

# An Anarchist FAQ

# AFAQ

AFAQ volume one

Iain McKay

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# Introduction

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*"Proletarians of the world, look into the depths of your own beings, seek out the truth and realise it yourselves: you will find it nowhere else"*

- Peter Arshinov

## The History of the Makhnovist Movement

### Welcome to our FAQ on anarchism

This FAQ was written by anarchists across the world in an attempt to present anarchist ideas and theory to those interested in it. It is a co-operative effort, produced by a (virtual) working group and exists to present a useful organising tool for anarchists on-line and, hopefully, in the real world. It desires to present arguments on why you should be an anarchist as well as refuting common arguments against anarchism and other proposed solutions to the social problems we face.

As anarchist ideas seem so at odds with "common-sense" (such as "of course we need a state and capitalism") we need to indicate **why** anarchists think like we do. Unlike many political theories, anarchism rejects flip answers and instead bases its ideas and ideals in an in-depth analysis of society and humanity. In order to do both anarchism and the reader justice we have summarised our arguments as much as possible without making them simplistic. We know that it is a lengthy document and may put off the casual observer but its length is unavoidable.

Readers may consider our use of extensive quoting as being an example of a *"quotation [being] a handy thing to have about, saving one the trouble of thinking for oneself."* (A.A. Milne) This is not the case of course. We have included extensive quotations by many anarchist figures for three reasons. Firstly, to indicate that we are **not** making up our claims of what certain anarchists thought or argued for. Secondly, and most importantly, it allows us to link the past voices of anarchism with its present adherents. And lastly, the quotes are used for their ability to convey ideas succinctly rather than as an appeal to "authority."

In addition, many quotes are used in order to allow readers to investigate the ideas of those quoted and to summarise facts and so save space. For example, a quote by Noam Chomsky on the development of capitalism by state protection ensures that we base our arguments on facts without having to present all the evidence and references Chomsky uses. Similarly, we quote experts on certain subjects (such as economics, for example) to support and bolster our analysis and claims.

We should also indicate the history of this FAQ. It was started in 1995 when a group of anarchists got together in order to write an FAQ refuting the claims of certain "libertarian" capitalists to being anarchists. Those who were involved in this project had spent many an hour on-line refuting claims by these people that capitalism and anarchism could go together. Finally, a group of net-activists decided the best thing was to produce an FAQ explaining why anarchism hates capitalism and why "anarcho" capitalists are not anarchists. However, after the suggestion of Mike Huben (who maintains the *"Critiques of Libertarianism"* web-page) it was decided that a pro-Anarchist FAQ would be a better idea than an anti-"anarcho"-capitalist one. So the Anarchist FAQ was born. It still bears some of the signs of its past-history. For example it gives the likes of Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, and so on, far too much space outside of Section F -- they really are not that important. However, as they present extreme examples of everyday capitalist ideology and assumptions, they do have their uses -- they state clearly the authoritarian implications of capitalist ideology which its more moderate supporters try to hide or minimise.

We think that we have produced a useful on-line resource for anarchists and other anti-capitalists to use. Perhaps, in light of this, we should dedicate this anarchist FAQ to the many on-line "libertarian"

capitalists who, because of their inane arguments, prompted us to start this work. Then again, that would give them too much credit. Outside the net they are irrelevant and on the net they are just annoying. As you may guess, sections F and G contain the bulk of this early anti-Libertarian FAQ and are included purely to refute the claim that an anarchist can be a supporter of capitalism that is relatively common on the net (in the real world this would not be required as almost all anarchists think that "anarcho"-capitalism is an oxymoron and that its supporters are not part of the anarchist movement).

So, while coming from a very specific reason, the FAQ has expanded into more than we originally imagined. It has become a general introduction about anarchism, its ideas and history. Because anarchism recognises that there are no easy answers and that freedom must be based on individual responsibility the FAQ is quite in-depth. As it also challenges a lot of assumptions, we have had to cover a lot of ground. We also admit that some of the "frequently asked questions" we have included are more frequently asked than others. This is due to the need to include relevant arguments and facts which otherwise may not have been included.

