A brief history of Anarchist Studies (so far)

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For the past fifteen years, AS has been many things: innovative, insightful, provocative, occasionally outrageous – but never boring! AK Press has called Anarchist Studies ‘the premier scholarly journal on anarchism … erudite, and informed.’ AS provokes strong feelings, pro and con – surely a sign of success for any anarchist publication. Reviewing the AS archive, one is struck by the remarkable consistency of what we may perhaps call the Anarchist Studies project. Since its inception, the journal has consistently attempted to broaden the scope of anarchist discourse by introducing themes, topics, perspectives and methodologies which have not traditionally been considered relevant to anarchism. This essay will examine that ambitious attempt, paying particular attention to the ways in which AS has tried to make anarchism more theoretically sophisticated, more green, more international, and more applicable to the political conditions which obtain in the era of fully globalised capital.

Anarchist Studies arrived with a bang in the spring of 1993. The first issue featured a lead article on anarcho-syndicalism by Murray Bookchin, who was by then one of the international anarchist community’s best known intellectuals. From the very beginning, however, it was apparent that AS would do much more than simply publish and discuss the pronouncements of anarchism’s ‘great men’ (though the journal would always continue to offer
intriguing interpretations and re-assessments of Godwin, Kropotkin, Bakunin, Stirner, Chomsky, Bookchin, etc.). Thus the first issue also featured a piece on Wilhelm Reich and sexuality in the Spanish Revolution by Richard Cleminson, and a look at the anarchist art of John Cage, by Richard Kostelanetz. In his editorial introduction to the second issue, Tom Cahill made the desire for innovation explicit: ‘We might be bold about it and claim to be part of an effort to re-define what is central and what is marginal.’ The underlying objective was perhaps a bit hazy at first, but it would gradually become clearer as the journal grew and matured: the idea was to build new forms of anarchist thinking, criticism and politics which would update the received traditions of ‘classical’ anarchism, in order to make anarchism more meaningful and relevant in the postmodern period.

When Tom was forced to step down as editor due to a kidney transplant in 1995, Sharif Gemie took the editor’s chair (‘an attractive piece of furniture’ with ‘a few distinctive bumps and scratches,’ he joked in AS 3:1). Sharif made it clear that he would continue to nurture the creative, experimental spirit which had already become such an important part of AS: ‘One of the most encouraging signs is that a distinct “AS style” seems to be emerging: one that is at once sympathetic to but also critical of the anarchist tradition,’ he wrote in his first editorial (AS 3:1).

Sharif set an ambitious agenda: more articles about sexual politics, more on anarchism and post-modernity, more ‘green’ articles, more on the Third World. The journal’s diverse collection of contributors would deliver. AS 4:1 brought an important account of ‘free love’ in Imperial Germany by Hubert van den Berg. AS 4:2 featured a groundbreaking piece on ‘Anarchy on the Internet’ by Chris Atton. When this article appeared in October 1996, the Internet had been around for about thirteen years (and had been well-known for much less time), and the World Wide Web was still a relatively recent invention. But as Atton made clear, anarchists already understood how this technology could dramatically expand the opportunities for alternative electronic publishing.

By 1996, the anarchist community had begun to view AS as a major site of intellectual discussion and (in the best sense of the word) argument. The Debate section was introduced in AS 4:2; it featured a lively, energetic encounter between L. Susan Brown and Janet Biehl, based upon Bookchin’s critique of Brown’s work in Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism. AS 5:1 included debate about van den Berg’s article. AS 6:1 offered a debate about Paul Nursey-Bray’s reading of Godwin (which had appeared in AS 4:2). AS 6:1 also contained my first contribution to the journal, an attempt to re-read early modern political philosopher John Locke as a proto-anarchist. I was a young graduate student when I wrote this piece; how delighted I was when I received AS 7:1 (March 1999) and saw Dave Morland and Terry Hopton’s sophisticated ‘Locke and Anarchism: A Reply to Call.’ I had never imagined that anyone might find my work important enough to challenge. Suddenly I
felt that I was part of something larger, a vibrant intellectual community that cherishes the tradition of civilized intellectual debate which stretches all the way back to the ancient Greek city-states.

