

A Goal and Strategy for Anarchy

James Herod

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Contents

The Goal	3
Historical Strategies	6
Strategies, Explicit or Implied, of Contemporary Anarchist Currents	7
The Actual Practices Prevailing in the Present Day Anarchist Movement	9
The Way Forward	10
Notes	10

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The Goal

It should be quite obvious, but apparently it's not, that we can't devise an anarchist revolutionary strategy until we have a clear idea of what it is we're trying to achieve.

Regrettably, there has been a vigorous ban on thinking about the future society we want, a ban that has been more or less effectively imposed for nearly one hundred and fifty years. Marx is largely responsible for this. He refused to discuss in concrete detail what he thought a communist society would look like, what social forms it would take. He said it would be up to the people making the revolution to work that out. Additionally, he derided as "utopian" socialist thinkers who were trying to think this through (e.g., Charles Fourier and Robert Owen). Given the long-lasting hegemony of Marxism on the left this label has stuck. To this day people refer to Fourier as a "utopian socialist." So also has the ban stuck until quite recently, when the hegemony of Marxism-Leninism was finally broken.

Recently, at least in USAmerica, two other political currents have joined the ban on thinking about the future society, Primitivism and Postmodernism. Primitivists define the enemy as civilization, and are hoping that it will collapse; they do whatever they can to hasten this. As for what happens next, they offer some vague and romantic notions about everyone returning to live in hunting and gathering tribes; but for the here and now, they have no political program for improving society. In fact, they casually contemplate the extermination of most people on earth, nearly six billion people, because that is what would happen if agriculture were abandoned. As for Postmodernists, they are good at deconstructing, and in strengthening anti-foundationalism, which can be useful, but they refuse to engage in constructive efforts to improve the world. They have no political program. Thus their philosophy has neutered them and rendered them impotent. They become apolitical and useless in the struggle for liberation.

This lack of attention to the goal is a tragedy, because although it's true that we live in potentially calamitous times, what with peak oil, climate warming, and the more general crisis of capitalism, we also live in exciting times. A window of opportunity has opened up to create at long last a decentered world, without capitalism, states, or god, a world of democratic autonomous communities.

There are at least two important reasons for this opening. One is the near total collapse of the prevailing social philosophies which have underpinned capitalism to date. Conservatism is dead, as is liberalism. The counterparts of these philosophies on the left are also dead and gone, namely, Leninism and Social Democracy. All these ideologies were more or less destroyed in the great revolts of the 1960s. Into the vacuum stepped neoliberalism, a reversion to nineteenth century unfettered capitalism, or capitalism without the smokescreen, where profit-taking trumps all. In addition to all the inherent contradictions of a system based on the accumulation of capital for its own sake, now capitalists are having to function without a veneer. The so-called war on terror is a poor substitute for a full-fledged social ideology. That they are trying to rely on such a shoddy idea to justify profit-mongering is a sign of their desperation. And when capitalists have to start commodifying water, seeds, genes, wind, sunshine, libraries, hospitals, parks, roads, thought, and

emotions, in order to keep the profits rolling in, maybe they are beginning to scrape the bottom of the barrel. Neoliberalism this second time around through these past forty years has exposed as probably nothing else could have the absolutely destructive, vicious, murderous, immoral, and insane nature of the practices of capitalists.

A second and perhaps more important reason for this historical opening is the possible demise of capitalism itself. At least one eminent anti-capitalist scholar, Immanuel Wallerstein, believes that world capitalism has reached its limits, and faces structural restraints that it will not be able to overcome. He believes we are entering a period of chaos, a time of transition between capitalism and whatever comes next.¹ Whether he is right or not I guess only time will tell.

But at the very least, we know that the century of the US American Empire is coming to an end, and that even if capitalism survives there will be a period of confusion before a new hegemon can establish itself.

