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The Anarchist Tradition, Revisited

2013/14 Faculty Seminar Proposal

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Anarchism. What is it and what is it good for?

Arguably one of the most caricatured and least understood bodies of political thought, anarchism is undergoing a revival. From the Zapatista rebellion to anti-globalization and anti-war protests to the Occupy Wall Street movement, anarchist influences are increasingly prominent in contemporary activist movements. For today's activists, this means decentralized organizational structures, ad hoc affinity groups, radical egalitarianism, and consensus decision-making combined with a general suspicion of authority. This anarchist revival extends beyond protest politics; it also involves innovation with alternative economies. Anarchist influences are manifest in the spread of community-based models of development that emphasize mutual aid, cooperatives, intentional communities, workplace democracy, local food systems, community currencies, and other forms of solidarity-based economy that defy mainstream capitalist logics without relying upon the state.

This revival occurs against a historical backdrop in which anarchism has rarely been taken seriously as an object of inquiry. In many corners of the world, anarchism has a bad name. It is typically associated with adolescent rebellion and the shady underworld of conspiratorial bomb throwers for whom a commitment to disruption and violence—the “propaganda of the deed”—overrides any desire for solidarity and social improvement. The anarchist tradition is, however, far more complex than caricatures of urban guerrillas, monkey-wrenching eco-terrorists, and nihilistic punks suggest. Anarchism is a broad framework with many branches, both violent and nonviolent. It includes libertarians, mutualists, collectivists, anarcho-syndicalists, and anarcho-communists as well as green anarchists, spiritual anarchists (of various faiths), post-anarchists, and even anarcho-capitalists. These branches are ostensibly united by their opposition to centralized authority and by their support for self-organization, voluntary association and mutual aid. Furthermore, even though the Modern anarchist movement traces its roots 19th century working class politics in Europe, anarchist currents can be discerned throughout much of history and across civilizations.

The anarchist tradition has inspired many cultural formations and political experiments around the world. It has shaped the environmental, feminist, cooperative, anti-colonial and labor

movements. It has influenced artists from Pissarro and Picasso to Duchamp and Pollack. Anarchist currents can be found in a variety of musical genres, including punk, afrobeat, hip hop, heavy metal and techno rave, as well as in some classical compositions. Novelists ranging from Tolstoy and Conrad to Henry James and Oscar Wilde to Orwell and Leguin have acknowledged debts to anarchist movements. Anarchism has even left its mark on the natural sciences, as evidenced in the epistemological anarchism of Paul Feyerabend and in the contributions to evolutionary biology and geography made by early anarchists such as Kropotkin and Reclus.

Its cultural and political significance notwithstanding, anarchism has been largely disregarded as an object of academic research. It has been treated, as David Graeber describes, as Marxism's poorer cousin: it makes up for what it lacks in brains and analysis with what it possesses in passion and zeal. This faculty seminar aims to provide some relief by taking anarchism seriously as a social, economic and political tradition. The seminar will examine the history of anarchist thought, the influence of anarchist principles on culture and society, the ways the new anarchism might differ from the old, and the potential and limits of anarchist ideas and practices as sources of socioeconomic transformation in times of crisis.

During the seminar, we will explore some key events in the history of anarchist movements and we will discuss classic works of anarchist political philosophy by authors such as Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Goldman. Our focus will, however, be as much on the present as on the past. We will therefore also discuss more recent contributions from a variety of fields, including material by David Graeber (anthropology), Peter Marshall (history), James Scott (political science), and other scholars writing about anarchist-inspired economies and the cultural relevance of anarchist thought. The final content of the seminar will ultimately depend upon the background, interests and contributions of participants. Participants will be encouraged to share work in progress that relates to the broad topic of the seminar

Questions that might be asked include:

- What has anarchism been historically?
- What principles have been foundational to anarchist movements?
- What is the relation between anarchism and violence?
- At what points, and why, has anarchism resonated with people?
- At what points, and why, has it been suppressed, gone underground, and subsequently re-emerged?
- Which facets of contemporary social movements might properly be called anarchist?
- Is there a discernible anarchist aesthetic?
- What does the anarchist tradition have to offer in terms of conceiving political and economic alternatives?
- What are the primary critiques of anarchism and how do those critiques apply today?