Many among today's young radical activists, especially those at the center of the anti-globalization and anti-corporate movements, call themselves anarchists. But the intellectual/philosophical perspective that holds sway in these circles might be better described as an anarchist sensibility than as anarchism per se. Unlike the Marxist radicals of the sixties, who devoured the writings of Lenin and Mao, today's anarchist activists are unlikely to pore over the works of Bakunin. For contemporary young radical activists, anarchism means a decentralized organizational structure, based on affinity groups that work together on an ad hoc basis, and decision-making by consensus. It also means egalitarianism; opposition to all hierarchies; suspicion of authority, especially that of the state; and commitment to living according to one's values. Young radical activists, who regard themselves as anarchists, are likely to be hostile not only to corporations but to capitalism. Many envision a stateless society based on small, egalitarian communities. For some, however, the society of the future remains an open question. For them, anarchism is important mainly as an organizational structure and as a commitment to egalitarianism. It is a form of politics that revolves around the exposure of the truth rather than strategy. It is a politics decidedly in the moment.

Anarchism and Marxism have a history of antagonism. Bakunin, writing in the late nineteenth century, argued that the working class could not use state power to emancipate itself but must abolish the state. Later, anarchists turned to "propaganda of the deed," often engaging in acts of assassination and terrorism in order to incite mass uprisings. In the early twentieth century, anarcho-syndicalists believed that militant trade unionism would evolve into revolution as a result of an escalating logic of class struggle. Marx (and also Lenin) had pointed out that constructing socialism would require a revolutionary transformation of the state (and ultimately a "withering away" of the state based on class). Anarchists, however, criticized Marxists for tending in practice to treat the state as an instrument that could simply be taken over and used for other ends. Anarchists saw the state not as a tool, but as an instrument of oppression, no matter in whose hands. The Stalinist experience lent credence to that critique.

The anarchist mindset of today's young activists has relatively little to do with the theoretical debates between anarchists and Marxists, most of which took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has more to do with an egalitarian and anti-authoritarian perspective. There are versions of anarchism that are deeply individualistic and incompatible with socialism. But these are not the forms of anarchism that hold sway in radical activist circles, which have more in common with the libertarian socialism advocated by Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn than with the writings of Bakunin or Kropotkin. Today's anarchist activists draw upon a current of morally charged and expressive politics.

There is considerable overlap between this contemporary anarchism and democratic socialism partly because both were shaped by the cultural radicalism of the sixties. Socialists and contemporary anarchists share a critique of class society and a commitment to egalitarianism. But the history of antagonism between the two worldviews has also created a stereotype of anarchism in the minds of many Marxists, making it difficult to see what the two perspectives have in common. Anarchism's absolute hostility to the state, and its tendency to adopt a stance of moral purity, limit its usefulness as a basis for a broad movement for egalitarian social change, let alone for a transition to socialism. Telling the truth to power is or should be a part of radical politics but it is not a substitute for strategy and planning.
There are also things that Marxists could learn from the anti-globalist activists. Their anarchism combines both ideology and imagination, expressing its fundamentally moral perspective through actions that are intended to make power visible (in your face) while undermining it. Historically, anarchism has often provided a too-often ignored moral compass for the left. Today, anarchism is attracting young activists, while Marxist socialism is not, or at least, not in the same numbers. What follows is an effort to make sense of the reasons for this attraction.

1.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anarchism anchored the militant, radical side of the U.S. labor movement and left in something like the way that Communism would in later decades, in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Though there were anarchist organizations, most importantly the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), organization was not a strength of the anarchist movement, as it was, later, of the Communist movement. Anarchist identity was not linked to membership in any organization in the way that Communist identity was later linked to membership in the Communist Party. Despite such differences anarchism occupied something like the position within the broader left that Communism later came to occupy.