AS has published papers on a remarkably diverse array of topics over the past fifteen years. Still, certain general trends have emerged. For example, AS has always recognized the vital role which postmodernism and post-structuralism play in contemporary debates about anarchist theory. By no means has AS provided an uncritical endorsement of the various ‘post-’ theories. Instead, the journal has consistently offered a stimulating conversation about the relevance (or irrelevance) of these theories to contemporary anarchism. In AS 5:2 (October 1997), Andrew M. Koch considered the possibility that Max Stirner may have been the first poststructuralist, while John Moore offered a review article on anarchism and poststructuralism. In October 1999, John (now Associate Editor) guest-edited a special issue of AS on Anarchism and Science Fiction. In his editorial introduction, John made explicit the intriguing connections between anarchism, postmodernism and science fiction, citing the work of political philosopher Todd May and that of American SF writer/critic Samuel Delany. I was happy to see my essay on postmodern anarchism in the novels of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling appear alongside excellent anarchist readings of Pat Murphy, Joan Slonczewski, Eric Frank Russell and Star Trek’s Borg. AS 8:1 featured a sophisticated review essay by Karen Goaman and Mo Dodson on Habermas and the postmodern turn. Saul Newman, who is now a leading figure in the growing field of ‘post-anarchism,’ has continued to develop the poststructuralist reading of anarchism, offering a very thought-provoking piece on Stirner and Deleuze in AS 9:2, as well as a stimulating paper on anarchism, Marxism and Bonapartism in AS 12:1.

The journal’s commitment to a theoretically sophisticated anarchist discourse is very deep, and that commitment is not limited to those theories whose names begin with ‘post-’. AS has also consistently insisted that anarchism must address the concerns of feminists and gender theorists. The connection between anarchism and feminism is not a new one; certainly anarchists have recognized this connection since the days of Emma Goldman. (Goldman herself has drawn the attention of several AS contributors: Cliff Hawkins looked at her views on political violence in AS 7:1, while Jim Jose assessed her contribution to anarchist theory in AS 13:1.) However, AS has done quite a bit to strengthen, expand and radicalize the anarcho-feminist connection. In AS 3:2, Val Plumwood examined issues of privacy from an anarcho-feminist perspective. Hélène Bowen Raddeler offered a fascinating look at Japanese anarcho-feminist Ito Noe in AS 9:2. The journal’s commitment to anarcho-feminism has been part of a broader attempt to ensure that anarchists will take seriously issues of gender and sexuality. Richard Cleminson, who has been a regular contributor to the journal since the beginning and an Associate Editor since 1998, has done a great deal to move this project forward. In AS
5:1, Richard continued to explore the theories of sexuality which developed among the Spanish anarchists, focusing this time on Félix Martí Ibañez. In October 2000, Richard guest-edited another special issue of AS, this one on Anarchism and Sexuality. As he observed in his editorial introduction, AS 8:2 demonstrated ‘the extremely diverse set of interventions that anarchists in one shape or another have made to tackling sexuality and gender in different countries over time.’ This issue featured essays on a breathtakingly broad array of topics, including sexuality in the Spanish Civil War, anarchist discourses on masturbation, the sexual revolution in 1960s Germany, and even a discussion of anarchism and the Marquis de Sade. More recently, the journal has begun to explore the intersection of anarchism and queer theory. Aaron Lakoff’s interview with Yossi represented an initial exploration of the vital connections between anarchism and radical queer culture (AS 13:2). The theoretical terrain surrounding ‘queer anarchism’ appears to be very rich indeed, and I hope that we will see more work on this important topic in the future.

