



Anarchism and Its Aspirations

Cindy Milstein

Praise for *Anarchism and Its Aspirations*

One of the strongest speakers and writers in North American radical movements and anarchist networks, it's about damn time that Cindy Milstein's amazing thinking and writing is put together in a book. Simultaneously a participant in popular radical movement actions and articulating the theory behind the actions, she paints a clear-headed vision of the free and just world we're fighting for. Uncompromising, practical, and hopeful, this book is essential reading for all who are taking on climate change, war, or corporate capitalism, and know that a better world is both possible and necessary!

—David Solnit, coauthor of *The Battle of the Story of the "Battle of Seattle"*

I've often been asked by people for a book on anarchism that "gives them an idea," and I've often wondered what I could recommend that is all at once concise, profound, highly readable, and up to date. Cindy Milstein has now solved this problem. In these wonderful essays, she brings together anarchist history and current developments with ease, illustrating how the core values, ideas, and principles of anarchism remain the same while their expressions change according to times, places, and circumstances. You will find it hard to put down this book until you're finished, and it will leave you longing for more intelligent and inspiring thoughts on how to make this world a better place for all of us. I expect *Anarchism and Its Aspirations* to become *the* introduction to anarchism of the next decade—and I certainly hope it will be!

—Gabriel Kuhn, editor of Gustav Landauer's *Revolution and Other Writings*

Milstein's work is a clear and passionate account of the anarchism that lives beyond any particular organization, as an expression of humanity's indestructible desire for a world free from hierarchies and all forms of domination. The book is also a road map to the many social and cultural movements that anarchism has traversed, from the Provos to radical ecology and Zapatismo, and a testimony to its continuing ability to capture the radical imagination. Above all, the book is a call to live the revolution now, making of our daily lives a prefiguration of the egalitarian and cooperative ethics that anarchism aspires to.

—Silvia Federici, author of *Caliban and the Witch*

In a crazy world full of complexity, contradiction, and irony, it's easy to lose your footing. If you are looking for a solid place to root your analysis, this is a fabulous place to land. Cindy Milstein's book is thoughtful, energetic, and visionary, and will give you a ton to chew on. It is a brilliant primer of anarchist politics.

—Matt Hern, author of *Common Ground in a Liquid City*

At a time when anarchism is no longer merely the most revolutionary political theory and praxis but also the only one left, it is even more important to rescue it from the dangers of potential fossilization. A century ago, another "dangerous woman," Emma Goldman, reminded us that anarchism should not be a theory of the future but rather a "living force in the affairs of our life, constantly creating new conditions." Goldman's voice resonates strongly in this beautiful and inspirational book, which offers the much-needed hope that every individual—here and now—can change this world and create it anew.

—Žiga Vodovnik, author of *Anarchy of Everyday Life*

ANARCHISM AND ITS ASPIRATIONS

Anarchist Interventions : 01

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Anarchist Interventions: An IAS/AK Press Book Series

Radical ideas can open up spaces for radical actions, by illuminating hierarchical power relations and drawing out possibilities for liberatory social transformations. The Anarchist Intervention series—a collaborative project between the Institute for Anarchist Studies (IAS) and AK Press—strives to contribute to the development of relevant, vital anarchist theory and analysis by intervening in contemporary discussions. Works in this series will look at twenty-first-century social conditions—including social structures and oppression, their historical trajectories, and new forms of domination, to name a few—as well as reveal opportunities for different tomorrows premised on horizontal, egalitarian forms of self-organization.

Given that anarchism has become the dominant tendency within revolutionary milieus and movements today, it is crucial that anarchists explore current phenomena, strategies, and visions in a much more rigorous, serious manner. Each title in this series, then, will feature a present-day anarchist voice, with the aim, over time, of publishing a variety of perspectives. The series' multifaceted goals are to cultivate anarchist thought so as to better inform anarchist practice, encourage a culture of public intellectuals and constructive debate within anarchism, introduce new generations to anarchism, and offer insights into today's world and potentialities for a freer society.

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Prologue

A *narchism and Its Aspirations* doubles as a book and a bookend. I finished the manuscript on the tenth anniversary of the “battle of Seattle”—November 30, 2009. A decade ago, that same mass mobilization and the anarchism that it made visible in North America spurred me to write for the new anticapitalist movement of movements as part of my political work. Chapter 3, “Democracy Is Direct,” was the first result of that effort. It was penned for the booklet *Bringing Democracy Home*, which an anarchist group of us produced and then distributed for free, by the thousands, on the streets of Washington, DC, at the A16 direct action against the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings in spring 2000.