The leadership of the nineteenth century Knights of Labor, the first large national labor organization, wavered in relation to working class militancy. The Knights of Labor included reform associations as well as labor unions; at times the leadership of the organization discouraged labor union militancy that seemed likely to threaten the organization's reform agenda. Alongside them, a small anarchist labor movement upheld a consistent militancy, which contrasted with the stance of the Knights of Labor. The wavering support of the Knights’ leadership for trade union struggles made the organization vulnerable to competition from the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which limited its membership to trade unions.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the frequent slides of the economy into depression encouraged widespread anti-capitalist sentiment among U.S. workers; in its formative years the AFL associated itself with this radical sensibility. But in the early years of the twentieth century growing prosperity opened up the possibility that skilled workers, at least, could gain more stability. The AFL renounced its former gestures towards radicalism, proclaimed itself concerned only with wages and workplace conditions and in relation to broader issues willing to respect the power of capital. The AFL's conservatism, its focus on organizing skilled, mostly native born workers, and its unwillingness to organize the unskilled or immigrants left considerable space for a more radical labor movement.

A radical alternative to the AFL emerged first through the Western Federation of Miners and other labor organizations, which engaged in militant struggle and were open to socialist and anarchist perspectives. The IWW, formed by these organizations and others, adopted an explicitly anarcho-syndicalist perspective, organized the unskilled, foreign-born, and black workers ignored by the AFL, and stood for militant, radical trade unionism. The socialist left divided along the same lines as the labor movement, with some leaning toward the IWW, some toward the AFL. The Socialist Party included a left wing that supported the IWW and its militant approach to class struggle and a right wing that supported the AFL and was inclined towards
electoral politics. The narrowness of the IWW's conception of revolution, which ruled out any engagement in the political arena, led many Socialists who at first supported the IWW to distance themselves from it over time.

The IWAI conducted a series of brilliant, often successful, organizing campaigns, but IWW locals were often short-lived. They were weakened partly by their reluctance to sign contracts, based on the view that any agreement with capital was class collaboration, and partly by the vulnerability of the IWW's largely immigrant, often non-English speaking, constituency to harassment by employers and legal repression by the government. Ultimately the IWW's approach to revolution was displaced by the Bolshevik Revolution, enthusiastic support for which swept the U.S. left, especially its immigrant constituencies, from which anarchism had drawn its support. The Bolshevik Revolution also led to a split in and the subsequent decline of the Socialist Party, and to the ascendance of the Communist Party within the U.S. left.

In the twenties, thirties, and forties, anarchism was supplanted by Marxism, which became the leading form of left thinking. The Communist movement was able to create strong organizational structures, and was also more able to resist corporate-led attacks and attempts at legal repression, than the IWW and other anarchist groups had been. The vulnerability of anarchism to attack, and the greater ability of the Communist Party to resist attacks, were illustrated by the case of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, anarchists unjustly accused of a payroll robbery and murder in 1921. The leadership of the Sacco-Vanzetti defense campaign was expanded to include communists, socialists and liberals, at the urging of prominent anarchist Carlo Tresca, who recognized that anarchists alone would not be able to mobilize mass support. By 1927, when Sacco and Vanzetti were executed, anarchism had ceased to be a major tendency within the U.S. left. This was partly due to the attraction of Bolshevism, but also partly due to the assimilation of immigrants in the United States. Previously the major constituency for anarchism, by the late twenties, most immigrants who might have at one time followed anarchism had turned to communism, socialism or liberalism. Two of the most important leaders of the Communist Party, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and William Z. Foster, were both anarcho-syndicalists before they became Communists. Their political histories are emblematic of a broader trajectory in the history of the U.S. left. The decline of anarchism was unfortunate for the Communist Party and for the rest of the socialist left, which could have benefited from the anti-authoritarian perspective and moral critique that anarchists might have provided.

In the forties and fifties, anarchism, in fact if not in name, began to reappear, often in alliance with pacifism, as the basis for a critique of militarism on both sides of the Cold War. The anarchist/pacifist wing of the peace movement was small in comparison with the wing of the movement that emphasized electoral work, but made an important contribution to the movement as a whole. Where the more conventional wing of the peace movement rejected militarism and war under all but the most dire circumstances, the anarchist/pacifist wing rejected these on principle. The Communist Party supported the anti-fascist allies in the Second World War, while many anarchists and some socialists refused to serve. The anarchist/pacifist wing of the movement also employed civil disobedience, which involved personal risks that most people in the more conventional wing of the movement were not willing to take.