Those of us who have been following AS for some time remember with fondness the journal’s old black and red covers – very traditional, very ‘old school’ and, until 1996, quite devoid of graphics! However, a journal as subversive as AS could hardly remain content to promote the colours of ‘classical’ anarchism alone. In retrospect, it is not surprising that the journal developed what Tom Cahill called a ‘green tinge’ (AS 2:2). In his Autumn 1994 editorial, Tom argued that ‘the environmental movement would benefit greatly from a bit more anarchist input.’ I would only add that the reverse is also true: anarchism has benefited greatly from its encounter with environmentalism. AS 2:2 featured an important piece on sustainable development by Glenn Albrecht, and an insightful look at Peter Marshall’s ‘libertarian ecology’ by John Clark. The review section in that issue focused heavily on green themes, and the journal’s book reviewers would continue to discuss green politics, ecology, urban planning, etc. In its green moments, the journal has managed to escape briefly from its ivory tower and focus on ‘real world’ social and political movements. Examples of this phenomenon include Ian Welsh and Phil McLeish’s piece on anarchist opposition to the UK Roads Programme (AS 4:1), Chris Atton’s study of the Green Anarchist newspaper (AS 7:1), and Ben Lawley’s look at ecological libertarianism in the UK Social Housing Development (AS 9:1). Although the journal has remained comfortable in its academic ‘niche,’ pieces such as these have ensured that AS would also remain relevant to practicing non-academic anarchists. AS 12:1 featured two papers on ecology: Viktor Postnikov’s study of ecological thinking in nineteenth-century Russia, and Robert Graham’s provocative critique of social ecology. (The latter piece proved so controversial that it was still provoking debate late in 2006; AS 14:2 featured a spirited exchange between Graham and John Clark.) I am confident that AS will continue to insist that the proper colours of twenty-first century anarchism must surely be black, red and green.
Anarchist Studies has always tried to move the anarchist discourse beyond its European origins. AS 6:2 featured a remarkable article by John A. Rapp on the connections between Daoism and anarchism. By this time (1998), AS had already run several articles on Asian anarchism, including Mihara Yoko’s ‘Anarchism in Japan’ (AS 1:2) and John Crump’s ‘Anarchism and Nationalism in East Asia’ (AS 4:1). In his editorial for AS 8:1 (March 2000), Sharif Gemie spoke admiringly of Rapp’s paper on Daoism, and invited readers to submit ‘essays on the Islamic contribution to anarchism.’ He thus identified what was, at the time, a major lacuna in AS: although the journal had done groundbreaking work on Asian anarchism, there had not yet been anything on anarchism in the Islamic or Arab worlds. The fascination with Asia continued with Rapp’s work on Maoism and anarchism (AS 9:1), and Raddeker’s piece on Ito Noe (AS 9:2), but it was not until 2002 that AS explicitly took up the question of anarchism in the Islamic world. No doubt this move was partly inspired by the events of 11 September 2001. In Spring 2002, AS published a timely, relevant ‘round table’ discussion on ‘Anarchism after 11 September.’ Contributors included AS regulars Sharif Gemie, Ronald Creagh and Karen Goaman, German commentator Johannes von Hösel, anarchist groups from Fraga and Istanbul, and world famous ‘libertarian socialist’ Noam Chomsky. This discussion provided badly needed historical and political context which helped to demystify the terrorist attacks; it thus represented a valuable antidote to the reductionist ‘with us or against us’ rhetoric of Bush and his cheerleaders in the mainstream media. In an important contribution to AS 10:2, Harold B. Barclay explored a ‘possible relationship between the idea of anarchy and Muslim society.’ Georges Rivière studied anarchist movements in Algeria in AS 11:2. AS 13:1 featured an indispensable discussion of ‘The Torture Show – Reflections on Iraq and the West,’ with contributions from Sharif Gemie, Allan Antliff and Marcus Milwright, and the prominent Turkish anarchist Sureyya Evran. AS 14:1 consisted mainly of an extended debate surrounding the French government’s controversial decision to ban ‘ostentatious’ religious symbols – specifically, the Muslim veil – in French state schools. Sharif Gemie’s insightful paper criticized the positive response of the French anarchist journal Monde Libertaire to this provocative ban, and numerous contributors commented and expanded upon Sharif’s work.

