whether protesters are peaceful or not. This is something we should expect but can also use to our advantage. People go to protests with the intent of non-violent provocation and civil disobedience, but they come prepared. They still make sure to have a plan and defense; ideally they use this experience to practice strategy. Once the police attack, which they are looking for any excuse to do, communities make sure to push back with equal force. Meanwhile, independent press documents things to show the public the true purpose of the state. At the same time, these same movements must be there to support their community. In the real world, most of the revolution is building, not destroying. This tactic has proven itself successful wherever it's been applied—especially after public support has carefully been gathered. It will accumulate more and more support until it becomes clear that we possess the momentum to create whatever we want.