The American as Anarchist
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American radicalism can be divided into two general camps: indigenous and imitative. The imitators of foreign radicalism, and those who interpret American movements by foreign terms, are the most widely recognized in this culture, but they are in fact the least culturally significant. In terms of the usual categories of mass parties, class consciousness, and popular use of the stereotyped vocabulary of the Left, American dissidents have been a resounding failure; but such concepts are usually irrelevant to American conditions. This study could be entitled "The American Radical" in the same sense that Emerson wrote "The American Scholar" in 1837, calling for the decolonization of our literature and the construction of an authentically American culture built from national experience. My work has the similar purpose of identifying some varieties of radicalism as intellectual imports while showing that others represent enduring traditions. Borrowed, imitative art still has its equivalent in borrowed, imitative radicalism.

Perhaps it is time to recognize, after two hundred years of political independence, that our native radicalism is fundamentally different from that of Europe, Russia, China, or the Third World. By native, I do not mean baptized by the Indians. I imply that it draws upon basic beliefs of the general culture for its meaning. This indigenous radicalism is rooted in centuries of our history and assumes that however much this society may be
changed or transformed, it is unlikely to become something wholly dissimilar to what it has been. It is radical, then, in the sense that it is a complete realization of the democratic potential it perceives within our past. My book, following Emerson’s advice, is an intellectual declaration of independence from alien modes of interpretation, finding the spirit of our radicalism not in Lenin but in Debs, not in the USSR, but in the IWW, not in Chinese peasants, but in the Populists. It assumes, as Emerson did, the existence of “new lands, new men, new thoughts.” De Crèvecoeur realized earlier that the American is new, a difference in kind, not simply in variety.

What, then, is American about this American radicalism? Unlike Scandinavian social democracy, Fabian bureaucracy, and Soviet communism, our traditional critiques of the existing order have been pervaded by suspicion, if not hostility, toward any centralized discipline. The essence of this heritage—which has been expressed in both individualist and communal forms—could be named “antistatism,” “libertarianism,” or more provocatively, “anarchism.” Like Proudhon, who defined this last term positively in 1840, we have frequently assumed that there is an order inherent in nature, that society is self-sufficient, and that government is likely to interrupt the vital functions of individuals and voluntary associations. Homegrown critics from both the individualist right and the communal left have often counterposed society against the state, or even the individual against the structures of society. Some rebels have always gone beyond implicit resistance to institutional authority to explicit rejections of such authority. Our radicals have concentrated on emancipation, on breaking the prisons of authority, rather than on planning any reconstruction. They are abolitionists, not institution-builders; advocates of women’s liberation, gay liberation, liberation theology, black liberation; prophets, not priests; anarchists, not administrators. They generally presume that the freed spirit will require little or no guidance.

This implicit ideology of American radicalism has been expressed in several varieties of criticism: liberalism, right libertarianism, and left libertarianism. Each contains an element of anarchism that distinguishes it from statist (and often foreign) radicalisms. None of these libertarian currents, however, would necessarily eliminate all authority. We must erase the cartoon image of the anarchist as a shaggy-headed Frankenstein’s monster, with a crazed glint in its eyes, loaded down with an armful of bombs. Anarchists have usually advocated new forms of order, not chaos. While the statist would rely primarily upon institutions, libertarians prefer other means of social control. Mores can regulate far more powerfully than administrators (Emerson’s “government without governors”). Tocqueville noted in the 1830’s that a seemingly atomized population, by expecting allegiance to its basic values, could be extremely cohesive and authoritarian.
Similarly, it is quite possible to envision a highly authoritarian culture that is also stateless. *Anarchos* (being leaderless) is not incompatible with *nomos* (law, custom, usage). A society without a state could be repressive in other ways, as even "primitive" societies might instruct us. This realistic possibility will become clearer when the types of anarchist organizations are outlined.²

Each form of libertarian radicalism covers a spectrum that evolves toward the most explicit, from laissez-faire liberalism to Anarcho-Capitalism (organizing society entirely on the basis of the market), or from community control advocates to Anarcho-Communists and syndicalists. Such tendencies have been historically repeated, but often without an understanding of their precedents. As one labor historian has remarked: "The only bona fide American radical tradition is anarchy, and that, in spite of Thoreau, has been much less a doctrine than a fact."³

This study will attempt, for the first time, to discuss this "fact," classifying different libertarian perspectives within a general theory of American radicalism, as others have done for American liberalism or conservatism. It will bring to consciousness, or focus, the historical repetition of certain themes. Such continuities or recurrences will be presented as "pure types," used to capture the characteristic features of forms of criticism—as useful typifications or sketches of generalities, rather than as actual beings. Thoreau gave voice to the actual complexity of our pragmatic anarchism: "I quietly declare war with the State, after my own fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her as I can, as is usual in such cases."⁴ Consistency is not an anarchist virtue.