We are sure that many anarchists will not agree 100% with what we have written in the FAQ. That is to be expected in a movement based upon individual freedom and critical thought. However, we are sure that most anarchists will agree with most of what we present and respect those parts with which they do disagree with as genuine expressions of anarchist ideas and ideals. The anarchist movement is marked by wide-spread disagreement and argument about various aspects of anarchist ideas and how to apply them (but also, we must add, a wide-spread tolerance of differing viewpoints and a willingness to work together in spite of minor disagreements). We have attempted to reflect this in the FAQ and hope we have done a good job in presenting the ideas of all the anarchist tendencies we discuss.

We have no desire to write in stone what anarchism is and is not. Instead the FAQ is a starting point for people to read and learn for themselves about anarchism and translate that learning into direct action and self-activity. By so doing, we make anarchism a living theory, a product of individual and social self-activity. Only by applying our ideas in practice can we find their strengths and limitations and so develop anarchist theory in new directions and in light of new experiences. We hope that the FAQ both reflects and aids this process of self-activity and self-education.

We are sure that there are many issues that the FAQ does not address. If you think of anything we could add or feel you have a question and answer which should be included, get in contact with us. The FAQ is not our "property" but belongs to the whole anarchist movement and so aims to be an organic living creation. We desire to see it grow and expand with new ideas and inputs from as many people as possible. If you want to get involved with the FAQ then contact us. Similarly, if others (particularly anarchists) want to distribute all or part of it then feel free. It is a resource for the movement. For this reason we have "copylefted" An Anarchist FAQ (see <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/copyleft.html> for details). By so doing we ensure that the FAQ remains a free product, available for use by all.

One last point. Language has changed a lot over the years and this applies to anarchist thinkers too. The use of the term "man" to refer to humanity is one such change. Needless to say, in today's world such usage is inappropriate as it effectively ignores half the human race. For this reason the FAQ has tried to be gender neutral. However, this awareness is relatively recent and many anarchists (even the female ones like Emma Goldman) used the term "man" to refer to humanity as a whole. When we are quoting past comrades who use "man" in this way, it obviously means humanity as a whole rather than the male sex. Where possible, we add "woman", "women", "her" and so on but if this would result in making the quote unreadable, we have left it as it stands. We hope this makes our position clear.

So we hope that this FAQ entertains you and makes you think. Hopefully it will produce a few more anarchists and speed up the creation of an anarchist society. If all else fails, we have enjoyed ourselves creating the FAQ and have shown anarchism to be a viable, coherent political idea.

We dedicate this work to the millions of anarchists, living and dead, who tried and are trying to create a better world. An Anarchist FAQ was officially released on July 19th, 1996 for that reason -- to celebrate the Spanish Revolution of 1936 and the heroism of the Spanish anarchist movement. We hope that our work here helps make the world a freer place.

The following self-proclaimed anarchists are (mostly) responsible for this FAQ:

---

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We would like to thank the following for their contributions and feedback:

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## An Anarchist FAQ: After ten years

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It is now ten years since "An Anarchist FAQ" (AFAQ) was officially released. A lot has happened over that time, unfortunately finishing it has not been one of them!

Over that decade, AFAQ has changed considerably. It was initially conceived as a energy-saving device to stop anarchists having to continually make the same points against claims that "anarcho"-capitalism was a form of anarchism. As would be expected, the quality of the initial versions and sections were pretty mixed. Most of it was extremely good (even if we do say so ourselves!) and has required little change over the decade (mostly we have built upon and expanded the original material). A few bits were less good and have been researched more and rewritten. We have also, of course, made mistakes and corrected them when we have been informed about them or have discovered them ourselves. In general, though, our initial work has stood up well and while we were occasionally wrong on a few details, the general thrust of even these areas has been proven correct. Overall, our aim to produce an FAQ which reflected the majority of anarchist thought, both currently and historically from an international perspective, has been a success as shown by the number of mirrors, links and translations AFAQ has seen (being published by AK Press).

Since the official release, AFAQ has changed. When we released it back in 1996, we had already decided to make it a FAQ about anarchism rather than an FAQ on why anarchism is anti-capitalist. However, the first versions still bore the marks of its origins. We realised that this limited it somewhat and we have slowly revised the AFAQ so that it has become a resource about anarchism (indeed, if it were to be started again the section on "anarcho"-capitalism would be placed into an appendix, where it belongs). This means that the aim of AFAQ has changed. I would say that it has two related goals:

1. To present the case for anarchism, to convince people they should become anarchists.
2. To be a resource for existing anarchists, to use to bolster their activism and activities by presenting facts and arguments to allow them to defend anarchism against those opposed to it (Marxists, capitalists, etc.).