There was a similar opening at the end of feudalism. Feudalism, as a system for extracting the surplus wealth of the laboring classes, was beginning to fail. The ruling classes were in a panic. But they rallied and created a new system, capitalism, which enabled them to keep their wealth and power, and stay in control. Nevertheless, during this interregnum, the oppressed classes came closer than they ever had before, or ever have since, to casting off their oppressors.²

And so there is an opening, an opening for anarchy. Anarchism still stands as a living, viable, vibrant social philosophy, with a deep, rich tradition. Anarchism is finally back on the agenda, back in the political arena, thankfully, and not a moment too soon either. But the time is now, during the next ten, twenty, or thirty years. This is our chance. There is no more postponing; no more putting it off to the next generation; no more excuses for not knowing what we want; no more saying that it is up to those in the future who will be making the revolution to work out the details. We are the revolutionaries! If we don't know now what we want, when will we ever? This is a terrible responsibility, but it is also a rare and exciting opportunity. We could be the generation that finally brings down capitalism and creates a decent, sustainable, humane, just, free, and joyful world.

Fortunately for us, anarchy, humanity, and the world, many anarchists pretty much ignored the ban on imagining the future. Peter Kropotkin wrote detailed empirical studies, infused with history and theory, about how we might better arrange ourselves socially. These studies present a picture of human life so at odds with contemporary realities and the dominant culture as to practically stun the reader.

Kropotkin was not alone, however. Almost from the first emergence of anarchism as a distinct social philosophy, with William Godwin, anarchists have been trying to imagine the future. James Guillame, from Bakunin's circle, wrote a nice little essay on Social Organization in 1876. The anarcho-syndicalists, through nearly a century of struggle, produced an enormous literature on workers' control and worker self-management. There is an enormous literature on communalism, communes, and intentional communities. There is a small but important literature on direct democracy. The Spanish revolutionaries, standing on fifty years of organizing, which was imbued with ideas from Bakunin, Kropotkin, and French anarcho-syndicalism, wrote detailed

¹ Wallerstein's thesis can be found in "Globalization: A Long-Term Trajectory of the World-System," Ch. 3, pp. 45-68, in his *The Decline of American Power* (New Press, 2003), or in "The Modern World-System in Crisis: Bifurcation, Chaos, and Choice," Ch. 5, pp. 76-90, in his *World-Systems Analysis* (Duke University Press, 2004).

² For an outstanding study of this period see Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. (Autonomedia, 2003)

plans for what they wanted, plans which covered everything – workplaces, public services, agriculture, and town and village self-government. We have the literature on the Paris Commune, on the San-Culottes in the French Revolution, on the Ukrainian Makhnovist movement, and on the direct democracies of medieval towns. Recently, there has been a rash of uprisings based on Popular Assemblies in Algeria, Argentina, Bolivia, and Mexico. And so on, down through the past two hundred years.³

In 1997, Ken Knabb wrote up a good description of all this in his book *The Joy of Revolution*. Takis Fotopoulos has mapped out, in concrete detail, what we want in his book *Towards an Inclusive Democracy*, as well as in numerous essays. Murray Bookchin has a short book on *Remaking Society*. Cornelius Castoriadis was perhaps the greatest contemporary philosopher of autonomy (see, for example, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*). John Holloway has brilliantly explained the philosophical foundations for a free people in his book *Change the World Without Taking Power*. Colin Ward brought anarchy down to earth in his book *Anarchy in Action*. There are dozens of other attempts.

We don't have to rely just on theorists from modern anarchism, however. We can look back in history. There were enormous peasant revolts in early modern Europe. What did they want? They wanted to get the ruling classes off their backs and to live free and autonomous in their villages. This was no new thing either. As recently researched and superbly described by David Graeber,⁴ from the emergence of the first states, whenever there was the slightest crack in the structure of power, people tried to get free and reestablish control over their own lives in their local communities. People have always gathered in assemblies in their tribes and villages whenever they had the chance to cooperatively govern their own social lives.