The first section of my book will survey the social and cultural environment that generated this anarcholibertarian sensibility. The interaction of three factors will be stressed: the Protestantism of most of the colonial founders, the expansive opportunities they encountered, and their business relations. These cultural, geographic, and economic influences were crucially different from other areas of even the New World, such as the Latin, Catholic, and Mediterranean elements that struggled with large-scale Indian civilizations in much of South America. Here, each factor tended to disintegrate traditional definitions of community that favored ideals of organic solidarity, hierarchy, status by birth, and deference to precedent, often rooted in a fundamentally agrarian society following the slow natural rhythms of the seasons. Instead, these influences have promoted relationships based upon changing associations to satisfy particular functions; egalitarianism; status by activity; and constant innovations for the technological control and utilization of nature. Although we live in a community with a common language and unifying symbols, traditional society, as an ideal type, is a "lost world." One of our most stable beliefs is the inevitability of change. Our relation-
ships are generally formed by the shifting needs of the marketplace in an atomistic society where people are often treated like interchangeable parts.  

Religion commands the premier rank in this transition because of the universal truth expressed by Mircea Eliade: "the beginnings of culture are rooted in religious experience and beliefs." Radical values, like others in our culture, "cannot be correctly understood if one does not know their original religious matrix, which they tacitly criticized, modified, or rejected in becoming what they are now: secular cultural values." If this had been a Buddhist culture, obviously our common perceptions of linear progress, active humanity, and personal responsibility might have been dramatically altered.

It was not only Christianity, but one specific tendency of it that was crucial in our history. By the 1770s, one historian has claimed that approximately 85 to 90 percent of the population bore "the stamp of Geneva," of the radical Reformation that had weakened or destroyed Catholic definitions of community. Although such groups labored to build their own purified institutions, ultra-Protestant ego has sometimes justified the conservative's fear of it as "the dissidence of dissent."

At the very least, this has promoted a sense of self-reliance. In 1820, when de Maistre first used the term "individualism," he christened it political Protestantism. The traditional role of religion in providing holistic or transcendent values became a rationale for every pilgrim's separate progress. In the 1970s, more than 80 percent in one poll agreed that "willpower" was the key determinant in success, and that "whenever I fail, I have no one to blame but myself." Self-sufficiency was admired. In another study, up to 90 percent of blue-collar workers refused to attribute their failures to outside conditions. Despite the power of modern institutions, individual effort and individual solutions have been emphasized. Protestantism has helped to replace community with privacy—an English concept, absent from other languages, which have terms only for separation or isolation, not for privacy. For radicalism, this has sometimes raised a counterforce to the state's claim to ultimate power by emphasizing a law higher than that of institutions, the law of personal conscience.

Second, American capitalism has also tended to replace community with individualist anarchism, the "I" spirit instead of the "we." Whereas capitalism in other societies has been modified by precapitalist or anticapitalist institutions and mores (resulting, for example, in the paternalism of Japanese corporations), in the United States capitalism exists in perhaps the purest form in the world. It is one of the assumptions most Americans take for granted in a society that has 5 to 6 percent of the world's population but uses more than half its resources, has a gross national product surpassing a trillion dollars, and has a higher standard of individual consumption than any of the communist countries.
In our culture, community is often identified with the market—a bargaining society, a society of contract. Earlier moral injunctions against the love of mammon have generally been replaced with a narrow self-seeking. Tocqueville, in the 1830s, perceived an almost antisocial society where individuals were concerned with "the petty pleasures of private life," although he also warned that when personal comfort was threatened, people might repudiate social liberty to defend their personal security. History, of course, has confirmed both of Tocqueville's themes—anarchy and authority. The common vision of freedom and the general experience of conformity have been a dialectic throughout our culture, although most commentators have understood only one or the other. But the dialectic continues, since our libertarian ideals are neither fully achieved nor annihilated. The hardy persistence of this heritage is the core of my book.