The second goal explains why, for example, we spend a lot of time refuting capitalist economics and Marxism/Leninism (partly, because many of the facts and arguments are in academic books which are unavailable to the general public). We hope that AFAQ has proved useful to our comrades as much as we hope we have convinced non-anarchists, at best, to become anarchists, or, at worse, to take our ideas seriously. Hopefully, the two aims are mutually complementary.

Not only has AFAQ changed over the last ten years, so has the anarchist and general political landscape on the internet. When AFAQ was being initially created, the number of anarchists on-line was small. There were not that many anarchist webpages and, relatively speaking, right-wing "libertarians" were unopposed in arguing that "anarcho"-capitalism was a form of anarchism (the only FAQ was Caplan's biased and inaccurate "Anarchist Theory FAQ"). As a non-American, I was surprised that this oxymoron even existed (I still am, as are all the anarchists I mention it to). Anarchism has always been a **socialist** theory and the concept of an "anarchism" which supported the economic system anarchism was born opposing is nonsense. Arguing with its supporters and reading up on it convinced me that the only real link it has with anarchism is simply its attempted appropriation of the name. [1] Hence the pressing need for a **real** anarchist FAQ, a need AFAQ successfully met.

Luckily, over the 1990s things changed. More anarchists went online, anarchist organisations created web presence and the balance of forces changed to reflect reality (i.e. there are far more anarchists

than "anarcho"-capitalists). The anti-capitalist movement helped, putting anarchists back in the news (the BBC even linked to AFAQ for those interested in finding out what anarchists wanted!) Even in the USA, things got better and after Seattle genuine anarchism could no longer be ignored. This produced some articles by "anarcho"-capitalists, explaining how there are two forms of anarchism and that the two have nothing or little in common (if that is the case, why call your ideology anarchism?) Anarchist organisations and activism increased and the awareness that anarchism was anti-hierarchy, anti-state **and** anti-capitalist increased. As an added bonus, some genuine individualist anarchists appeared, refuting the claim that "anarcho"-capitalism was merely a form of "updated" individualist anarchism. All these developments were welcomed, as were the words of praise and encouragement we received for our work on AFAQ from many anarchists (including, it must be stressed, individualist ones). Today, genuine anarchism in all its forms has a much greater profile, as is anarchist opposition to "anarcho"-capitalism and its claims. We hope AFAQ played a role, however small, in that process. Of course, the battle is not over. On Wikipedia, for example, right-"libertarians" are busy trying to rewrite the history of anarchism. Some anarchists have tried to counteract this attempt, and have meant with differing degrees of success. We urge you to get involved, if you have the time and energy as numbers, sadly, do seem to count. This is because we anarchists are up against people who, apparently, do not have a life and so can wage a war of attrition against those who try and include relevant facts to the entries (such as the obvious anti-capitalism of "traditional" anarchism, that anarchism is **not** compatible with government or hierarchy -- hence an-**archy!** -- or that calling yourself an anarchist does not necessarily make it so). It is a shame that such a promising project has been derailed by ideologues whose ignorance of the subject matter is matched only by their hatred of AFAQ which they deny is a "credible" or valid reference on anarchism.

I am not surprised that AFAQ is hated by the "libertarian" right (nor will I be surprised if it is equally hated by the authoritarian left). After all, it presents the case for genuine anarchism, exposes the claims of a capitalist "anarchism" for the nonsense they are and shows how deeply authoritarian right-wing "libertarianism" actually is. That the FAQ can be called "biased" by these people goes without saying (it is, after all, a FAQ about anarchism written by anarchists). What seems funny is that they just do not comprehend that anarchists take offence to their pretensions of labelling their ideology "anarchism," that we would seek to refute such claims and that their notion that "anarcho"-capitalism is anarchist is far more biased. Let us hope that more academics will pay attention to this and the obvious fact that there is a very long list of anarchists, famous and not-so-famous, who consider the whole concept an oxymoron.