As a book, I hope this small collection of essays contributes to building a better anarchism and encouraging new anarchists. I hope it sparks debate about what anarchism is and could be, first and foremost because I want us to be effective—to win—and that involves critical yet constructive dialogue as integral to our prefigurative practice. And I hope that the ideals expressed here stand

the test of time, because I firmly believe in the expansive ethical sensibility that has marked anarchism as a tradition. Like many anarchists, I know that words can indeed be weapons. That's why I write. It is my greatest hope, then, that this book adds to our arsenal as we fight to institute a nonhierarchical society.

As a bookend, though, I worry that the lavish emphases of ten years ago—direct democracy, unity in our diversity, and a cooperative, creative impulse, among others—have been lost. Such loss can certainly be attributed to the numerous historical events over the past decade that seem to have gone from bad to worse, crushingly so: 9/11, “wars on terror,” green and brown scares, Katrina and now Haiti, accelerating ecological and economic devastation. Sadly the list could go on. But I worry that in the face of this morass, anarchists are becoming increasingly nihilistic and far less concerned about ending social suffering. The ever-crueler, more alienating world appears to be doing far more damage to us than we have the capacity, much less stamina, to do to it. It troubles me that as I finish this book, I get the eerie sensation that I might have to shelve my own aspirations for what anarchists can accomplish, just when we are needed more than ever.

This may be my own sorrow speaking, from the standpoint of a bookended period that began with so much potential, so much exuberance, and seems to have ended in such despair. The gap between the ideals advanced by anarchism and the actual social reality today, even within anarchist circles, can be great—dispiritingly so, if one is a self-reflective anarchist. Contemporary anarchism can appear messy. In practice, it manifests all the forms of

hierarchy, domination, and oppression that one finds elsewhere. Its subcultural codes of dress, say, or its sometimes-tired protest tactics can make it seem like a parody of itself. Chapter 4, “Reclaim the Cities: From Protest to Popular Power,” written midway through this bookended time and revised for this book, was one attempt to address this problem. For newcomers, the gateway to the lived world of anarchism can be rusty and unwelcoming, and many of you will exit all too quickly. As one friend morosely joked recently, the past decade has seen three generations of anarchists come and go.

With this book, I want to extend a compassionate hand, and urge you, those new and old to anarchism, to stay. I want us all to struggle for what’s best within anarchism, not just for ourselves, but in order to construct the free society of free individuals that anarchism, as I’ll argue below, so generously and lovingly strives to achieve for everyone. Yes, the world is increasingly messy; rather than retreating, however, it’s imperative that we advance toward an egalitarian community of communities. Thus I hope I’ve adequately imparted enough of the good, the true, and the beautiful of anarchism’s aims here to convince you to joyfully yet diligently embrace—or continue doing so with renewed vigor—the spirit of anarchism.

There is much that is promising within present-day anarchism. Chapter 2, also written midway through this bookended period and revised here, captures this possibility. We may not have put a dent in capitalism, and that’s something we need to strategize long and hard about, but we have come a long way in a relatively short time. The “Paths toward Utopia” epilogue, excerpted from a

recent collaboration with Erik Ruin for *World War Three Illustrated*, gestures at how our cultures of resistance can move toward cultures of reconstruction. On the ground, the first decade of the twenty-first century has provided a remarkable opening for anarchism, thereby swelling the numbers of those who identify as anarchists. This has led to a flowering of anarchist infrastructure, from a dramatic increase worldwide in social centers and infoshops, to an upsurge in collectively run projects meeting needs like legal support, food, and art. We've developed informal though articulated global networks of exchange as well as solidarity, facilitated by everything from savvy uses of communication technologies and indie media to material aid. Along with like-minded others, we've engaged in forms of face-to-face politics that have supplied a new radical imagination through numerous days of action, consultas and convergences, and horizontalist movements.

It isn't enough. Still, the ten-year bookend here isn't only holding up a history of desolation; we have made substantial gains, even if embryonic. Such seemingly minor victories are necessary for social transformation, not just as sustenance along the way, but also because our processes are part and parcel of revolution, pointing beyond hierarchy. The main essay in this book, chapter 1, written this past year, reflects my optimism that anarchism's constellation of ethics, along with its dynamic practices, can bind us together, inspiring us and many others for the hard work ahead of forging a world from below. That, too, is my hope.