Third, atomism has been encouraged by an environment of great physical space and social opportunity, where optimistic Americans have been unlikely to maintain the sense of sin and limitation that might be so useful to conservatism. Rather, sunny views of human nature and civil or natural society have prevailed. Government, in this pleasant world, may be regarded as useful, but not as a vital barrier to human cruelty or a major umpire that can ration scarcity.¹⁰

Many of the core values nurtured by this history—which forms the basis of much of our past—are radical, liberatory, utopian. The United States has, comparatively, one of the most egalitarian societies in the world, in which there are few philosophical conservatives who praise class orders, suspicion of the common people, veneration of the old, organicism, or the necessity for a strong leader. In Emerson's terms, Americans usually identify with the party of the future, not of the past; of the movement, not the establishment. The mental landscape of Americans is filled not so much with solid institutions of the past and present as with visions of human will, progress, and change. Our literature is "more relentlessly self-critical than any other,"¹¹ the intelligentsia frequently serve as an idealistic conscience against imperfection; our ideas are particularistic and pragmatic (or, as one person labeled the thought of William James: "philosophic Protestantism"); our language is simple and direct; and our social manners are relatively democratic, free of formal titles and officiousness.¹² Of course, this antiorthodoxy and antielitism has its own assumptions, often held with dogmatic certainty. In the candid words of Paul Goodman: "I have a democratic faith—it's a religion with me—that everyone is really able to take care of himself, to get on with people, and to make a good society. If it's not so, I don't want to hear about it."¹³ This is a common faith among Americans.

The most moderate expression of this radical belief in democracy is liberalism. Perhaps because this is the oldest liberal democracy in the world we forget how utopian are the commonplaces lauded even in McGuffey's
readers, honoring a "free community" in which there are no "privileged orders" and opportunity is open to ability alone. Although Tocqueville argued that America had been "born free," it would be more accurate to portray a slow and often painful revolution, over several centuries, to liberate blacks, women, and many others to be equal competitors in the capitalist marketplace. This dream, and the constant tension between the ideal and the actual, has been a vital source of radical thought and action in our society.

Throughout our history, it has encouraged the kind of spontaneous antimonopolism often found in the Anti-Federalists, the Jacksonians, the Knights of Labor, and the Populists, with fears that "the people" were losing their liberties and economic chances. The alternative to concentrations of wealth and power have been sometimes individualist, sometimes cooperative, but they have almost invariably been critical of undemocratic power.

Themes of liberation have also been applied to groups of people. For blacks, it has been reflected in Garrison's newspaper the Liberator; in Frederick Douglass's broad definition of slavery as the lack of control over one's own life (by which he often included women and wage laborers); in John Brown's scorn of "talk—what is needed is action—ACTION" (what the anarchists would call propaganda of the deed); in the phrase from the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "as He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free"; and in modern criticisms that "we have made a mockery of being our brother's keeper by being his jail keeper." 16

Liberation from confining sexual roles was expressed by the first women's rights convention in the world, held at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. These daring Americans called for equal rights in the professions, schools, politics, and religion, equal status in marriage, equal wages and equal property rights. "Know your place" has been changed, slowly but steadily, to "woman's place is everywhere." Increasingly, there have been real personal choices in sexual freedom, careers, marriage as a relation of equals ("democracy begins at home"), communal living ("explode the nuclear family"), and abortion ("our right to choose"), as aspects of a critique of social/sexual definitions that limited both men and women, straight and gay (e.g., James Baldwin's reference to "the male prison"). 17 By the 1970s, the American women's movement was the largest independent feminist force in the world, far more systematically radical than perhaps any other (the Communists, for example, casually scorn sexual pleasure as "petty bourgeois indulgence" and consider nonconformists "deviants" to be "rehabilitated," or worse).

The ideal of liberation has also been applied to "ageism" (treating children and the elderly as representatives of a category, rather than as individuals); to schools (John Holt has called them "children's prisons"); to
civil rights in the military, including free speech, press, and assembly; to abolishing laws against "crimes without victims" (as in drug use, sexual behavior, pornography, and gambling); or to prison criticism (most radically enunciated by Eugene Debs: "while there is a soul in prison I am not free").

While liberalism has generally sought to achieve such radical freedom by moderate means, it also includes a history of direct action, like the sit-downs of the 1930s, pray-ins at segregated churches, sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, wade-ins at segregated beaches, boycotts, and demonstrations. But the impossibility of realizing such utopian ideals by limited means—the unfulfilled promises of liberalism to achieve liberation—has fostered more explicit forms of radicalism. A moderate liberal might fantasize that problems had been solved—like a complacent individual of the 1920s or the 1950s—only to be shocked to reality by the Great Depression or the social upheavals of the 1960s. In the late 1970s, the basis for another period of struggle may be evident in such statistics as the Urban League's claim of 25 percent unemployment for blacks (and up to 50 percent for black youth), one-third of blacks below poverty level and a growing gap between the average white income and average black income, or in the disproportionately large number of women in jobs with the lowest status and pay. Clearly, we continue to live with the legacy of centuries of racism and sexual discrimination, whatever our progress.

