Review of Anarchy as Order: The History and Future of Civic Humanity by Mohammed Bamyeh

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Book Review
Anarchy as Order: The History and Future of Civic Humanity
By
Mohammed Bamyeh

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Rowman & Littlefield, 250 pp, $69.00

Unlike the many activist and activist-scholar written books about anarchism in recent years, Anarchy as Order is written by a solidly professorial author. Consequently, the book under review originates from a different source than works like Anarchy Alive! by Uri Gordon or Gramsci is Dead by Richard Day. These latter books are informed by the immediate, highly potent anarchist movements that have proliferated around the world in recent decades, and that have spread multi-faceted views and critiques of the societies in which they are embedded, as well as in the globalizing spaces in-between cultural groupings. Still, Anarchy as Order is likely the best and most serious of the non-activist written books written on anarchism, perhaps since established works by folks like James Joll or Peter Marshall. Even this sort of praise does not do justice to the fascinating and highly-sociological interpretation Bamyeh gives of anarchism or, more appropriately described, anarchy. This is unlike many bookish academics who have a perverse view of anarchism, which is more informed by the paranoid lies and misconceptions of mass media spokespersons, delusional free-marketeers, and government spies than by anarchists themselves. Bamyeh's account is sympathetic, learned, and true to the intent of classic anarchists like Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin and even, later in the book, with acknowledgement to Stirner.

Reading Anarchy as Order is like digesting a more philosophical and academic version of Colin Ward's modern classic Anarchy in Action, the English-speaking world's best work of

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anarchist-sociology. The major distinction between Bamyeh and Ward is the latter's emphasis on anarchy as an already-existing tendency in present society: sometimes obscured, but still present. As such, Bamyeh's work is a thoughtful indictment of modern societies; in particular the state, of which he provides a unique, digested analysis of the anarchist critique. His work thus has much in common with an assorted collection of other critical and Marxist sociologists. However, like all anarchist writing, there is a clear, practical Utopian strand that prefigures the future. As with Ward and most comparable anarchist thinkers, especially Kropotkin, Bamyeh's view of anarchical society is not one devoid of order. Rather his view depicts a highly just, civil, and organic order. Due to this focus, Bamyeh inadvertently yet instantly draws a comparison between his argument of a civil society consumed by the state, and the Habermasian claim of “the system” colonizing the life-world.

Bamyeh argues, correctly and creatively, that anarchism emphasizes freedom, indeterminate outcomes and a fluid solidarity, and that an anarchical society would contain these elements. This is in contrast to other social qualities that many societies are now tainted with such as hero-worship, obedience, war-making, control, and inequality. Thus, one of *Anarchy as Order's* clearest successes is its ability to frame anarchist ideas as potential and maybe even latent conditions in a future society, thus described as “anarchy”. To rescue the word “anarchy” from the semantic slaughterhouse it has historically been subjected to, Bamyeh instinctively adopts Proudhon’s claim that “anarchy is order”, while contemporary society as dominated by the nation-state, capitalist ravish, and religious oppression is a society wracked by disorder, and chaos. Bamyeh also smartly makes a distinction comparable to that of Alexander Berkman who once wrote that although some people were ready and willing to adopt the philosophy and tenets advocated by anarchism the ideology, few were able to successful practice and live in a world of unimposed and non-hierarchical anarchy. This has been the case thus far, at least.

Anarchist Studies scholars may be surprised by the credit extended to the “individualist” American faction in the United States. This attribution seems to include modern Libertarianism, which is highly allergic to anti-capitalist anarchist movements. However, given the sympathies that “individualists” like Benjamin Tucker had for
collectivists like Bakunin, it is unclear if such simple distinctions can be drawn accurately. *Anarchy as Order*’s otherwise appropriately culled reading of anarchist philosophy and movement history excels beyond most scholarly works on anarchism, and can be seen to occupy a middle-ground between purely philosophical scholarly works and the descriptive anarchist movement histories usually authored by activists for use by their own movements. The purely philosophical scholarly works are so abstract in character that they do not even acknowledge the existence of a movement. One weakness of this compromise is that little attention is paid to modern anarchist theory and movements, except in abstract terms. The explosion in new anarchist strains or ideological subvariants in recent decades; such as anarcha-feminism, Black anarchism, queer anarchism, post-leftism, especifismo, primitivism, and so on, have sometimes controversially changed anarchism’s focus to a systematic critique of domination. Whereas Bamyeh’s work is sympathetic to this contemporary consensus, most of his analysis focuses on the state, and far less so on patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism, Western civilization, and so on. In doing so, *Anarchy as Order* is a solid work on the dichotomy between the state and civil society, but is less mature in its analysis of other institutions of domination. This is not, I believe, a fatal deficit, since Bamyeh’s highly nuanced and provocative analysis of the state furthers anarchist-sociology more than anything else in the academic discipline up to the present moment. Hopefully, future anarchist-sociology works will take up Bamyeh’s agenda and extend it with the same seriousness, compassion, and commitment shown in *Anarchy as Order*.

Readers looking for an empirical analysis from an anarchist perspective may feel slightly let down by this very abstract and philosophical work. There is no “research design” to follow, as far as I can tell, and no dialogue with existing anarchist movements whose actions and ideas could inform Bamyeh’s independent analysis. Thus, in contrast to some of the best recent case studies of modern anarchism, such as Jeff Shantz’s *Constructive Anarchy* follows labor struggles, anarchist tech geeks, anti-poverty and anti-border organizing, political squatters, and alternative educators based on participant observation, Bamyeh seeks to construct a theoretical argument built by his own substantial intellectual force.
Post-colonialist readers and Sociologists who lack the desire to respect the confines of nation-states, such as Sociologists Without Borders will enjoy *Anarchy as Order*. The book will be of interest not merely because such an orientation is crucial to modern anarchism, but also due to Bamyeh’s vast knowledge of non-Western and particularly Islamic thought and history, world-systems theory, and radical civil society claims. Still, as alluded to above, these elements of the book tend to avoid both classic anarchism’s advocacy for internationalism and “one big union”, cross-national worker solidarity and also modern global justice and anti-border activism.

Ultimately, the principal audiences for *Anarchy as Order* are Sociologists who want to know more about anarchism and anarchists who seek a sociological interpretation of their philosophy. A good example of this is the intriguing discussions of subjects of interest to both sociologists and anarchists, including: trust, alliance, personality, alienation, and the common good. Bamyeh has the ability to make the superficially-mundane detail both fascinating and unpredictable. One of the best examples of this talent is Table 6.1, where he contrasts democracy, types of society, and the state, thereby illustrating an anarchist view of potential social forms. The emerging typology here is provocative and intellectually stimulating.  

Personally, my own preference for “anarchist-sociology,” at least as an academic project, would be conceived of as a “big tent” under which sympathetic authors can bring together their varied collection of works based on many theoretical perspectives, strategies, empirical data, methodological approaches, and the like. These works could all inform each other, with a cacophony of different voices engaged in a diverse conversation of understanding. If this is a sensible strategy to an incipient anarchist-sociology, then *Anarchy as Order* is an amazing contribution to that project.