Equally unsurprising is the attempt to deny that AFAQ is a valid reference on Wikipedia. This boils down to the claim that the authors are "nobodies." Given that Kropotkin always stressed that anarchism was born from the people, I take that intended insult as a badge of pride. I have always taken the position that it is not who says something that counts, but what they say. In other words, I would far sooner quote a "nobody" who knows what they are talking about than a "somebody" who does not. As AFAQ indicates with its many refutations of straw man arguments against anarchism, there are plenty of the latter. Ultimately, the logical conclusion of such an argument is that anarchists are not qualified to discuss anarchism, an inherently silly position but useful if you are seeking to turn anarchism into something it is not.

Given that even such an usually reliable expert as the late, great, Paul Avrich made mistakes, this position is by far the most sensible. Between what a suitably qualified "expert" writes and what actual anarchists say and do, I always go for the latter. Any serious scientist would do so, but sadly many do not -- instead, we get ideology. A classic example is Eric Hobsbawm's thesis on "**Primitive Rebels**" which he decided to illustrate, in part, with the example of Spanish anarchism. As we recount as part



of our appendix on "Marxism and Spanish Anarchism" while being undoubtedly a "somebody" and immensely qualified to write on the subject, his account was utter nonsense. This was proven beyond doubt when an anthologist interviewed the survivors of the Casas Viejas massacre. Their account of the event had only appeared previously in anarchist papers at the time and both, needless to say, refuted Hobsbawm.

So, to be called a "nobody" is quite a complement, given how many of the "somebodies" have not stopped being ignorant of anarchism from putting pen to paper and exposing that ignorance to the world (the worse recent example of this, outside of Marxism, must be George Monbiot's terrible comments in his "**Age of Consent**"). So, when it comes to saying what anarchism is, I turn to anarchists. This is what the "experts" should be doing anyway if they were doing their job.

Are we "qualified" to write about anarchism? Well, the collective has always been made up of anarchists, so we have an anarchist FAQ written by anarchists. It has always been a popular site, given the number of mirrors, translations and links it has been given (one mirror called it "world famous"). It is being published by AK Press, one of the leading anarchist publishers in the world.

I am the main editor and contributor to AFAQ. While one contributor to Wikipedia claimed I as an American academic, this is not the case. I have a "real" job and work on AFAQ in my spare time (I do despair when people, particularly leftists, assume that wage slaves are incapable of producing works like AFAQ). I have always been an anarchist since becoming politically aware which means I have been an anarchist activist for approximately 20 years (time flies when you are having fun!). I have been a member of numerous anarchist groups and have contributed to many anarchist publications and websites. As can be seen from my personal webpage [2], I regularly contribute articles to **Freedom** (the leading English-language anarchist newspaper). Rarely does an issue come out without something by me in it. Moreover, some of the longer articles have appeared in **Black Flag** (before and after I joined its editorial committee). My works have also been published in **Scottish Anarchist**, **Anarcho-Syndicalist Review** and **Free Voices** and some have been translated into other languages. I am also an invited columnist for the [www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org) and [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net) webpages (neither of which I am otherwise involved with). In addition, I have been invited to speak at anarchist conferences in Scotland and Ireland, as well as by Marxist parties to debate the merits of anarchism. Due to family commitments, my specifically anarchist activities are pretty much limited to writing these days, but I remain a reasonably active trade unionist.

I will leave it up to the reader to decide whether we are "qualified" to write about anarchism or not!

But as I said, I always consider what is said more important than who says it. The fact that AFAQ is so popular with anarchists is what counts and I hope that we continue to be. We are always looking for help and suggestions, so if you want to get involved or want something added or changed, please contact us -- we consider AFAQ as a resource for anarchists and we want it to reflect what anarchists think and do. [3] However, if you do want something changed or added be prepared to do some or all of the work yourself as we have our own plans on future developments and may not be able to provide the time or energy for other changes. Also, if you spot a mistake or a typo, please inform us as no matter how often we check errors do creep in. We take our task seriously and correct all errors when informed of them (differences in interpretation or terminology are not, of course, errors). [4]

Speaking personally, I have enjoyed being part of this project. I have learned a lot and have gained a better understanding of many anarchist thinkers and historical events. For example, I can now understand why Daniel Guerin was so interested in Proudhon and why it has been a crying shame that Voltairine de Cleyre's works have been unavailable for 8 decades. As such, my understanding and appreciation of anarchism has been enriched by working on AFAQ and I hope that others have had a

similar experience reading it. On the negative side, I've had to read some terrible books and articles but very few, if any, of those were anarchist. ~~But this is minor. The work has been worth it and while~~ has taken longer than any of us had imagined at the start, I'm glad that we are still working on it ten years later as AFAQ is much improved for all that time and energy. If nothing else, this work has reinforced my belief in the positive ideas and ideals of anarchism and confirmed why I became an anarchist so long ago. And, let me be honest, I would not do it unless I enjoyed it!