2.
Within the movements of the sixties there was much more receptivity to anarchism-in-fact than had existed in the movements of the thirties. In the thirties, Communists, radical trade unionists and others demanded state action on behalf of working people and the poor, and succeeded in pushing the New Deal toward the left. In a context in which the left was, with some success, demanding a shift in the orientation of the state, anarchism had little place. But the movements of the sixties were driven by concerns that were more compatible with an expressive style of politics, with hostility to authority in general and state power in particular. Relatively few sixties activists called themselves anarchists or, for that matter, anything else. Especially in the early sixties, many activists rejected all ideologies and political labels. Nevertheless, many activists were drawn to a style of politics that had much in common with anarchism. Many of them, if asked what left tradition they felt closest to, would probably have named anarchism.

Civil rights struggles in the South pointed to the discrepancy between democratic values and the policies of those in power. The civil rights movement won the right of blacks to vote, and thus transformed the South, largely through the use of nonviolent direct action. Anarchist ideology was not a factor in the development of the civil rights movement. But the beliefs of many Christians, that shaped the civil rights movement, had in common with anarchism a deeply moral approach to politics and a focus on direct action as a tactic. A generation of young activists in the North drew inspiration from the civil rights movement and wanted to adopt its style, but they were too firmly secular to identify with Christianity, and besides, many of them were Jews. In the emerging student movement in the North, the Christian orientation of Southern blacks translated into a politics with a moral base and a style that revolved around expression.*

The early New Left, like the civil rights movement, was concerned with the gap between the words and deeds of those in power, in particular the contradiction between the ostensible liberalism of the Democratic Party and its pursuit of the Cold War. The war in Vietnam turned what had been a relatively mild critique of liberalism into an angry radicalism, which regarded the liberal state as the enemy. By the late sixties, political protest was intertwined with cultural radicalism based on a critique of all authority and all hierarchies of power. Anarchism circulated within the movement along with other radical ideologies. The influence of anarchism was strongest among radical feminists, in the commune movement, and probably in the Weather Underground and elsewhere in the violent fringe of the anti-war movement.

In the late sixties, a messianic mood, a sense that victory could come any moment, swept through the movement. This was linked to a tendency to equate radicalism with militancy, to rapidly escalating standards for militancy, and to a tendency to equate militancy and radicalism with violence, or at least with threats of the use of violence. In the late sixties and early seventies, the movement was pervaded by rage against the war and the culture that had produced it, and wild fantasies of immanent revolution, fantasies regarded by those who held them as realistic views of what the movement could accomplish with enough effort. In fact, movement activists rarely initiated viofence. But something like madness took hold. In response perhaps to the continuing international terror represented by the Vietnam War, violent fantasies swept the movement, frightening many people out of political activity. The radical movement of the late sixties and early seventies mostly collapsed when the war in Vietnam came to an end. The end of that movement more or less coincided with the end of the draft and the exit of the baby boom generation from the universities. It was followed by a downturn in the economy which was taken
as a warning, by many young people who had participated in the movement, that it was time to resume their careers or at least find some stable means of making a living. The generation of students that followed was smaller, more cautious, and had no unifying cause.

In the late seventies activists influenced by a perspective that drew from anarchism, pacifism, feminism and environmentalism initiated a movement against nuclear power, which they hoped would go on to address other issues, eventually becoming a movement for nonviolent revolution. They created a distinctive style of politics by drawing the concept of the affinity group from the history of Spanish anarchism, the tactic of large-scale civil disobedience from the U.S. civil rights movement, and the process of decision-making by consensus from the Quakers. The nonviolent direct action movement, as it called itself, conducted campaigns against nuclear power and nuclear arms. The version of anarchism that circulated within the movement called for egalitarian community based on small, autonomous groups. The commitments to nonviolence, and to decision making by consensus, were intended to shield the movement from the problems that had plagued the anti-war movement of the late sixties. Groups in various parts of the country held large, dramatic protests which helped to mobilize public opinion first against the nuclear industry and then against the arms race, and a small army of activists gained experience in non-violent civil disobedience.