I copyedit university press books for a relatively pleasant "living" (as a friend quipped once, "Even when I love my work, I hate capitalism"), and every prologue reminds

the reader that any mistakes belong to the author. The same holds true for *Anarchism and Its Aspirations*. Such prologues also offer a round of appreciation, but primarily to professional colleagues, well-funded foundations, and frequently, wives. I was struck, when thinking about acknowledgments, that my gratitude is for all those acts of mutual aid that anarchists regularly do for each other, and not to build careers, nor for money, power, or due to coercion. I am proud—on most days—to call myself an anarchist, yet as another dear friend has reminded me of late, it isn't what we call ourselves that counts but how we behave. And that has been underscored for me umpteenth times in the writing of this book. It was a collective process, made possible by numerous acts of kindness and cooperation, by dedicated comrades, global ties, voluntary associations and shoestring projects, and chosen friends/family. My name is on the cover, but that masks the fact that anarchist books, like all anarchist endeavors, are intentionally communal works.

In this case, some of that mutual aid is visible. My book marks the first in the Anarchist Interventions series produced collaboratively by the Institute for Anarchist Studies (IAS), AK Press, and Justseeds Artists' Cooperative. My profound respect goes out to everyone involved in those projects, and my profound gratitude likewise goes out to the people in those projects who encouraged and also pushed me to do this book; thanks most especially to the members, past and present, of the IAS board. I want to particularly thank by name those anarchists who went so far beyond the "call of duty" that in hindsight, I'm almost embarrassed to have asked so much of them: to Zach Blue, David Combs, Chris Dixon, Josh MacPhee, Suzanne

Shaffer, and Charles Weigl, for untold hours of critiquing, editing, and copyediting, design and layout, and advice. Much appreciation, too, to Alec Icky Dunn for lending his artwork; I couldn't have asked for a better graphic complement to my words. And thanks to Kate Khatib for proofreading.

Much of this mutual aid is, sadly, invisible, just as, sadly, so much of anarchism and anarchists are frequently invisible to the world. When I think back on it, during this bookended time period, my various essays and now this book have only been improved by the countless anarchists who have either offered rigorous criticism of my writing and ideas, explained their ideas to me or handed me their zine or CD, taught me lessons in collectives, study groups, and conversations, dialogued at conferences or bookfairs and during my public talks, shared exhilarating as well as deflating moments on the streets, and just plain given me moral support. Whenever I needed someone to dig up a quotation, debate a new thought, or publish something I'd written, there was always an anarchist ready to assist. This isn't miraculous, nor should it even seem extraordinary. But in reflecting on what went into this book—aside from the long hours I stared at my computer screen—I am more convinced than ever that there is something special about how most anarchists choose to act, despite all the odds at this historical juncture: with empathy, tangibly giving of ourselves *and* doing it ourselves, toward a form of social organization in which it will be routine to act in mutualistic ways. If you are one of those many thousands of anarchists that I've met over the past ten years through our widening milieu and had a lovely interaction with, or

better yet gotten to know as an acquaintance or friend, or are someone I love (or have loved) and are (or have been) fortunate enough to have in my life, the biggest of heartfelt thanks. And a hug.

I wish that I could acknowledge all the anarchist projects that ended during the time frame here, but alas there are too many. I do want to name a few that are no longer around, and that I was intimately involved with and still mourn, especially politically, because they also shaped me and this book: the anarchist summer school known as the Institute for Social Ecology, the Free Society Collective, and the National Conference on Organized Resistance (fortunately, Black Sheep Books is still alive and kicking). I've also lost more friends and comrades, not to mention a partner, who influenced me and this book than I care to recount during the past ten years. It is one of the most painful parts of remaining an anarchist that, at least for now, anarchism seems to be a revolving door; if this book does anything to change that, every hour of writing will have been worth it. Death, too, takes good anarchists, though, and I want to express the deepest of appreciation for one person in that regard: Murray Bookchin. A lifelong, self-educated revolutionary, and arguably one of the most influential anarchists of the second half of the twentieth century, Murray gave tirelessly of himself to mentor and befriend generation after generation of radicals, including me. I remember years ago, at a public meeting in Burlington, Vermont, when some politician was spinelessly equivocating about some economic injustice, Murray stood up and in a booming yet measured voice said, "In my day we called it capitalism." I miss him.

Lastly, the past two years have been the darkest and oddly, as a result, the brightest of my life. Many friends and strangers as well as my biological family have startled me by being there at just the right moment. Yet certain chosen friends/family truly made this book possible, by renewing my faith in trust, love, and home within the uncertainty that is life: Walter, Ace, Arthur, Chloe, Katie, Nutmeg, Karen, Diane, Andrej, Harjit, and especially Joshua.

