Origins of Anarchism

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by Sonja L. Brinkan

Anarchism is an **iconoclastic** philosophy aimed at abolishing the state. Its rhetoric often takes a **contumelious** tone, and some anarchists advocate violent revolution. But the ideal society envisioned by anarchists is neither a **saturnalian** chaos nor a muddle of masses in perpetual conflict. Essentially, anarchism is motivated by a rosy, even **maudlin** vision of humanity's potential for peace, harmony, and freedom without government control. Though anarchism's goals seem unrealistic, its ideals merit attention, providing a **touchstone** by which scholars might measure social reform.

Roots of Anarchy

Many anthropologists maintain that early human society was anarchic, without government, political institutions, or strict hierarchies of power. Others counter that meaningful hierarchies existed in primitive societies, and even among chimpanzees. Anthropologists may argue, **quid pro quo**, about the prehistoric origins of anarchy. Though it picks up **in medias res**, the record of history is somewhat clearer.

With the emergence of states, strains of anarchism arose among ancient philosophers. Lao Tzu's principle of nonrule, nonaction, or nonintervention is interpreted by many as an example of anarchist thinking in ancient China because it urged nonintervention of governments. Bao Jingyan's **portentous** treatise on the evils of social hierarchy and the futility of government rule clearly displays anarchical tendencies. In Greece, Zeno of Citium argued that the ideal society is a community of free, rational individuals living without regulation by a state. Historians cite countless examples of anarchist tendencies in communal societies of the West, from Europe's Middle Ages through the American colonial period.

Modern Anarchists

William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Human Justice*, published in 1793, was among the first modern anarchist treatises. A man of the Enlightenment, Godwin held an optimistic view of human nature and blamed government for corrupting it. Godwin argued that government **vitiates** human character, that our vices result from social conditions imposed by government. He sought progress toward a more **salubrious** and stateless form of society, in which people's rational self-interest would lead them to act in harmony.

Unit F	In medias res	Quid pro quo
Abortive	Internecine	Salubrious
Bruit	Maladroit	Saturnalian
Contumelious	Maudlin	Touchstone
Dictum	Modulate	Traumatic
Ensconce	Portentous	Vitiate
Iconoclastic	Prescience	Waggish

Anarchism's heyday dawned in the mid-nineteenth century; Europe was racked with **traumatic** revolutions as the continent's governments **modulated** from aristocratic monarchies to more egalitarian social orders. In 1840, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon summarized his anarchist philosophy in the **dictum** "Liberty is the mother, not the daughter, of order." He believed the best society would arise spontaneously from the action of free, rational individuals. Mikhail Bakunin argued, against Proudhon's disciples, that all productive property should be owned collectively. However, Bakunin opposed other Marxist notions that social revolutions must be led by enlightened elites in positions of authority. Instead, he believed in the power of the masses. Decades later, following the Russian Revolution, the **prescience** of Bakunin's anti-elitism was affirmed by anarchists like Emma Goldman, a Lithuanian Jewish immigrant to New York City, who criticized the Bolsheviks' authoritarian, repressive approach to social control, and loathed its rigid centralization and anti-Semitism.

Dissent and Dreams in the Sidelines of History

Anarchists played an important role in the reform of Western society for nearly a century, particularly in the labor movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But anarchism was declining by the start of World War II. The movement's effectiveness was hampered by **internecine** disputes and by its essential paradox: How can people who passionately object to imposed social organization come together to act as a coherent political force?

The paradox reflects deeper problems with the very idea of anarchy. Hope is a waking dream, and anarchism's dream of a free society without government is unlikely to be realized. But its nobler yearnings toward social and economic equality continue to inspire reformers.

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