Actually then, we are not in trouble at all as regards the goal. There is no reason for us to be confused or apologetic about what we want. There is a solid historical consensus on what we want. We want to get the ruling classes off our backs. We don't want to be exploited or alienated. We don't want to be slaves. We want to be a self-governing people, free and autonomous.

The idea of self-government implies assemblies, and always has: workers' councils, town meetings, household cooperatives. We can summarize and synthesize this as follows:

- Neighborhood Assemblies
- Workplace Assemblies
- Household Assemblies
- An Association of Neighborhood Assemblies

³ References to all these things can be found in my big bibliography, *Emancipatory Social Thought: A Partially Annotated Bibliography in English for the Libertarian Left and Progressive Populists in the United States*, available on line at:

<<http://www.jamesherod.info/?sec=book&id=5&PHPSESSID=f6cd0975a0455b574d6a745a3808fa3e>>. For Kropotkin, see his *Fields, Factories and Workshops*; *Mutual Aid*; and *The Conquest of Bread*. The Guillame essay is in Sam Dolgoff, editor, *Bakunin on Anarchism*. See the entries listed below in the above bibliography for the various topics: peasant wars, Engels, Price; anarcho-syndicalism and workers' control, Ostergaard, Anweiler, Anderson, Brinton, Carsten, Castoriadis, Cole, Curl, Debord, Dolgoff, Gorter, Haffner, James, Kasmir, Korsch, Krimerman, Pankhurst, Pannekoek, Richards, Rucker, and G. Williams; radical democracy, Lummis; the Paris Commune, Edwards; sans-culottes, Sobol; medieval towns, Rorig; the Ukrainian Makhnovist movement, Arshinov; communalism, communes, and intentional communities, Rexroth, Holloway; the Spanish Revolution, Broue, Akelberg, Dolgoff, Paz, Richards.

⁴ David Graeber, "There never was a West; or Democracy emerges in the spaces in between," in his *Possibilities*, pages 329-374 (AK Press, 2007).

That's it. That's how we do it. This is a simple and elegant vision of how we can reorder our social lives. These social forms, in varying mixes and degrees, have been present in just about every revolt against oppressing classes from the dawn of hierarchical society.

The goal implies the strategy. We must establish these assemblies, in every neighborhood, workplace, and household (much extended households though). There is great power in social organization. Revolution means rearranging ourselves socially. The beauty of this plan is that the social forms which will enable us to defeat capitalists are the very same forms that we will need to establish the society we want. In the process of gutting capitalism we will be creating anarchy at the same time. These social forms will enable us to escape wage-slavery and embed ourselves instead in cooperative labor. They will enable us to get out of commodity markets and build a world based on mutual aid and gift giving. They will enable us to become a self-governing people, free and autonomous in our local communities, and to establish an association of such communities. This is a plausible, realistic strategy.

You see, it is not enough to seize the means of production. We must take all decision making away from the capitalist ruling class and relocate it into our assemblies. To do so we must shift the focus of our attention to these three strategic sites, and away from protest politics, identity politics, labor unions, and single issue campaigns, which are not getting us very far toward defeating capitalists and establishing anarchy.

Maybe a note is in order as to why household assemblies are included in the list, which is not often done. First of all, it simply makes sense. Humans have always organized themselves into households, regardless of their societal type, even in tribal societies. It is a well-nigh universal and "natural" social form. Most of us spend a great deal of our lives in our households. Secondly, women in the autonomous movement in Italy in the 1970s proved that housework is an integral part of wage-slavery. That's why they launched the Wages for Housework campaign. Finally, some of the keenest contemporary students of capitalism, those associated with Immanuel Wallerstein at the Fernand Braudel Center, include households as a key unit of analysis. These are some of the reasons why I think households must be included along with workplaces and neighborhoods as an essential arena for directly democratic decision making, and thus of self-government. But the households I'm talking about would be expanded households, not nuclear families or even extended families, but a new social form, harking back to the larger household structures in medieval manors or the ancient world, consisting of 50-200 people.