Mass civil disobedience demonstrations became the signature of the movement, and inability to move beyond this tactic became a liability. In each campaign a point was reached at which the size of civil disobedience protests leveled off because the maximum number of people willing to be arrested on that issue had become involved. At this point it would become clear that civil disobedience protests alone could not overturn the nuclear power industry, or the arms race. The problems of the nonviolent direct action movement were compounded by its rigid adherence to decision making by consensus. The decline of the nuclear industry in the late seventies and the de-escalation of the arms race in the mid-eighties brought these campaigns to an end.

3.

The approach to politics developed by the nonviolent direct action movement has outlasted the movement itself. Activists throughout the progressive movement have adopted elements of the movement's style of politics. The current anti-globalization movement has roots in the nonviolent direct action movement, with which it shares a structure based on small autonomous groups, a practice of decision-making by consensus, and a style of protest that revolves around mass civil disobedience. Each of the major organizations of the nonviolent direct action movement began with great promise but soon went into decline, in large part due to the structural and ideological rigidities associated with insistence on consensus decision-making and reluctance to acknowledge the existence of leadership within the movement. This raises a question for the anti-globalization movement: will it share the fate of the nonviolent direct action movements of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, or will it gain the flexibility that will allow it to evolve with changing circumstances?

The anarchist sensibility has made important contributions to the radical tradition in U.S. history. It has brought an insistence on equality and democracy, a resistance to compromise of principle for the sake of political expediency. Anarchism has been associated with efforts to put the values
of the movement into practice and to create communities governed by these values. Anarchism has also been associated with political theater and art, with creativity as an element of political practice. It has insisted that radical politics need not be dreary. But the anarchist mindset also has its doctrinaire side, a tendency to insist on principle to the point of disregarding the context or likely results of political action. In this regard the anarchist sensibility has something in common with the outlook of Christian radicals who believe in acting on their consciences and leaving the consequences to God.

The moral absolutism of the anarchist approach to politics is difficult to sustain in the context of a social movement. Absolute internal equality is hard to sustain. Movements need leaders. Anti-leadership ideology cannot eliminate leaders, but it can lead a movement to deny that it has leaders, thus undermining democratic constraints on those who assume the roles of leadership, and also preventing the formation of vehicles for recruiting new leaders when the existing ones become too tired to continue. Within radical feminism a view of all hierarchies as oppressive led to attacks on those who took on the responsibilities of leadership. This led to considerable internal conflict, and created a reluctance to take on leadership roles, which weakened the movement. Movements dominated by an anarchist mindset are prone to burning out early.

Despite its problems, the appeal of anarchism has grown among young activists, especially within what is generally called the anti-globalization movement. This description is not entirely accurate: the movement's main focus is not on stopping globalization but transforming the terms on which it takes place, and it shades into the domestic anti-corporate movement. The movement might better be described as against neoliberalism, or against U.S. imperialism and domination by U.S.-based transnational corporations. But these are cumbersome phrases. So, like most people, I describe this as the antiglobalization movement.

The most dramatic moment of the anti-globalization movement thus far, at least in the United States, was the mobilization against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in late November and early December of 1999. In the series of demonstrations that took place over the course of several days, the young, radical activists who engaged in civil disobedience were greatly outnumbered by trade unionists and members of mostly liberal environmental organizations. But it was the young radicals who blockaded the meetings of the WTO, fought the police, liberated the streets of Seattle, and whose militancy brought the attention of the media to a mobilization that would otherwise have gone relatively unnoticed outside the left. The alliance that formed in Seattle between young radicals, the trade unionists and the liberal environmentalists was loose, and it has become even looser since then. It is the young radicals who have pushed the anti-globalization movement forward.

The anti-globalization movement includes the countless individuals, groups, and coalitions that have joined in demonstrations in Seattle and elsewhere against the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, and the two major parties that support the existing international order. It includes the organizations-many of them the same ones-- now mobilizing in this hemisphere against the Free Trade Area of the Americas. It overlaps with the anti-corporate movement. It includes groups working against sweatshops, against destruction of natural environments, and around a range of
other issues. These groups share an opposition to transnational corporations and to the neoliberal government policies that enable them to flourish. Most of the core activists in this movement, in the United States at least, are young, in their teens or twenties. Older people are involved as well, including intellectuals and activists associated with such organizations as Global Exchange and the International Forum on Globalization. Many activists involved in anti-corporate efforts, such as the Campaign for a Living Wage on university campuses, consider themselves part of this movement. And there are important links to the labor movement. Most movement activists are white and culturally middle-class, but this is changing with increasing involvement of Latinos, particularly in connection with the campaign against the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

