

Anarchism - The Very Short Introductions Podcast – Ep 56

Rebecca Parker 00:07

Welcome back to the Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matters to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

Alex Prichard 00:26

Hi, my name is Alex Prichard and I've taught at the University of Exeter for the past 10 years. And I'm here today to introduce my new addition to the Very Short Introduction series, which is on anarchism. So my area of research is anarchism, unsurprisingly, but specifically, I'm interested in what the anarchists thought about international affairs. So I want to understand these ideas in their own terms, but also to see if these ideas can inform our current theories of world politics. I've also edited three collections of essays on the historical, philosophical, and political intersections between anarchism and Marxism, mainly because I was tired of the sort of standard narratives of factionalism and division, and wanted to show that there was another story to tell, one of, sort of, mutual influence and hybridity. But my PhD was on anarchism, and it provided the first contextualized reading of Proudhon's *War and Peace*, published in 1861. *War and Peace* is one of five books that Proudhon wrote about international relations that few in the field have seemed to have read. The title of that book might ring bells for you, and so it should. Leo Tolstoy secured a written introduction from Alexander Herzen, and, in April 1861, went to see him for a couple of weeks in Brussels. And there they discussed politics and international relations. When Proudhon died in 1865, Tolstoy was in the middle of writing his own book, which was first serialized under the title *1815*, which was a nod to the treaties that ended the Napoleonic Wars, but when Tolstoy published it as a novel, he renamed it *War and Peace*, and there's good evidence to suggest he took more than just the title from Proudhon.

Alex Prichard 01:57

Anyway, this very short introduction to anarchism that I'm going to introduce you today tells more stories like this. What I try and do is bring anarchism out of the shadows, to show how central anarchist ideas are to our everyday lives and how anarchist ideas, how anarchists social and political movements, even anarchist pop culture, from punk to [...], *V for Vendetta* to Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex*, how these have shaped the world around us. The book tells an anarchistic story about how we got where we are today. It tells a story about where the world of capitalist nation states on the brink of climate collapse came from. It gives a counter history of 21st century through such stories as the anarchists' involvement in the struggle for the eight hour workday in the 1880s, or the debates around war and peace in the 20th century, and their visions for policing, health services, work and education. What first got me interested in the topic of anarchism was suspicion and disbelief. I was highly suspicious of so called realist theories of world politics that posited that man's aggressive or self interested and acquisitive nature was what shaped world history. States by this account were natural, inevitable, transhistorical; they've been with us forever and will be with us forever, and it is states that shape society, and it just didn't resonate with me.

Alex Prichard 03:15

I grew up in rural North Wales. I looked around me in all the sorts of things I saw were mutual aid, families, communities, even internationalism and, and culture, and I thought to myself, doesn't any of this matter? Look out my window, I couldn't see what, something else must have been holding societies together. We all knew that communities were often the object of rapacious activity like colonialism. But they persisted in spite of this, and it's that that made life tolerable. So where did those sorts of sentiments and feelings fit in this story? Anarchism provided part of an alternative explanation for how communities formed and persisted and how it's broken, too. And, but it wasn't until years later that I discovered that the anarchists had written volumes on international relations that no one in my discipline ever told me about. But making sense of Proudhon's writings on the subject of war and peace, and then making those books sensible to contemporary scholars, even the general public, was anything but easy. And this is what brings me to the very short introduction. So in writing that thesis, I joined a wider group of scholars to rethink the history of anarchism, where it come from, how it had spread, what the main ideas were and who it appealed to, and, of course, where Proudhon fit into that story. I came to see that anarchism simply wasn't very well understood in higher education or amongst the general public.