For the past five years or so, AS has been focused – quite rightly, in my view – on the problems and perils of what we now call ‘globalisation.’ In their 2003 guest editorial, Ian Welsh and Jon Purkis argued compellingly that in the present situation, unfettered global capital is a far more dangerous force than the nation state, which does occasionally provide ‘critical bulwarks against the worst excesses of global corporations operating within a deregulated market system’ (AS 11:1).2 (The fascination with post-structuralism also remained in evidence; Ian and Jon proved conclusively that no guest editorial is complete without a reference to the work of Todd May.) Continuing the theme that has guided AS since its creation, Ian and Jon called for a ‘diversity of engagement’
which would not be embodied in any one particular form. This emphasis on the diversity of tactics and forms was exemplified by Allan Antliff’s remarkable analysis of anarchist art, which built upon the work of the late John Moore, whose obituary appeared in the same issue (AS 11:1). Alan O’Connor’s sophisticated piece on Mexican anarcho-punk continued this trend in the following issue, which also featured Karen Goaman’s thoughtful paper on carnivalesque symbolic action in the anti-globalisation movement, held over from the overflowing AS 11:1. Interest in the issues of the global economy was so extensive that AS 12:1 featured a debate section on ‘Anarchism and Globalisation.’ Gavin Grindon continued the exploration of carnival’s radical potential in AS 12:2, which also featured a look at anarchist modernism in Argentinian literature by Glen S. Close. In an ambitious paper in AS 14:2, Linden Farrer explicitly tied resistance to the G8 to post-structuralist anarchism, thus bringing together two major concerns of AS.

I would be remiss if I did not emphasize the importance of AS’s remarkable book review section. Under the stalwart leadership of Carl Levy (from 1993 through 2001) and Jon Purkis (from 2002 until quite recently), Anarchist Studies has published thought-provoking reviews on a broad range of anarchist literature. The book review forum has always been a feisty, energetic section of AS. Not content to accept its given place in the back pages of the journal, the book review section has, from time to time, challenged and subverted the privileged position of the ‘feature articles’ – in the finest anarchist tradition! My understanding of the literature by, about, and of interest to anarchists has been greatly enhanced by these reviews and review essays. I am especially grateful for the frequent contributions of Brian Morris, Colin Ward, David Goodway, John Crump, Ruth Kinna, Karen Goaman and John Moore.

Where do we go from here? I hope that we will continue the project which began fifteen years ago, for that project is by no means complete. There are still anarchist stories which remain untold. For example, anarchists have not yet really dealt with the full implications of the insurgency which anarchism is currently conducting inside popular culture. Anarchism has become remarkably fashionable of late, and is depicted in mainstream culture in ways that are surprisingly positive. What are we to make of the amazing popularity of V for Vendetta, Alan Moore’s grim vision of a near-future totalitarian England, in which would-be 17th century ‘terrorist’ Guy Fawkes is not burned in annual effigy, but celebrated as a freedom fighter? In the hands of Hollywood’s sometimes brilliant Wachowski brothers, V for Vendetta has been ably translated into a striking critique of Anglo-American politics in the post-9/11 world. What does it mean that, at a time when the forces of capitalism and imperialism seem more oppressively powerful than ever, popular culture can provide such positive anarchist narratives?

Anarchist Studies has come a long way over the past decade and a half. The journal has had two publishers. The move from Cambridge’s White Horse
Press to London's Lawrence and Wishart in 2002 brought a smaller trim size, full colour covers (purists remain sceptical about the higher production values!) and modest opportunities for increased circulation. The journal has had two editors so far. I am grateful to Tom Cahill for getting the journal started in the first place, and to Sharif Gemie for a decade of hard work which has helped make AS into what it is today: one of the foremost fora for the serious discussion of anarchist theory and practice. I would also like to ask all AS readers to join me in welcoming our new editor, longtime AS contributor and Associate Editor Ruth Kinna.

And what about this 'brief history?' Has it been too celebratory? Probably. A journal which features the word 'anarchist' in its name has been in continuous publication for the past fifteen years, and shows no signs of stopping. In my book, that is cause for celebration. Are there aspects of the journal's history which should be approached with a more critical eye? Perhaps, but I leave that for the next history, and the next historian. Diversity of engagement means, among other things, that there are as many versions of Anarchist Studies as there are readers of Anarchist Studies. So come on, all you cyborgs and Situationists, you ecologists and egoists, you punks and perverts. Who will narrate the next version?

NOTES


2. Noam Chomsky has made a similar argument: ‘My short-term goals are to defend and even strengthen elements of state authority which, though illegitimate in fundamental ways, are critically necessary right now to impede the dedicated efforts to ‘roll back’ the progress that has been achieved in extending democracy and human rights. State authority is now under severe attack in the more democratic societies, but not because it conflicts with the libertarian vision. Rather the opposite: because it offers (weak) protection to some aspects of that vision.’ Powers and Prospects, Boston: South End Press, 1996, p. 73-74.