

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

Mark L. Melcher
President
melcher@shentel.net

Friday, September 27, 2002

A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 10, 2001

The Anarchists Are Coming

Mark L. Melcher

They're coming, you know. The anarchists, that is. Tens of thousands of them. At least that's the estimate used by the Independent Media Center (<http://dc.indymedia.org>), which apparently knows about such things. They're coming to Washington, the website says, for 10 days "of alternative events," which include "rallies, teach-ins, protests, workshops, concerts and abandoned housing takeovers," ending with demonstrations against two days of meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on September 29 and 30.

It remains to be seen whether "tens of thousands" will actually show up. But the Washington, D.C. government apparently believes they will. D.C. officials have said publicly that they expect the demonstrations to be the biggest in Washington since the Vietnam War protests and have asked for a special appropriation of \$30 million from the Bush administration for crowd control.

Now the IMC website doesn't actually say that all of the tens of thousands of protestors will be anarchists. Some will be promoting causes that are somewhat less ambitious than the worldwide eradication of both hierarchical government and capitalism. Unions will be there promoting protectionism. Environmentalists will be there on behalf of the rainforests, whales, etc. Other groups will protest the ill treatment of migrants and refugees worldwide. And some folks will, I expect, be there just for fun of it.

But it is the anarchists who will be at the forefront of the demonstrations, stirring up trouble, and getting the TV coverage. And it is the anarchists, who, I believe, at least, are the most interesting.

Why? Because anarchists are genuine *rarae aves*. Spotting a covey of them in their natural habitat is not like seeing the uncommon, but not rare, Piliated Woodpecker or a Scarlet Tanager in the woods. It would be comparable to coming upon a whole flock of Dusky Seaside

Subscriptions to The Political Forum are available by contacting:
The Political Forum
8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359, e-mail melcher@shentel.net

Sparrows, a breed that was declared extinct in 1987. Anarchists are not supposed to even exist anymore. They haven't been around in some 75 years or so.

Oh yes of course, individuals who claim to be anarchists have turned up every now and then over the years. But most, if not all, of these have been of a common, look-alike subspecies known by the name given them by the great Linnaeus himself, *avis wackos*. In fact, so far as I know, one of the last confirmed sightings of a real live anarchist in the United States was on August 23, 1926, the day Nicola Sacco And Bartolomeo Vanzetti were electrocuted in Charlestown, Massachusetts for killing two men in a payroll robbery of a shoe manufacturer.

So why has this long-extinct breed suddenly emerged like Poe's raven from the "Night's Plutonian shore?" Is their appearance prophetic? If so, is the prophecy decipherable? Or, as was the case with the raven, will the meaning always be as obscure as "nevermore?" And will these unwanted visitors go away, or will they perch forever on the "placid bust of Pallas," haunting the 21st century with "eyes having all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming?"

Obviously, I don't know the answer to these questions. And I will even admit to a bit of over dramatization in their presentation. But they, the anarchists, are indeed coming to town again; and they do indeed represent a relatively new phenomenon on the global political scene; and their appearance certainly portends something, even if we don't know what that is.

So I thought this week I would explore the topic of anarchism a little and then offer a few tentative thoughts on, if not answers to, the questions asked above. The thought behind this effort is that if we must have anarchists among us, it would probably behoove us to know a little about the history of their beliefs and the nature of their heroes.

For starters, I should point out that anarchists are not advocates of political chaos, or no government whatsoever, as most people seem to believe and as their name implies. Simply stated, anarchists are against any and all hierarchies. A leading anarchist website quotes "anarchist L. Susan Brown" as explaining that anarchists "oppose the idea that power and domination are necessary for society; and instead advocate more co-operative, anti-hierarchical forms of social, political and economic organization."

The website doesn't say so, but the basic idea comes from Rousseau, who can, I believe, be said to have sown the seeds of all of the malignant, utopian ideologies of modern times, including, but not limited to socialism, communism, anarchism, and fascism.

It was Rousseau, of course, who argued that humans were innately good, that the concept of original sin is bogus, that vice and error are not natural to mankind but introduced from without, caused mostly by bad institutions. The upshot of this idea is that the cure for mankind's suffering and society's problems is either more and better government, or, as the anarchists see it, no government at all, since humans in their natural state would happily cooperate with each other as one big happy family.

To put all of this more simply, anarchists advocate government by a committee of the whole with no chairperson. This is, of course, an amazingly stupid idea, as any child with even limited

playground experience can attest. Like it or not, leaders emerge in human societies. Hierarchies develop naturally. Or, to paraphrase Cagney in "The Big House," someone has to have the upper bunk.

While anarchists argue strenuously against this proposition if challenged, the debate really is not central to anarchism. As a practical matter, anarchists have historically been more interested in attacking existing hierarchies, usually with violence, than with the task of creating leaderless societies. Like recreational sailing, anarchy is more about the voyage than the destination.