There are many in the movement who do not consider themselves anarchists. These would include some of the older intellectuals, as well as some younger activists with experience in movements with other ideological leanings, such as the international solidarity/antiimperialist movement, in which anarchism has not been a major influence. There are activists who do not identify with any ideological stance. Nevertheless anarchism is the dominant perspective within the movement. The movement is organized along lines understood as anarchist by movement activists, made up largely of small groups that join forces on an ad hoc basis, for particular actions and other projects. Movement activists call this form of organization anarchist. It is supported not only by those who call themselves anarchists but by many who would not. Journalist Naomi Klein, in a defense of the movement that appeared in The Nation, points out that this form of organization allows the movement to include many different styles, tactics, and goals, and that the internet is an excellent medium for linking diverse groups. The greatest tactical strength of the movement, she argues, is its similarity to a swarm of mosquitoes. This anarchist form of organization makes it possible for groups that disagree in some respects to collaborate in regard to common aims. At the demonstrations in Quebec City in May 2001, affinity groups formed sectors defined by their willingness to engage in or tolerate violence, ranging from those committed to nonviolence to those intending to use "unconventional tactics." This structure made it possible to incorporate groups which otherwise would not have been able to participate in the same demonstration.

There are probably more people in the anti-globalization movement attracted to the movement's culture and organizational structure than to anarchism as a worldview. Nevertheless anarchism is attractive as an alternative to the version of radicalism associated with the Old Left and the Soviet Union. Many activists in the anti-globalization movement do not see the working class as the leading force for social change. Movement activists associate anarchism with militant, angry protest, with grassroots, leaderless democracy, and with a vision of loosely linked small-scale communities. Those activists who identify with anarchism are usually anti-capitalist; among these, some would also call themselves socialists (presumably of the libertarian variety), some would not. Anarchism has the mixed advantage of being rather vague in terms of its proscriptions for a better society, and also of a certain intellectual fuzziness that allows it to incorporate both Marxism's protest against class exploitation, and liberalism's outrage at the violation of individual rights. I spoke with one anti-globalization activist who described the anarchism of many movement activists as "liberalism on steroids"-that is, they are in favor of liberal values, human rights, free speech, diversity-and militantly so.
The main target of the anti-globalization movement is corporate power, not capitalism, but these perspectives do not necessarily exclude one another. Some activists want regulation of the corporations, forcing them to comply with human and environmental rights; some want corporations abolished. These aims are not necessarily incompatible. Depending on how one defines the limitations to be imposed on corporations, the line between regulation and abolition can evaporate. There are activists in the movement, especially among the more radical, younger people, for whom the ultimate target is capitalism. In the late sixties many of the radical activists who adopted one or another version of Marxism were unwilling to entertain ideas that did not fit a socialist perspective. The radical activists in the anti-globalization movement tend to have a more fluid approach to ideology. Despite their preferences for anarchist forms of organization, and the anarchist visions some hold of a future society, they are likely to read Marxist-oriented accounts of global political economy. The decentralized form of the movement and its commitment to leaving room for a range of perspectives allows for a certain flexibility of perspective. Activists may vacillate between various outlooks, remain ambivalent, or combine elements of anarchism, Marxism, and liberalism. This can lead to ideological creativity. It can also lead to a habit of holding various positions simultaneously which, if more rigorously examined, would prove incompatible.

The most heated debate within the movement is over the question of violence. The debate over violence within the anti-globalization movement in the United States concerns violence toward property, and the danger of inciting police violence. In Seattle, groups of black-clad young people, who later identified themselves as the Black Bloc, smashed windows and destroyed property of corporate targets within the downtown area over which protesters and police were vying for control. These attacks took the organizers of the protest by surprise, and, provoked more police violence against protesters generally. Some nonviolent protesters tried to restrain those smashing windows. In the wake of the demonstration some protesters condemned the violence, arguing that it discredited the movement as a whole and that tactics should be decided democratically, not by small groups acting autonomously. Others argued that window smashing, and the police violence that it provoked, had brought the attention of the media and given the demonstration a prominence that it would not have otherwise had. In subsequent demonstrations the Black Bloc and others with similar approaches have become more integrated into the movement and have modulated their actions, while some others have become more willing to accept some violence against property.