Historical Strategies

Let's review now the strategies that have been used so far to get out of capitalism and into a freer society. By the way, in the nineteenth century there was broad agreement among anti-capitalist activists, whether marxist or anarchist, that "communism" meant a society without a state. That is, the original meaning of communism was communalism or local community autonomy. A disagreement emerged, however, about how to achieve it. The split between Marx and Bakunin (marxists versus anarchists) in 1872 at the Hague Congress of the International Workingmen's Association solidified this disagreement. Marxists thought that we could use the state to get to communism. First capture the state, and then use it to get to communism. Anarchists said no, that this wouldn't work, and that we had to bypass the state entirely and work directly for a stateless society.

The two-stage strategy, as it came to be called, of the statist, as they came to be called, had two wings: Leninists (Bolsheviks) who believed in seizing the state in an armed revolution led by a vanguard party, and Kautskyists (social democrats) who believed in capturing the state through elections using mass-based working-class parties. Both these strategies proved incapable of getting rid of capitalism through nearly a century of trials. Leninist vanguard parties came to power in countries all over the third world, beginning with Russia, and nowhere was capitalism destroyed. Similarly, Kautskyan social democratic parties gained control of numerous European governments, sometimes for decades, and capitalism went rolling on.

The two-stage strategy was hegemonic on the left for nearly a century. Nevertheless, an anarchist strategy, anarcho-syndicalism, based on federated workers' councils, managed to survive as a weak marginalized alternative. The idea here was to seize the means of production, establish workers' councils, and federate these councils into a dual power structure which could then destroy the state and capitalism. Aspects of this strategy appeared in most European revolutions throughout the twentieth century – Russia in 1905 and 1917, Germany and Austria in 1918-1919, Spain in 1936, Hungary in 1956, France in 1968, Portugal in 1974-75, and Poland in 1980-81. This anarcho-syndicalist strategy has also failed to unseat capitalism, and should no longer serve as a model for us.

There are remnant groups still pushing these failed two-stage strategies in most countries. In the United States, for example, the Revolutionary Communist Party and the International Socialist Organization still believe in building a vanguard party (their own party, of course) to seize the state by force of arms. The Democratic Socialists of America are representative of the moribund social democratic strategy.

Strategies, Explicit or Implied, of Contemporary Anarchist Currents

Let me focus now more closely just on anarchist strategies, that is, anti-statist strategies. I'll do this by briefly surveying the various anarchist tendencies in the United States and teasing out the strategy implications of their beliefs.

We might categorize contemporary US American anarchist currents as follows:

1. *Anarcho-Syndicalism, Anarcho-Communism, and Cousins*: Workers' Solidarity Alliance; Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World); Northeastern Federation of Anarchist Communists; Situationists; Grassroots Economic Organizing and the Cooperative Commonwealth.

2. *Libertarian Municipalism*.

3. *Major Related Tendencies*: Surrealism; Autonomous Marxism; Libertarian Socialism.

4. *Individualists*: Primitivists; Ontological Anarchism; Crimethinc; So-called Post-Left Anarchism.

5. *Other*: Radical Democracy; Co-Housing; Intentional Communities; Global Justice Movement.⁵

If we survey all these various currents with an eye for the strategy recommended by each, the picture is pretty bleak. The Workers' Solidarity Alliance (WSA) remains an orthodox anarcho-syndicalist organization with a strict focus on workplace organizing, with the 100-year-old vision

⁵ I have briefly described each of these currents, providing typical literature for each, with critiques where available, in the outline for my workshop about *Anarchist Revolutionary Strategy*, which is available online at: <http://www.jamesherod.info/index.php?sec=paper&id=32>.

of federated workers' councils as the social organization to replace capitalism. Similarly with the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies), whose strategy hasn't changed since its founding in 1905. It believes in industrial democracy (workers' control), to be achieved through One Big Union.