What of the future? Obviously, we know that AFAQ is not the final word on anarchism (we have always stressed that this is **An** Anarchist FAQ and not "The Anarchist FAQ," although some do call it that). The immediate aim is to revise the existing main sections of AFAQ for publication, which we are slowly doing. In the process some previous work is being added to and, in some cases, totally revised. After ten years, our knowledge of many subjects has expanded considerably. We have also asked a couple of individualist anarchist comrades to have a look over section G and hopefully their input will flesh out that section when it comes to be revised (for all its flaws, individualist anarchism deserves far more than to be appropriated by the right and social anarchists should be helping its modern supporters attempts to reclaim their radical tradition). [5] Once the revision of the main body of AFAQ is complete, the appendix on the Russian Revolution will be finished and then all the appendices will be revised.

After that, AFAQ will be added to once new information becomes available and new anarchist social movements and ideas develop. We have not covered everything nor does AFAQ discussed all developments within anarchism in all countries. If you think we have missed something, then contact us and we can arrange to include the subject and issues missing. As noted above, though, do **not** expect us to do all the work for you. This is a resource for the movement and, as such, we expect fellow anarchists to help out beyond merely suggesting things they expect **others** to do!

Hopefully, after summarising 19th and 20th century anarchism, the anarchists of the 21st century will use that to build and develop new ideas and movements and create both viable anarchist alternatives under statism and capitalism and, eventually, a free society. Whether we do so or not is, ultimately, up to us. Let us hope we can rise to the challenge! I do hope that anarchists can rise above the often silly arguments that we often inflict on each other and concentrate on the 90%+ that unites us rather than the often insignificant differences some consider so important. One thing is sure, if we do not then the worse will happen.

Finally, another personal note. On the way to work, I go past a little park. This little oasis of green in the city is a joy to behold, more so since someone has added this piece of graffiti to one of its walls:

*"Resistance is **never** futile! Have a nice day, y'all. Love Friday, XXX"*

With that in mind, we dedicate the ten year anniversary release of "An Anarchist FAQ" to all those "nobodies," all those anarchists who are not famous or have the appropriate "qualifications", but whose activity, thoughts, ideas, ideals, dreams and hopes give the "somebodies" something to write about (even if they fail to get some, or even all of it, right).

Iain McKay

## **Notes**

1. While "anarcho"-capitalism has some overlap with individualist anarchism, it lacks the radical and socialist sensibility and aims of the likes of Tucker which makes the latter anarchist, albeit a flawed and inconsistent form. Unlike the former, individualist anarchism **can** become consistent anarchism by simply applying its own principles in a logical manner.
2. Under my pseudonym "Anarcho" (given what's on it, I'm surprised I bother using "Anarcho" these

days as it is obvious who writes the articles). It is available here:

<http://anarchism.ws/writers/anarcho.html>

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3. Apologies for those who sent emails over the years and never received a reply -- some were lost and, given how much busy we are, emails are always the first to suffer.
4. For a discussion of one early incident, mentioned in the Wikipedia entry on AFAQ, see my article ("*An Anarchist FAQ, David Friedman and Medieval Iceland*" on my webpage). Suffice to say, once we became aware of his new criticism this year (Friedman did not bother to inform us directly), we sped up our planned revision and expansion of that section and corrected the few mistakes that had remained. In summary, it can be said our original critique remained valid in spite of some serious errors in details caused by a failure to check sources in a rush to officially release it. We learned our lesson and try not to make the same mistake again (and have not, as far as I am aware).
5. A few people have said that AFAQ does not give equal billing to individualist anarchism. However, in terms of numbers and influence it has always been very much a minority trend in anarchism outside of America. By the 1880s, this was probably the case in America as well and by the turn of the 20th century it was definitely the case (as noted by, among others, Paul Avrich). As such, it is hardly a flaw that AFAQ has presented the majority position on anarchism (social anarchism), particularly as this is the position of the people involved.