I want to end this prologue and begin this book with an anecdote. I've heard Ashanti Alston, Anarchist Panther, former IAS board member, and ex-political prisoner, speak in public on many occasions. I am continually amazed by his knack for gifting a positive outlook to others, even when he personally is having a hard time. After one particularly reinvigorating talk, someone asked Ashanti how he had remained so hopeful during his dozen-plus years of incarceration. His eyes lit up, and Ashanti enthusiastically exclaimed, to paraphrase: "That was the most hopeful time of my life, because every day we were scheming about how to escape from prison!" No one should have to live in the cages of capitalism, states, and other forms of social domination, but given that we still do, anarchism's aspirations supply a key to finding our way out.



Anarchism and Its Aspirations

By anarchist spirit I mean that deeply human sentiment, which aims at the good of all, freedom and justice for all, solidarity and love among the people; which is not an exclusive characteristic only of self-declared anarchists, but inspires all people who have a generous heart and an open mind.

—Errico Malatesta, *Umanita Nova*, April 13, 1922

At its core, anarchism is indeed a spirit—one that cries out against all that’s wrong with present-day society, and boldly proclaims all that could be right under alternate forms of social organization. It is also precisely the quality of an airy free-spiritedness that gives anarchism its attraction. Anarchism playfully travels across the mists of time and space to borrow from the best of human innovations, to give body to the most lofty of ideals. It can be hauntingly beautiful. But it involves a difficulty as well: pinning down this ghostly figure, this “inhabitant of an unseen world,” with any definition or substance, much less getting other people to believe in the utopian apparition called anarchism.¹

What is anarchism exactly? People have asked and answered this question since the birth of the word as a distinct political philosophy within the revolutionary tradition. Most definitional tracts on the “ABCs of anarchism” were penned long ago.² I will try to offer an introduction to anarchism from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century.³ More specifically, I will hone in on anarchism’s aspirations, as opposed to its history or current practices. That anarchist projects, and anarchists themselves, fall short of these aims underscores how essential it is to transform society in order to also transform ourselves. “We’re only human,” the saying goes, but our humanity is profoundly damaged by the alienated world of control that we inhabit. Anarchism contends that people would be much more humane under nonhierarchical social relations and social arrangements. Hence my concentration on the ethics—the values pertaining to how humans conduct themselves—that knit anarchism together as a distinct political sensibility.⁴ As will hopefully become clear, anarchism serves unflinchingly as a philosophy of freedom, as the nagging conscience that people and their communities can always be better.

There are many different though often complementary ways of looking at anarchism, but in a nutshell, it can be defined as the striving toward a “free society of free individuals.”⁵ This phrase is deceptively simple. Bound within it is both an implicit multidimensional critique and an expansive, if fragile, reconstructive vision.

To deepen this definition, a further shorthand depiction of anarchism is helpful: the ubiquitous “circle A” image. The *A* is a placeholder for the ancient Greek

word *anarkhia*—combining the root *an(a)*, “without,” and *arkh(os)*, “ruler, authority”—meaning the absence of authority. More contemporaneously and accurately, it stands for the absence of both domination (mastery or control over another) and hierarchy (ranked power relations of dominance and subordination).⁶ The circle could be considered an *O*, a placeholder for “order” or, better yet, “organization,” drawing on Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s seminal definition in *What Is Property?* (1840): “as man [*sic*] seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy.”⁷ The circle *A* symbolizes anarchism as a dual project: the abolition of domination and hierarchical forms of social organization, or power-over social relations, and their replacement with horizontal versions, or power-together and in common—again, a free society of free individuals.

To fill out this initial definition a bit further, let’s look at the two sides of that phrase. Anarchism is a synthesis of the best of liberalism and the best of communism, elevated and transformed by the best of libertarian Left traditions that work toward an egalitarian, voluntarily, and nonhierarchical society.⁸ The project of liberalism in the broadest sense is to ensure personal liberty. Communism’s overarching project is to ensure the communal good. One could, and should, question the word “free” in both cases, particularly in the actual implementations of liberalism and communism, and their shared emphasis on the state and property as ensuring freedom.⁹ Nonetheless, respectively, and at their most “democratic,” one’s aim is an individual who can live an emancipated life, and the other seeks a community structured along collectivist lines. Both are worthy notions. Unfortunately, freedom can never be

achieved in this lopsided manner: through the self *or* society. The two necessarily come into conflict, almost instantly. Anarchism's great leap was to combine self and society in one political vision; at the same time, it jettisoned the state and property as the pillars of support, relying instead on self-organization and mutual aid.