Liberalism, beyond these charges of inadequacy, has been burdened with the contradiction that it has often used institutional means to guarantee equality while popular sentiment has been deeply skeptical about "bureaucracy" (even when it has called it into existence to achieve its hopes). Notice Whitman's hatred of "the swarms of cringers, suckers, doughfaces, lice of politics, planners of sly involutions for their own preferment to city officers or state legislators or the judiciary or congress or the presidency."

Though all forms of indigenous radicalism have deep roots in the liberal center and its idealism, they are more dramatically libertarian. The first, which I will define as right libertarianism, trusts in a society organized on the basis of voluntary agencies. Its most moderate expression can be found in various laissez-faire liberals, and its most extreme, in Anarcho-Capitalists who repudiate the state. Since modern intellectuals easily equate radicalism with communitarianism (and hierarchical authority), this tradition is frequently overlooked. Nonetheless, it is a genuine expression of utopian individualism, as represented by Emerson, in "The American Scholar," yearning for an individual "like a sovereign state."

While anarchism, in the form of movements, has been most pronounced in Europe, expressed as Anarcho-Communism, syndicalism, and other types of communitarianism, American anarchism—even when explicit—has been distinctively separate. A 1907 comparison between European and American
anarchism remains valid: "European anarchists are less introspective than us. They concern themselves more with the mass movement than we do; they fight the capitalist; we fight Comstock. Instead of participating in the trade unions, organizing the unemployed, or indulging in soap-box oratory, we rent comfortable halls and charge ten cents admission. Added to that are, in many cases, ten cents carfare, and Anarchism has become a luxury. Instead of inspiring the workers with revolutionary ideas we teach them speculative theories of liberty."  

Especially in America, anarchist theories have had many ties to middle-class egoism. 

However, another variety of antibureaucratic radicalism will also be identified—left libertarianism, which ranges from decentralists who seek to limit state power to syndicalists who want to abolish it. While individualist anarchism is one possible form of capitalism taken to an extreme, left libertarianism represents an alternative tradition. While resistance to institutional authority, praise for local decision-making, and mass participation (if not consensus) are also hallmarks of this criticism, it is directed toward creating a society of communal sharing rather than individual assertion. 

The conclusion of part 2 will contrast these forms of indigenous radicalism with the strange gods of what I have termed "statist radicalism." All expressions of this tendency have usually cast off our libertarian history for the neatly ordered usable past of some other society’s legends, symbols, shrines, "holy days," patriotic songs, and heroes. As one Communist asserted in the 1930s, the main task of the CPUSA was to "bolshevize" the party rather than to Americanize it.  

More recently, a Marxist historian belittled any plea for a "red, white, and blue left" with the condescending claim that "our revolutionary 'heroes' must be understood to be expansionists and the oppressors of workers, slaves, women, and national minorities.... We must avoid identification with the bourgeois revolutionary tradition of imperial expansion built into the U.S. from its inception." 

Radicals in other countries have sometimes noticed this remarkable abandonment of all national symbols, so unlike the USSR looking back to popular champions from its pre-1917 history, the People’s Republic of China preserving the memory of peasant insurrections, Cuba speaking of its present revolution as continuing the long struggle for independence, Vietnam invoking a thousand years of conflict to become a separate entity, or other states calling themselves defenders of radical nationalism (Peru, Syria, Egypt). Radicals in most other societies have been passionately engaged in building their programs upon local traditions, demonstrating how they continue or fulfill many of the central aspirations of their cultures. 

Americans meeting with representatives of the National Liberation Front were once chastized, however, because "you American friends have not yet found your own identity: you do not identify with your own people or your country and its traditions." On another occasion, a United States delegation
was greeted by the Vietnamese revolutionaries as "the finest sons and daughters of Washington and Jefferson." American radicals are likely to be startled and appalled by such comments. Such reactions are shared by both libertarians and statists, who may be reflecting the moralistic, ahistorical, atheoretical, and eclectic character of this society in their confusion about their own history, rejection of whatever does not immediately "work," contempt for their imperfect predecessors, and affirmations of universal ideals; but the statist radicals have suffered most because their solution to these quandaries has been to retreat to alien models.

Each foreign system has its outpost in America, loyally staffed: Soviet Marxism (the Communist Party, USA), Maoism (the U.S. Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist), and "true" Trotskyism (the Workers’ League, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Spartacist League). In 1977, for example, the U.S. Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist, was given the sole American franchise to distribute Maoism. A member of the Chinese politburo, at a Peking banquet honoring the obscure leader ("Chairman Khlonsky") of the USCP (M-L), grandiloquently announced that "the founding of the Communist Party (M-L) of the United States has reflected the aspirations of the proletariat and other working people of the United States and is a new victory for the Marxist-Leninist movement in the United States." Such delusions should require little comment.