## Introduction to Volume 1

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As many anarchists have noted, our ideal must be one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented political theories on the planet. “An Anarchist FAQ” (AFAQ) aims to change this by presenting the basics of anarchist theory and history, refuting the most common distortions and nonsense about it and providing anarchists with a resource they can use to aid their arguments and struggles for freedom. This is important, as much of the ground covered in AFAQ was provoked by having to critique other theories and refute attacks on anarchism.

Anarchism has changed over the years and will continue to evolve and change as circumstances do likewise and new struggles are fought and (hopefully) won. It is not some fixed ideology, but rather a means of understanding an evolving world and to change it in libertarian directions. As such, AFAQ seeks to place specific aspects of anarchism into their historical context. For example, certain aspects of Proudhon’s ideas can only be understood by remembering that he lived at a time when the vast majority of working people were peasants and artisans. Many commentators (particularly Marxist ones) seem to forget this (and that he supported co-operatives for large-scale industry). Much the same can be said of Bakunin, Tucker and so on. I hope AFAQ will help anarchism continue to develop to meet new circumstances by summarising what has gone before so that we can build on it.

We also seek to draw out what anarchists have in common while not denying their differences. After all, individualist-anarchist Benjamin Tucker would have agreed with communist-anarchist Peter Kropotkin when he stated that anarchism was the “*no government form of socialism.*” While some anarchists seem to take more time in critiquing and attacking their comrades over (ultimately) usually minor differences than fighting oppression, I personally think that this activity while, at times, essential is hardly the most fruitful use of our limited resources -- particularly when it is about possible future developments (whether it is on the economic nature of a free society or our attitude to a currently non-existing syndicalist union!). So we have discussed the differences between anarchist schools of thought as well as within them, but we have tried to build bridges by stressing where they agree rather than create walls.

Needless to say, not all anarchists will agree with what is in AFAQ (it is, after all, as we have always stressed “An Anarchist FAQ”, not “The Anarchist FAQ” as some comrades flatteringly call it). From my experience, most anarchists agree with most of it even if they have quibbles about certain aspects of it. I know that comrades do point others to it (I once saw a Marxist complain that anarchists always suggested he read AFAQ, so I explained to him that this was what having a “Frequency Asked Questions” was all about). So AFAQ is only a guide, you need to discover anarchism for yourself and develop and apply it in your own way. Hopefully AFAQ will help that process by presenting an overview of anarchism and indicating what it is, what it is not and where to find out more.

Some may object to the length of many of the answers and that is a valid point. However, some questions and issues cannot be dealt with quickly and be considered as remotely convincing. For example, simply stating that anarchists think that capitalism is exploitative and that claims otherwise are wrong may be both correct and short but it hardly a convincing reply to someone aware of the various defences of profit, interest and rent invented by capitalist economists. Similarly, stating that Marxist ideology helped destroy the Russian Revolution is, again, both correct and short but it would never convince a Leninist who stresses the impact of civil war on Bolshevik practice. Then there is the issue of sources. We have tried to let anarchists speak for themselves on most issues and that can take space. Some of the evidence we use is from books and articles the general reader may not have easy access so we have tried to present full quotes to show that our use is correct (the number of times I’ve tracked down references only to discover they did not say what was suggested is, sadly, quite

numerous).

Moreover, refuting distortions and inventions about anarchism can be lengthy simply because of the necessity of providing supporting evidence. Time and again, the same mistakes and straw man arguments are regurgitated by those unwilling or unable to look at the source material (Marxists are particularly bad at this, simply repeating *ad nauseum* the assertions of Marx and Engels as if they were accurate). Assumptions are piled onto assumptions, assertions repeated as if they were factual. AFAQ seeks to address these and present evidence to refute them once and for all. Simply saying that some statement is false may be correct, but hardly convincing unless you already know a lot about the subject. So I hope that readers will understand and find even the longest answers interesting and informative (one of the advantages of a FAQ format is that people can simply go to the sections they are interested in and skip others).

This volume covers what anarchism is, where it comes from, what it has done, what it is against (and why) as well as what anarchism is not (i.e., showing why “anarcho”-capitalism is not a form of anarchism).