Anarchism understood that any egalitarian form of social organization, especially one seeking a thoroughgoing eradication of domination, had to be premised on both individual and collective freedom—no one is free unless everyone is free, and everyone can only be free if each person can individuate or actualize themselves in the most expansive of senses. Anarchism also recognized, if only intuitively, that such a task is both a constant balancing act and the stuff of real life. One person's freedom necessarily infringes on another's, or even on the good of all. No common good can meet everyone's needs and desires. This doesn't mean throwing up one's hands and going the route of liberalism or communism, propping up one side of the equation—ultimately artificially—in hopes of resolving this ongoing tension. From the start, anarchism asked the much more difficult though ultimately pragmatic question: Acknowledging this self-society juggling act as part of the human condition, how can people collectively self-determine their lives to become who they want to be and simultaneously create communities that are all they could be as well?

Anarchism understood that this tension is positive, as a creative and inherent part of human existence. It highlights that people are not all alike, nor do they need, want, or desire the same things. At its best, anarchism's basic aspiration for a free society of free individuals gives

transparency to what should be a productive, harmonic dissonance: figuring out ways to coexist and thrive in our differentiation. Anarchists create processes that are humane and substantively participatory. They're honest about the fact that there's always going to be uneasiness between individual and social freedom. They acknowledge that it's going to be an ongoing struggle to find the balance. This struggle is exactly where anarchism takes place. It is where the beauty of life, at its most well-rounded and self-constructed, has the greatest possibility of emerging—and at times, taking hold.

Although it happens at any level of society, one experiences this most personally in small-scale projects—from bike cooperatives to free schools—where people collectively make face-to-face decisions about issues large and mundane. This is not something that people in most parts of the world are encouraged or taught to do, most pointedly because it contains the kernels of destroying the current vertical social arrangements. As such, we're generally neither particularly good nor efficient at directly democratic processes. Council decision-making mechanisms are hard work. They raise tough questions, like how to deal with conflict in nonpunitive ways. But through them, people school themselves in what could be the basis for collective self-governance, for redistributing power to everyone. When it goes well, we have a profound sense of the types of promises, or agreements, we can make with and keep to each other. We recognize what we can be, in a way that qualitatively points past capitalism, the state, and other all-too-numerous forms of oppression. On the microlevel and much larger ones, anarchism forms “the structure of

the new society within the shell of the old,” as the preamble to the Industrial Workers of the World’s Constitution asserts.¹⁰ More crucially, it self-determines the structure of the new from spaces of possibility within the old.

From the start, anarchism was an open political philosophy, always transforming itself in theory and practice. This, too, might be seen as part of its very definition. Anarchism has to remain dynamic if it truly aims to uncover new forms of domination and replace them with new forms of freedom, precisely because of the ever-present strain between personal and collective freedom. Self-organization necessitates everyone’s participation, which requires being always amenable to new concerns and ideas. Yet when people are introduced to anarchism today, that openness, combined with a cultural propensity to forget the past, can make it seem a recent invention—without an elastic tradition, filled with debates, lessons, and experiments, to build on. Even worse, it can seem like a political praxis of “anything goes”—libertine without the libertarian—without regard for how one person’s acts impact another person or community.¹¹ It is critical to understand anarchism’s past in order to understand its meaning, but also its problems and shortcomings as well as what we might want to retain and expand on. We study anarchist history to avoid repeating mistakes, but also to know we aren’t alone on what has been and will likely be rocky, detour-filled “paths in utopia,” to borrow the title of a Martin Buber book. Of course, it’s generally helpful to understand historical contexts. Anarchism, for its part, is in large measure filled out and changed by its lived engagement in social struggle and visionary experimentation.

Looking Backward

Harmony . . . [is] obtained [through] . . . free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.

—Peter Kropotkin, “Anarchism,” 1910

To understand anarchism as a political philosophy and specifically its aspirations, we have to go back to the classical anarchism of the mid-nineteenth century—not to romanticize it, because it wasn’t “classic” in many ways, but because that is when anarchism emerged as a word describing a particular set of political beliefs and practices. There were certainly innumerable human behaviors and forms of organization going back millennia that could be classified as “anarchistic” in hindsight. Nevertheless, anarchism as a distinctive praxis, a constellation of attributes that we’ll explore below, appeared in the 1840s. It began in Europe, a nonmonolithic grouping of countries and cultures that, in turn, spawned a variety of anarchist tendencies. It then quickly traveled to and developed in places around the world.¹²

Anarchism in Europe grew out of, in part, hundreds of years of slave rebellions, peasant uprisings, and heretical religious movements in which people decided that enough was enough, and the related experimentation with various forms of autonomy.¹³ It was also partly influenced by Enlightenment thought in the eighteenth century,

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