The Northeast Federation of Anarchist Communists (NEFAC) is more typically anarcho-communist in that it embraces both workplace and community organizing, with a heavy emphasis though on the need for a strong anarchist organization to prepare the way for revolution. Spain is probably the preferred model here, considering that it was the main revolution that was based partly on the ideas of Bakunin and Kropotkin, and not merely on French anarcho-syndicalism.

Situationism (a French movement which inspired in part the uprisings in Paris in 1968) is no longer a living current, of course, and survives only through isolated individuals. However, Ken Knabb, a US American representative of the tendency, has written a nice synthesis of the workplace and community focuses in his *Joy of Revolution*. But not a great deal is said about how to get there.

The group that puts out the *Grassroots Economic Organizing Newsletter*, which focuses on worker owned businesses, admits that this current has failed so far to even try to embed itself in a larger movement to transform society. And when they do speak of such a transformation they think in terms of establishing a cooperative commonwealth, which will be legislated into existence, after a new progressive party wins control of the government.

Libertarian Municipalism, the strategy which Murray Bookchin attempted to launch, never caught on. It proposed the take-over of local governments, by winning elections, to be thereafter transformed into popular assemblies based on direct democracy which would then seize control of the economy. Struggles at the workplace were left out of the strategy. As far as I know, no group in the country is using this strategy.

Of the major related tendencies (within social anarchism, broadly defined) – surrealism, autonomous marxism, and libertarian socialism – none have advanced a clear picture of the goal, in terms of the social forms that will replace capitalism, and consequently none talk much about strategy. To the extent that they do, it is probably the anarcho-syndicalist strategy that informs the discussion.

Coming now to the Individualists – Primitivism, Ontological Anarchism, Crimethinc, and so-called Post-Left Anarchism – none have advanced, and all deny the need for, a concrete description of the kind of society we are trying to establish in the here and now. Since they tend to think of society as an aggregate of autonomous individuals, they resist any effort to define, in concrete terms, the social forms that anarchy will take. They don't even believe in social forms. Consequently, in terms of strategy, they are limited to attacking the existing order. That's their strategy: resist, subvert hierarchy, get off the grid and live free (defined in a very superficial way, however – like, quit your job), and attack, attack, attack. And that's what they do – protest and disrupt.

There are some other on-the-ground developments, like co-housing and intentional communities, neither of which, at present, are anti-capitalist (in the main). They do not see themselves as part of a larger movement to transform society. Each project in these currents remains more or less isolated.

The Global Justice Movement is infused with anarchist themes and practices, but, contrary to its claim that ‘There Is An Alternative,’ it has not yet been able to clearly articulate this alternative and build a strategy based on it, or so it seems.

There is an international journal, the *International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, which has articulated, in concrete detail, a clear image of the liberated society we so ardently desire, as well as a strategy for achieving it. But there are only a few individuals in the United States who are associated with this intellectual current. And, sad to say, it is very far from becoming a living current within the contemporary anarchist movement.

So that’s it – a very grim picture indeed as regards a goal and strategy for anarchy among contemporary anarchists.

The Actual Practices Prevailing in the Present Day Anarchist Movement

If we look now at the actual practices which prevail in the present day anarchist movement in USAmerica we can notice a curious fact. The strategies described above have almost no bearing on contemporary practices. Even for class-struggle anarchists who are oriented toward the working class and believe in workers councils, like those associated with the Wobblies, Nefac, or the WSA, the drive for such councils is almost nonexistent. Instead, they engage in standard labor practices: campaigns for the right to organize, union organizing drives, fights for better wages, hours, and benefits, or in defense of fired workers.

