


DK: *This is ARREST from the Punk Ethnography website, my name is Douglas Kidd.*

ARREST is a series of short pieces that use anecdote, theory and reflection to share an idea that we hope you find arresting- an idea that stops you and helps you think a little differently.

For further details about Punk Ethnography please visit www.punkethnography.org

Anarchy is Order

The term bricolage is often used when describing the visual aesthetic of the punk movement. It refers to the process of bringing together diverse elements adopted and repurposed from elsewhere. For example, during the 1980s I wore a donkey jacket as part of my punk finery. This kind of jacket was invented in the 1880s especially designed for the workers on the canals around Manchester in England, and named after an engine many of them worked on. Punks appropriated the jacket along with a whole range of cheap and hard-wearing clothes designed for workers and the army. Another kind of appropriation and repurposing focused

on symbols, and my jacket was adorned with a badge showing one of these: the  circle A representing anarchy.

The symbol has an interesting history. It seems to have been first used as the symbol for the regional branch of the International Workers Association in Spain in the final years of the 19th century. The symbol of the group was the circle A with the name of the association inside the lines of the circle and A. Punks began to use the symbol in the 1970s, stripped of the wording. Many saw the links between the rebellious, transgressive, DIY aesthetic of punk and anarchy. The meaning usually associated with the symbol, certainly the one I intended, was as a stylised abbreviation of the phrase: Anarchy is Order.

A dictionary definition of the term anarchy expresses a tension that is almost a contradiction.

In one definition, anarchy is a state of disorder due to a breakdown of authority- chaos, violence and disturbance. In the other, it is the organisation of society without rulers- the government of no-one.

The first definition is used far more in general conversation and even in news broadcasts to describe scenes of chaos and violence. It can seem like a deliberate attempt to preclude the second definition- to assert that anarchy can only be associated with chaos and disorder. The phrase "Anarchy is Order" then is like a koan- a contradiction designed to challenge the way you think.

In thinking with this arresting koan I want to focus on three ideas: first, the rejection of domination, second the importance of freedom and finally what anarchy as order might look like.

In my teens and twenties, the first anarchist thinker I read was Noam Chomsky, for whom anarchism was an injunction and a project.

Anarchy is an injunction to question authority and hierarchy. In the collection titled *On Anarchism*, he gives the example of stopping a 5 year old child from walking out into the road. This is a curtailment of the child's freely chosen action. So, like any exercise of authority over another, it must be justified. Can it be justified? He answers in the affirmative, before going on to say:

But the burden of proof for any exercise of authority is always on the person exercising it—invariably. And when you look, most of the time these authority structures have no justification: they have no moral justification, they have no justification in the interests of the person lower in the hierarchy, or in the interests of other people, or the environment, or the future, or the society, or anything else—they're just there in order to preserve certain structures of power and domination, and the people at the top. END OF QUOTE.

The ultimate authority in your life is always you. Any claim to usurp that is one that must be justified. Anarchy does not reject authority- if your house is on fire, respecting the authority of a firefighter in terms of how best to tackle it may be justified. But it rejects domination-imposed hierarchy which says that the authority of a given elite is always justified. Anarchy brings into question the apparatus of the state and capitalism which are premised on domination and exploitation of elites over the rest and of human society over the wider planet. Rejection of domination asserts personal freedom and our responsibility for that freedom.

This is the second idea I want to explore.

The association of anarchy and disorder is brought into sharp focus when we look through the lens of freedom. This association reveals a negative view of humans, a view that humans need hierarchical structure, that they need strong leaders because they cannot be trusted not to kill and rape and steal without it. Humans are free but irresponsible- their freedom will manifest in every vice and venality, unless controlled by the state.

On the other hand, anarchism offers an ontological view that is simultaneously positive and demanding. It does not claim that when external hierarchical authority is removed, humans will all behave perfectly, merely that we can all make choices to co-operate and care for each other, and further, that this is something humans have been doing for a long time. David Graeber was an anthropologist and anarchist who pointed to the enormous diversity of ways in which humans have organised themselves across cultures and throughout human existence. The state represents only a tiny fraction of those different ways and the attempt to simplify and thus reduce capacity of humans to organise and think for themselves inherent in the myth of our need for strong government he punctures in this extract from *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*:

“If you have the power to hit people over the head whenever you want, you don't have to trouble yourself too much figuring out what they think is going on, and therefore, generally speaking, you don't. Hence the sure-fire way to simplify social arrangements, to ignore the incredibly complex play of perspectives, passions, insights, desires, and mutual understandings that

human life is really made of, is to make a rule and threaten to attack anyone who breaks it. This is why violence has always been the favoured recourse of the stupid: it is the one form of stupidity to which it is almost impossible to come up with an intelligent response. It is also of course the basis of the state.”

— **David Graeber, Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology**

END OF QUOTE.

So throughout history, across cultures, and still today in many different ways, humans organise themselves anarchically- without external domination.

The third and last idea I want to explore is what this might involve.

It is important to note that there is no one anarchist approach. Instead there are multiple anarchies.

On the personal level we can apply anarchist principles to everyday life. Relationships that sit outside the normal married, monogamous, lifelong, family structure. Living arrangements that look different from a house per family, attitudes to work, food, entertainment, social interaction that is self organised and outside the confines of the mainstream. Anarchy can be an invitation also to look at yourself and ask- where is anarchy already present? Where are the places in our lives where we organise ourselves without external hierarchy and domination. The way we support each other in times of disaster and difficulty can be an example- and in the book *Disaster Anarchy*, Rhiannon Firth gives examples from the response to Hurricane Sandy and Covid-19 that speak to the power of solidarity and self-organisation.

As humans organise together anarchist principles offer specific approaches, rooted in theory and honed by practice and experience.

Mutual Aid describes the practice of individuals coming together in community to support each other, sharing skills and resources as need requires and capacity allows. In the practice of Mutual Aid there is no preset hierarchy as you might find in charity where external benefactors support the weaker needy. There is an intention to build solidarity within the community and for all parties to learn about and from each other.

This practice, drawn from, whilst not limited to, anarchist practice is committed to non-domination, involves participants acting as if they were free and develops order from what can often be chaotic situations.

As we look at what anarchy might offer on a larger scale, the publication from crimethinc called: *‘What might an anarchist programme look like?’* makes the simple claim to be a starting point for anyone thinking about how the principles of anarchy could be applied to changing the way we live, with sections about how we relate to each other, and how anarchy might help us rethink borders, food, work, education, housing and healthcare.

If we reject domination and take responsibility for our own freedom, anarchy can provide a way to imagine and enact a different way to order our lives.

Douglas Kidd, 28/3/24.