To emulate theories developed in preindustrial societies, often struggling for national independence, is to obscure the American present (where any revolution would not be against a czar, a Chiang Kai-shek, or a Batista) and the potentialities of a fully libertarian industrial America. The Old Left has been culturally arid and politically withered because, in an innovative, libertarian culture, it has been seeking to turn back the historical clock. As some left libertarians rebuked the statists: "We fight on the most advanced terrain in history—a terrain that opens the prospect for a post-scarcity society, a libertarian society, not a substitution of one system of hierarchy by another." By dismissing several hundred years of American libertarian radicalism as petty bourgeois and ideologically obsolete (when it may be avant-garde), statist radicalism has been reduced to esoteric cults, like American Buddhism (or, in this case, Maoism), that appeal essentially to radical snobs and alienated intellectuals. A major movement capable of having a deep and lasting impression on this society is unlikely to develop without building upon some existing foundations. The conclusion of part 2, then, is a call for a self-conscious, postcolonial radicalism that is authentically American.

Part 3 centers on the contemporary revival of these native traditions and speculates on their prospects. Certainly the failures of conventional socialism reinforce my thesis. The austerity measures often adopted by labor governments, the absence of popular control in nationalized industries, and the
obvious hypocrisies of revolutionary states have done much to validate Proudhon's fear of "the socialism of the barracks" and Bakunin's warning of "workhouse socialism" where the new elite would merely constitute a red bourgeoisie.

Nationalization, for example, has not been synonymous with democratization. Rather, power is often more remote. Workers still have little voice in what happens at their workplace. They are still subject to appointed managers, their unions are usually powerless, and they often cannot strike against "their" state. One British coal miner complained that it was "like working for a ghost" instead of a definite group of capitalists. Michael Polanyi was probably correct when he observed that a worker in a nationalized mine no more felt that he "owned" the mine than he felt that he owned the royal navy.

Nationalization, then, has not solved inequalities of power; it has only substituted officials for owners. Under the direction of this new elite, an enormous and highly centralized bureaucracy reduces the local unit to insignificance. Top-down management, a cretinizing division of labor, production quotas that resemble speedups, praise of stoical efficiency above personal happiness, and limits on popular control are at least as stringent as those in capitalist society. This has been bureaucracy, not democracy, and Fabians have been as guilty of it as Leninists, Trotskyists as much as Stalinists. This is the socialism of five-year plans, growth rates, and dams and factories, but it is not everyday democracy.

In fact, socialism has generally meant the restriction, rather than the expansion, of freedoms found in liberal society: discussion, reading, publishing, art, travel, organization of public employees, voting, religious beliefs, conscientious objection to military service, privacy, the right to strike, emigration, assembly, and the rights of nonconformity (for example, the freedom in American schools—legally guaranteed—not to salute the flag).

By contrast, none of the Marxist-Leninist states permits the formation of any open opposition, or the printing of opposition literature, or the holding of opposition meetings. Most Americans are aware of the military suppression of the working class in Hungary, East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Even in China, the struggle for power after the death of Mao Tse-tung was not openly debated but was the result of cliques, monster rallies, and bombastic denunciations of "the Gang of Four" as wreckers, spies, "agents of the Kuomintang," ultrarightists, and even "capitalist roaders!"

By the end of the 1970s, it was more difficult for American radicals to avoid historical dilemmas by turning to foreign models. Abroad, the Labour Party lacked the enthusiastic support of most British workers, the socialist party of Sweden was voted out of office after decades in power, the German socialists nearly met a similar fate, and much of the idealistic aura of the
Soviet and Chinese revolutions had been diminished by the realities of power politics, such as Chinese support for dictators like Suharto and Marcos, recognition of the Chilean junta, and approval of the Nixon visits. We were living in a time of decaying idols, “after the fall.”

At home, Americans were less convinced that mammoth systems would necessarily satisfy their personal needs. Was the modern city more comfortable than neighborhood communities? Was a factory more pleasant than a workshop? Was corporate capitalism ecologically, humanistically, and financially desirable? These were issues of the most fundamental radicalness, for which the seemingly exhausted imagination of the welfare state and the Old Left had few answers that were attractive to the public. The “successes” of Social Democracy and Communism may yet force a reevaluation of the “failed” truths of anarchism.

Let us turn, then, to the origins of this vision of decentralism, which may now form one of the few historical sources of hope.