What else? By participating in Food Not Bombs, we anarchists take on the task of feeding the hungry, whereas we should be devoting our time and energy to destroying a system that creates hungry people. We cannot stop all the crimes of capitalists, one crime at a time. Their crimes are endless. We must stop capitalists. Bikes Not Bombs perhaps highlights an alternative to the car culture, but it doesn’t hurt capitalists in the least. No number of Critical Mass bike rides will defeat the oil/car oligarchy. Anarchist Black Cross is certainly a decent, humane project, but no amount of letter writing to prisoners, or packets of books, will bring down the prison-industrial complex. Single-issue campaigns, like shutting down animal testing labs, in defense of animal rights, are eminently worthy. But we could close every lab in the world and capitalists will not be much fazed.

And why these? Why focus on hungry people, cars, prisoners, or animals? Why not war, a stupendously destructive crime, or torture, an absolute abomination? Or why not agri-business and the food processing industry? Processed foods, and the resulting obesity and malnutrition, are killing more people now than most major diseases. This is a crime of enormous impact, as is the neoliberal destruction of food security the world over, which has now placed about two billion people at risk from starvation.

What about all the time, energy, and resources we devote to running bookstores and organizing anarchist book fairs? These projects are a tiny hedge against capitalist cultural hegemony, and help keep an opposition movement alive, but how serious a threat are they, really, to capitalists?

And what about all the effort going into race, gender, and sex issues, hardly any of which is linked to class analysis or class struggle? Has forty years of identity politics moved us any closer to defeating the capitalist ruling class?

Then there are the endless marches and rallies, which have virtually no effect on capitalists. The ruling class is laughing at us. If all we can do is rally and march and protest in the streets, they have nothing at all to worry about.

It seems that a much more critical evaluation of our projects is called for. We need to seriously and persistently ask whether our projects are hurting capitalists in significant and permanent ways, and more particularly, whether they are taking any decision making away from the ruling class.

The Way Forward

It is time for a new tack. The two-stage strategy of seizing the state, used by both Leninists and Social Democrats, as a way of getting out of capitalism and then to communism (defined as a stateless society, that is, anarchy), is a proven failure. Similarly, the strict focus on workplaces and workers' control has also proved inadequate to the task. We need to seize everything, by establishing direct democracy everywhere, through face-to-face assemblies, in our neighborhoods, workplaces, and households. This is our best hope.

Our immediate problem is how we can get to the point of being able to set up these assemblies. It certainly seems more or less impossible at present, at least in the United States. But we're not even working on it, not even trying. It's not even on the agenda. We first of all have to get the idea into the air. Then maybe we could begin to see how it would be possible.

It might also help us to move in this direction if we get rid of the idea that it is the job of anarchists to organize other people (for example, workers) to make the revolution. In fact, we can assert an opposing idea, as the first principle of an anarchist revolutionary strategy: *Fight First for Your Own Liberation*. Not you individually, of course, but you with neighbors and co-workers. Get together with friends, wherever you are, and start a fight with the ruling class. Stop trying to assist others to get free, no matter whom – workers, women, blacks, gays, natives, immigrants – and fight to get free yourself, within your own immediate social setting.

What we most urgently need to do is shift the location of the anti-capitalist fight to the three strategic sites described above. We also need to scour the world for existing struggles on these sites, then study and publicize them. Only in this way will we start winning, and start destroying the world we hate and creating the world we want.

Notes

I have discussed the themes of this essay in considerably more detail in my little book *Getting Free: Creating an Association of Democratic Autonomous Neighborhoods*.

(Boston: Lucy Parsons Center, 2006; distributed by AK Press). It is available online at:

<<http://www.jamesherod.info/?sec=book&id=7&PHPSESSID=0b4aba7918323b17ce608ef741f40fcb>>.

Other relevant essays are also posted there, such as:

Making Decisions Amongst Assemblies, at:

<<http://www.jamesherod.info/index.php?sec=paper&id=60>>, or

The Weakness of a Politics of Protest, at:

<<http://www.jamesherod.info/index.php?sec=paper&id=17>>, and

Notes on Building a Movement for Direct Democracy, at:

<<http://www.jamesherod.info/index.php?sec=paper&id=18>>.

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