All of this is not to imply that all anarchists are stupid. In fact, the intellectual pedigree of anarchy as a political movement is arguably every bit as prestigious as that of its sister movements, socialism and Marxism.

All three trace their origins to the social, economic and political turbulence of early 19th century Europe, where the social fabric had been destroyed by a combination of the French revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic wars, and economic thought was dominated by the horrors of the industrial revolution in England.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, generally regarded as the founder of anarchism, came of age during these tumultuous times, as did Karl Marx. While the young Marx, and his fellow, middle class gang of neo-Hegelian intellectuals (such men as Ludwig Feuerbach, Moses Hess, Bruno Bauer, and Max Stirner) were sitting in the beer halls of Berlin arguing, debating and developing their intensely anti-religious, insurgent doctrines, Proudhon, a barrel-maker's son, was in Paris, teaching himself to read Greek, Latin and Hebrew and writing one of the first, great revolutionary tomes of the period entitled *What is Property?*, in which he answered his own question with the declaration, "Property is theft." Indeed, while Marx is better known today, it was Proudhon, not Marx, whose ideas dominated the early days of the European working class movement.

Marx was much taken with Proudhon's work, and in 1845 he wrote him a letter asking him to contribute to an organized correspondence, designed to keep communists in different countries in touch with each other. In the letter, he warned Proudhon against a group that called itself the "True Socialists." Marx thought this crowd, of which Hess became associated, was too soft, not revolutionary enough, too willing to compromise with bourgeoisie powers in order to defend their own petty-bourgeois interests.

In his reply, Proudhon agreed to cooperate with the project, but warned Marx, in typical anarchist fashion, that "for God's sake, after we have demolished all the dogmatisms *a priori*, let us not of all things attempt in our turn to institute another kind of doctrine into the people . . . let us not set ourselves up as leaders of a new intolerance, let us not pose as the apostles of a new religion . . ." Then Proudhon ended his letter with a defense of a leader of the "True Socialists," one Karl Grün. This sent Marx, a confrontational, petty, and perpetually angry man, into paroxysms of anger and prompted him to write a paper entitled *Poverty of Philosophy*, which attacked Proudhon and his ideas vociferously.

I have gone through this exercise because within it can be found the early seeds of the schism that developed between the socialist, communist, and anarchist movements. Marx's communism subsequently developed, as Proudhon worried that it would, into a new "religion" of intolerance, an oppressive, murderous nightmare, in fact. Socialism subsequently developed, as Marx worried that it would, into a giant state enterprise run by a new governmental elite, arguably just as oppressive as the old one, whose primary occupation would be to defend its own "petty bourgeois interests." Of the three, only anarchy remained relatively true to its original charter, as both Marx and the socialists worried that it would, disdaining and attacking all forms of organized, hierarchical government, including, not incidentally, communism and socialism.

In any case, while Proudhon wrote and spoke of direct action on behalf of anarchism, he was, in practice, an intellectual, not a man of action. The action was left to his friend and co-founder of anarchism, Mikhail Bakunin, who is one of the 19th century's most colorful characters.

Bakunin was a Russian aristocrat, a giant of a man who weighed over 250 pounds, sported a huge black beard, had a booming voice, and a seemingly bottomless supply of courage and energy. He was the inspiration for Turgenev's character Rudin in his novelette by that name, and, according to George Bernard Shaw, was used by Wagner as the model for Siegfried in the opera by that name.

Bakunin manned the barricades during the 1848 revolution in France, and afterward traveled throughout Europe fomenting uprisings. He coined the phrase "the passion for destruction is also a creative passion." He co-authored the well-known tract *Catechism of a Revolutionist* with Sergei Nechayev, which contains the famous phrase, "The revolutionist is a doomed man." He spent over eight years in some of the worst prisons in Europe, eventually escaping to America through Siberia. He then returned to Europe declaring that "I shall continue to be an impossible person so long as those who are now possible remain possible."

After his return, he founded secret conspiratorial societies all over the continent, and battled Marx for control of the First International. Marx won the fight in 1872, but he so despised Bakunin, and so feared his influence, that he moved the organization's General Council to New York, safely out of Bakunin's reach.

The third remarkable figure in the early history of anarchism was Prince Peter Kropotkin, who was imprisoned in Russia in 1876 for anarchist activities, escaped, found himself later in a French prison, and finally made his way to England, where he spent the next thirty years writing anarchist books and pamphlets inciting working men around the world to violence against the established order.

George Bernard Shaw once called Kropotkin "amiable to the point of saintliness." But he is credited with putting the violence in anarchism. Talk wasn't enough, he said. The masses must be awakened by the "propaganda of the deed." Richard Suskind, in his terrific little book on the subject of anarchism, *By Bullet, Bomb and Dagger* (a phrase taken from a Kropotkin pamphlet) describes him as the "man who raised anarchism to its final apotheosis of violence and who gave it the semi-mystical and religious connotation it has had ever since."