The latter may come as a surprise to most. Few anarchists, never mind the general population, have heard of that specific ideology (it is US based, in the main) and those who have heard of it may wonder why we bothered given its obvious non-anarchist nature. Sadly, we need to cover this ground simply because some academics insist in listing it alongside genuine forms of anarchism and that needs to be exposed for the nonsense it is. Few serious thinkers would list fascism alongside socialism, regardless of whether its supporters call their ideology “National Socialism” or “National Syndicalism” (unsurprisingly, right-“libertarians” do precisely that). No one took the Soviet bloc states seriously when they described themselves as “peoples’ democracies” nor considered their governments democratic. Anarchism seems to be excluded from such common-sense and so we find academics discussing “anarcho”-capitalists alongside anarchism simply, I suspect, because they *call* themselves “anarchists.” That almost all anarchists reject their claims to being anarchists does not seem to be a sufficient warning about taking such statements at face value! For obvious reasons, we have not wasted space in explaining why another US based ideology, “National Anarchism,” is not anarchism. While some individual anarchists were racist, the notion that anarchism has anything in common with those who aim for racially pure nationalist communities is ridiculous. Even academics have not fallen for *that*, although for almost all genuine anarchists “anarcho”-capitalism makes as little sense as “anarcho”-nationalism.

Then there is the history of AFAQ. As indicated in the original introduction, AFAQ was prompted by battles with “anarcho”-capitalists on-line in the early 1990s. However, while AFAQ may have started as a reply to the “anarcho”-capitalists it is no longer that. It would be a mistake to think that they are more significant than they actually are or that many anarchists bother with them (most, I am sure, have never heard of it). I did consider whether it was wiser to simply exclude section F from the book but, in the end, I decided it should remain. Partly, for the reasons above and partly because it does serve another, more useful, purpose. Neo-liberalism is based, in many ways, on right-“libertarian” dogmas so critiquing those helps our struggle against “actually existing” capitalism and the current attacks by the ruling class.

I do not wish anarchism to go the same way that “libertarian” has gone in the US (and, to a lesser extent, in the UK). Between the 1890s and 1970s, libertarian was simply a pseudonym for anarchist or similar socialist theories. However, the American free-market right appropriated the label in the 1970s and now it means supporters of minimal state (or private-state) capitalism. Such is the power having ideas that bolster the wealthy! The change in “libertarian” is such that some people talk about “libertarian anarchism” -- as if you can have an “authoritarian anarchism”! That these people include

“anarcho”-capitalists simply shows how ignorant of anarchism they actually are and how alien the ideology is to our movement (I’ve seen quite a few of them proclaim anarchism is simply a “new” form of Marxism, which shows their grasp of the subject). Equally bizarrely, these self-proclaimed “libertarian anarchists” are also those who most fervently defend the **authoritarian** social relationships inherent within capitalism! In other words, if “authoritarian anarchists” **could** exist then the “libertarian anarchists” would be them!

As AFAQ explains, being opposed to the state is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for being an anarchist. Not only is this clear from the works of anarchist thinkers and anarchism as a social movement, but also from the nature of the idea itself. To be an anarchist you must also be a socialist (i.e. opposed to capitalist property and the exploitation of labour). It is no coincidence that Godwin and Proudhon independently analysed private property from a libertarian perspective and drew similar conclusions or that Kropotkin and Tucker considered themselves socialists. To deny this critique is to deny anarchism as a movement and as a socio-political theory never mind its history and the aims of anarchists across the years.

Furthermore, as AFAQ stresses, to be a **consistent** anarchist you must recognise that freedom is more than simply the ability to change masters. Anarchism means “no authority” (an-archy) and to support social relationships marked by authority (hier-**archy**) produces a self-contradictory mess (such as supporting forms of domination, such as wage labour, which are essentially identical to those produced by the state – and, sometimes, admitted as such!). Anarchism is, fundamentally, a theory of organisation based on individuals associating together without restricting, and so denying and limiting, their freedom and individuality. This means that a consistent anarchism is rooted in free association within a context of self-management, decentralisation and “bottom-up” decision-making (i.e., it is rooted in political, economic and social equality). While it is possible to be an anarchist while opposing exploitation but not all forms of hierarchical social relationships, it is hardly logical nor a convincing position.