The fact that there is no section of the anti-globalization movement in the United States that defends or routinely engages in violence against people distinguishes the U.S. movement from the movement in Europe. Demonstrations in Prague and other European cities have included attacks on policemen, and such attacks have come to be expected as a part of any major mobilization of the movement.

In the context of the debate about violence in the United States, within which violence against people is excluded, the differences between the advocates of violence and those who are willing to countenance violence under certain circumstances are not clear-cut. In the early eighties activists, especially religious activists, did things like attempting to damage missiles as part of nonviolent direct action. Destruction of property can be part of a nonviolent politics. During the Vietnam War, pacifists and former Catholic priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan led raids on draft
centers, destroying draft files by pouring blood on them and, in one instance, by the use of homemade napalm. In the eighties the Berrigans and other Christian pacifists, in a series of Ploughshares Actions, invaded arms-producing plants and attacked missiles with hammers and bare hands. It seems to me that the importance of the current debate over violence, in the anti-globalization movement, lies less in whether or not the opponents of violence to property prevail, and more in what kind of ethical guidelines the movement sets for itself. What is important is whether the movement establishes an image of expressing rage for its own sake, or of acting according to an ethical vision.

5.

The traditional socialist left in the United States now mostly consists of several magazines and journals, a few annual conferences, a small number of intellectuals. Hope for the revival of the left appears to lie with the anti-globalization movement and the young radical activists at its core. There are reasons to fear that the anti-globalization movement may not be able to broaden in the way that this would require. A swarm of mosquitoes is good for harassment, for disrupting the smooth operation of power and thus making it visible. But there are probably limits to the numbers of people willing to take on the role of the mosquito. A movement capable of transforming structures of power will have to involve alliances, many of which will probably require more stable and lasting forms of organization than now exist within the anti-globalization movement. The absence of such structures is one of the reasons for the reluctance of many people of color to become involved in the anti-globalization movement. Though the anti-globalization movement has developed good relations with many trade union activists, it is hard to imagine a firm alliance between labor and the anti-globalization movement without firmer structures of decision-making and accountability than now exist. An alliance among the anti-globalization movement and organizations of color, and labor, would require major political shifts within the latter. But it would also probably require some relaxation of anti-bureaucratic and anti-hierarchical principles on the part of activists in the anti-globalization movement.

For several decades radicalism has been at low ebb in the United States, present in innumerable organizing projects but lacking focus and momentum. The anti-globalization movement provides focus and momentum, and holds out more hope for a revival of the left than any other movement has over the last two decades. The radical ideology that prevails among its core activists represents a soft and fluid form of anarchism. It is open to Marxist political economy, prefers small-scale communities but does not necessarily rule out the need for larger ones as well, is suspicious of structures of authority, especially the state, but does not necessarily deny the need for state power in some form. "Actually existing" anarchism has changed and so has "actually existing" Marxism. Marxists who participated in the movements of the sixties tend to have a sharper appreciation of the importance of social and cultural equality, and of living according to our values in the present, than did many members of previous generations of Marxist activists. If a new paradigm of the left emerges from the struggle against neoliberalism and the transnational corporate order, it is likely to include elements of anarchist sensibility as well as of Marxist analysis.

The consistent anarchist.. will be a socialist, but a socialist of a particular sort. He will not only oppose alienated and specialized labor and look forward to the appropriation of capital by the
whole body of workers, but he will also insist that this appropriation be direct, not exercised by some elite force acting in the name of the proletariat .... [I]n fact radical Marxism merges with anarchist currents.


Footnote

*I am indebted to John Sanbonmatsu in my discussion of the expressive politics of the sixties.

Author Affiliation


She would like to thank John J. Simon for his careful reading of several drafts of this article, and for editing suggestions which clarified and strengthened it.

Copyright Monthly Review Press Sep 2001

Word count: 5389

Indexing (details)