Alex Prichard 04:30

As my friend Jesse Cohn has said, by the turn of the 21st century, there was a stronger, more accurate memory of anarchism on the streets, so to speak, than in the academy, and bringing those two back into conversation with each other has been a central part of my academic work and amicus constitutional politics since. So this VSI draws on the revisionist history of anarchism that members of the amicus studies network and others have been developing for nearly 20 years. Now, there's one key misconception about anarchism that the book seeks to remedy and that's the idea that anarchism was the product of the merger of liberalism and Marxism in the late 19th century, that it was predominantly a European movement that flourished between the 1880s and the start of the Second World War, and that it's more a philosophical movement than a social movement, as such, is all fine in theory, but it never worked in practice, which explains why I suppose most people think that anarchism has had little lasting effect on our culture, and very little to offer for the future. But none of this is true. In fact, anarchism emerged out of the French Socialist and Republican movement of the 1840s. And it's more accurate to say that Marxism and liberalism also emerged out of that, too. Anarchism was a global movement by the end of the 1850s, and was central ideological tendency of the global socialist movement right up to the 1940s and 50s. Anarchism and its militant labor tendency and anarcho syndicalism was a mass labor movement across Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, Australia, the Middle East, North Africa, in particular Egypt, and of course, Europe, right up to the 1960s. Anarchists were central to countercultural politics in the interwar years and, subsequently, from the so-called Battle in Seattle in 1999 through to the anti globalization movement and onto Occupy Wall Street. Anarchists have been central to the contemporary radical left protest movements, including the climate justice movements.

Alex Prichard 06:13

So anarchist ideas have been central element of critique across the left that offer radical alternatives to life under capitalist nation states. Now the central focus for anarchists is freedom and what stands in its

way. Anarchists have a great sensitivity to unjustifiable power and domination. And wherever they spot it, they seek to criticize and dismantle it. The latter part is really important. But for anarchists and Marxists, bourgeois private property is a key instrument of modern domination. Private property, to be clear, is dominion over a thing, that is the right to use and abuse to exclude others from the enjoyment of a thing. And this right to use and abuse is protected by law, which in other words, means states will protect your legal claim to property by force. In other words, there's nothing natural about private property or states; they exist in symbiosis in order to maintain and sustain capitalism. But how is this domination, you might ask? Proudhon's most famous claim, and the argument that kickstarted radical socialism, indeed, anarchism, is that property is theft. So what does he mean by this? But a number of things. But first and foremost, the only way to make something private is to take it away from communal ownership, and to have possession, that private possession, defended by force. That is where the theft comes from. He argued that all things are naturally held in common.

Alex Prichard 07:33

Usufruct is the standard de facto mode of ownership. In other words, we're custodians of things, often in common, but in private, too. We hold all things in common because no object exists, or came into being, without the input or help of others. And we can't take it with us when we die. So all production is communal, too, whether that's me making this podcast or writing the book or making the computer I use for that; it'd be impossible for me to do it alone, I rely on the input of so many others and other things. So the additional value that accrues through this collective labor is more than simply the sum of the parts of that process. There's an emergent social property, or Proudhon called the surplus value. And that surplus value is generated by collectivizing labor. So the main way for capitalists to profit is to pay individual laborers less than the full value of the collective output of their labor. And to pocket the difference is profit that accrues to title, which was essentially rent. For example, today, huge and rising profits are fueling inflation despite declining wages and higher productivity. If we're more productive than ever before and being paid less, is it any wonder that profits are rising?

Alex Prichard 08:39

The reason those profits don't accrue to the laborer is because of the way private property relations are structured in this country. This process isn't natural, or the only way of doing things. It's a choice, and it's one that is enforced through the threat of state violence, including incarceration. Now, historically, private property emerged out of slavery, the epitome of unfreedom for anarchists and Republicans alike. And by the way, I'm not talking about the Republican Party in North America. Now anarchists noticed that slavery was central to the possibility of commercial society in the early modern period, because it was the ideological template for modern notions of private property, possession, and dominion. It is for this reason that anarchists are anti capitalists. Capitalism is a system of enslavement by this account, which is enslavement by means of property relations that are enforced by the state. So colonialism, both within the UK and overseas, was the enclosures of land, the expropriation of the land of others, and the exploitation of land and people for the profits of the metropolitan centers. For anarchists writing from the 1860s through to the Second World War, war and violence was the expression of an attempt to deal with this central contradiction created by capitalism, the need to profit to feed the rentier class, and not by the so called natural instincts of man. So in one way, this general labor theory of value helped explain the basic contradictions I understood or saw when I looked out the window when I came from Wales. Thank you very much for listening. My hope is that this book will help

reset public perceptions of anarchism, for better or worse, and I hope you read it, debate it, and, importantly, use it to inform your community building for a better future.

Rebecca Parker 10:22

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