AFAQ also seeks to go into subjects anarchists have, traditionally, been weak on, such as economics (which is ironic, as Proudhon made his name by his economic critiques). In this sense, it is a resource for anarchists both in terms of our own history and ideas but also on subjects which we inevitably come across in our struggles (hopefully, the critiques we provide of capitalism, neo-liberalism and so forth will also be useful to other radicals). We have tried to indicate the quoted source is an anarchist or libertarian. If in doubt, please look at the bibliography on the webpage. This breaks references down into libertarian (anarchist and non-anarchist) thinkers (or sympathetic accounts of anarchism) and non-libertarians (which, needless to say, includes right-“libertarians”). It should go without saying that quoting an expert on one subject does not mean anarchists subscribe to their opinions on other matters. Thus if we quote, say, a Keynesian or post-Keynesian economist on how capitalism works it does not imply we support their specific political recommendations.

Some have criticised AFAQ for not including some of the more recent developments within anarchism, which is fair enough. I have asked on numerous occasions for such critics to contribute a section on these and, of course, for referenced corrections for any mistakes others think we have done. Nothing has been forthcoming and we have usually discovered mistakes ourselves and corrected them (although a steady flow of emails pointing out typos has come our way). We have always been a small collective and we cannot do everything. This also explains why important social events like, say, the turn of the century Argentinean revolt against neo-liberalism is not discussed in section A.5 (this is a wonderful example of anarchist ideas being spontaneously applied in practice during a mass revolt). Suffice to say, anarchistic tendencies, ideas and practices develop all the time and anarchism is growing in influence but if we continually added to AFAQ to reflect this then it would never have

become ready for publication! As it is, we have excluded most of the appendices from the book version (these remain available on the website along with a lengthy links page).

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I would like to thank everybody who has helped and contributed (directly and indirectly, knowingly and unknowingly) to AFAQ. As for authorship, AFAQ started as a collective effort and remained so for many years. I have been the only person involved from the start and have done the bulk of the work on it. Moreover, the task of getting it ready and revised for publication has fallen to me. I have enjoyed it, in the main. This explains why the book has my name on it rather than a collective. I feel I have earned that right. As such, I claim responsibility for any typos and examples of bad grammar that remain. I have substantially revised AFAQ for publication and while I have tried to find them all, I am sure I have failed (particularly in sections that were effectively rewritten). I hope these do not detract from the book too much.

Finally, on a personal note I would like to dedicate this book to my partner and two lovely children. They are a constant source of inspiration, love, support and hope (not to mention patience!). If this work makes the world we live in better for them then it has been more than worthwhile. For, when it comes down to it, anarchism is simply about making the world a freer and better place. If we forget that, then we forget what makes us anarchists in the first place.

Iain McKay

[www.anarchistfaq.org](http://www.anarchistfaq.org)

## A Summation

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***“No question, the word anarchy freaks people. Yet anarchy -- rule by no one -- has always struck me as the same as democracy carried to its logical and reasonable conclusions. Of course those who rule -- bosses and politicians, capital and the state -- cannot imagine that people could rule themselves, for to admit that people can live without authority and rulers pulls out the whole underpinnings of their ideology. Once you admit that people can -- and do, today, in many spheres of their lives -- run things easier, better and more fairly than the corporation and the government can, there's no justification for the boss and the premier. I think most of us realise and understand that, in our guts, but schools, culture, the police, all the authoritarian apparatuses, tell us we need bosses, we need to be controlled ‘for our own good.’ It’s not for our own good – it’s for the good of the boss, plain and simple.”***

***“Anarchism is a demand for real freedom and real autonomy”***

***“But I also remain convinced that something like an anarchist future, a world of no bosses or politicians, one in which people, all people, can live full and meaningful lives, is possible and desirable. We see glimpses of it all around us in our day-to-day lives, as people organise much of their lives without depending on someone to tell them what to do. We see it in that spirit of revolt - a spirit that is often twisted by anger and despair, but nonetheless shows us that people have not given up. We see it in the political activism, the social lives, the demands for decency and respect and autonomy people put forward, the desire to be individuals while still being part of a community.”***

***“No, I don't think bowling leagues are the anarchist utopia, but they, like much of our lives outside of the workplace, are organised without hierarchy and oppression; the most meaningful, truly human parts of our lives already work best when organised on anarchist principles. Yet I also believe that in its function as critique and as a vision of the future -- perhaps the only one that doesn't end in our extinction as a species, or, as Orwell put it, as a jackboot smashing a human face forever -- anarchism is not only desirable but possible and necessary.”***

Mark Leier: **The Case for Anarchy**



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