It is fair to say, I think, that Kropotkin's clarion call to the "propaganda of the deed" influenced most of the many, many anarchists who, in the late 19th and early 20th century, blew things up and killed people all over Europe and the United States during that difficult period.

The anarchists' run in the United States began in 1882 with the arrival in New York of Johann Most. It lasted about 44 years, assuring that the labor unrest that marked that difficult transitional period was extremely bloody, featuring many strikes, many violent riots, and many deaths. It also included the assassination of President William McKinley by an anarchist named Leon Czolgosz, who stated simply: "I killed [him] because I done my duty and because he was an enemy of the good working people . . . I don't believe we should have rules. It is right to kill them. I don't believe in voting. It is against my principles. I am an Anarchist."

Most was a small man with a deformed face who came to the America after a stint in a German prison for being a socialist and another in English prison for praising in print the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. He traveled the country preaching anarchism, and published an anarchist newspaper called Freiheit, which openly extolled workers to violence.

Among Most's most prominent acolytes were Alexander Berkman and his mistress Emma Goldman, who was so taken by Most that she became his mistress also. Berkman is famous for his spectacular assassination attempt on the life of Andrew Carnegie's plant manager Henry Clay Frick following the bloody strike in 1892, put down by Frick, at Carnegie's giant steel plant in Homestead, Pa.

But, as I said earlier, by the time Sacco and Vanzetti were executed, the anarchist movement had waned significantly. As was the case in Europe, socialism and communism became the drugs of choice among the more radical political elements in the labor movement. Soon thereafter, the depression eliminated a lot of the wealth disparities that helped to fuel the anarchist cause, and shortly after that, World War II united the nation against a common enemy.

So, here we are today, 75 years later, at the beginning of the 21st century, and wonder of wonders, they're back, and the District of Columbia is spending millions of dollars to construct a six foot high perimeter of fencing materials and Jersey barriers encompassing some 100 blocks of the very center of the city, including the White House itself. Plans are not yet finalized, but the latest information indicates that street closings will range from 24th Street on the West to 14th Street on the East, and from I Street on the North to Constitution Avenue on the South.

The last time I wrote about the people who are causing such concern in Washington was when they first emerged on the national scene during the demonstrations in Seattle almost two years ago. I was dismissive of them then. I argued that there was very little going on to legitimize such anger, given that the world was largely at peace and the outlook for global prosperity had never been better.

I speculated that these malcontents were infected by "spiritual boredom, driven by the increasing secularization of American society and the failure of materialism, sexual license, drugs, pornography, pop entertainment, and a variety of cult religions to fill the void."

I now think I was wrong about that. I think there is something deeper and more serious at work. In retrospect, I failed to acknowledge that this is in fact a global movement, directed from a global perspective. And when viewed that way, it becomes clear that many of the circumstances that fueled the original anarchist movement are extant today, albeit in different form.

There is unthinkable poverty in some areas of the world, and vast, certainly unseemly to some, wealth accumulations in others. And these disparities are, in many cases, related directly to sweeping, permanent, fundamental changes in the processes of production, a new industrial revolution, if you will.

No "French revolutions" have destroyed the underlying social fabric of Western society, and no wars have wracked vast parts of the globe as the Napoleonic conflict did. But the end of the Cold War left a giant worldwide political and social void by virtually eliminating communism and socialism as ideological havens for those who hate and fear capitalism.

And finally, if a feeling of helplessness in dealing with the governments of the day added fuel to the anger of the original anarchists, then that same feeling has to be many fold stronger today, given the rise of so many vast, impersonal, and intensely bureaucratic international institutions, such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF, and the myriad NGOs, with their enormous economic, social, and ultimately, political power. And this is not to mention the vast global strength of the United States itself, as well as the tremendous international influence exerted by several hundred of the world's largest global corporations.

The bottom line is, I believe, that these anarchists are a sign of the times, and therefore here to stay for a while. They are almost certainly not a major threat to the developing order. By its very nature, anarchy is unsustainable for long periods of time. But they will just as certainly influence it, as their predecessors did, via their public protests, and most probably, assassinations and outright terrorism.

If global capitalism can, in the next decade or so, live up to its promise of providing a better life for citizens of all nations, including the poorest and least developed, while preserving peace, as well as protecting the global environment, then the anarchists will, once again, fade into history.

If global capitalism instead turns into a giant web of interlocking interests between corrupt governments, powerful and corrupt international organizations, and giant corporate interests, at the expense of the freedoms of the vast majority of ordinary citizens, and without providing noticeable improvements in the lives of the world's poorest nations, then anarchy as a political movement will, I believe, likely be around for a very long time and cause considerable trouble.

THE POLITICAL FORUM

Copyright 2002. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved. Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.