

TOWARDS AN ANARCHIST ANALYSIS OF
THE FAMILY

Concetta Oliva Tuttle
820 East Adelaide Dr.
Tucson, Arizona 85719
USA

INTRODUCTION

This paper represents the beginnings of an investigation of the concept of the family in anarchist thought. My examination of the family is based on a multiplicity of questions that arise in the face of what is widely regarded as a crisis for family structure in the late twentieth century among the major industrialized States. As this paper serves primarily as a focus for areas to be explored in a larger work, it is intended to raise questions and provoke discussion; it is not intended to represent any conclusive position on the family. Nevertheless, I begin this study from the hypotheses that the failure of libertarian analysis of the family is a critical shortcoming in anarchist theory; that the anti-family rhetoric evident in much of the literature of North American anarchists is indicative of their failure to arrive at a comprehensive theory of the social; and that the family has the potential to act as a force for radical social change.

Since Engels wrote The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, Marxist analysts have continued to produce a growing body of work on the subject of the relationship between the family and the larger social framework within which it exists. In addition to this growing body of literature, social scientists of every ideological stripe in the twentieth century have added a mass of new, revised, and sometimes conflicting theories, hypotheses, speculations and predictions to this important debate on the "only social institution other than religion that is formally developed in all societies."¹

The underlying concern of this paper, and the primary reason I think an anarchist analysis of family theory is of critical value in contemporary society, is the belief that a strong, successful, and tight family structure is the last defense people have against the encroachments of state authority. In any post-industrialized State, be it organized on the basis of either the capitalist model of the West or the communist model of the East, alienated individuals who must find their personal rewards and gratifications not in the family but outside of it, ultimately serve and become the agents of either the purposes of the corporation or those of the party. In both cases the ultimate benefactor is the State.

But long before the existence of the modern State, and indeed, for the greater part of recorded history, families have been the productive and reproductive cells of society, differing in form, but remarkably akin in purpose; purpose born of the biological and social requirements of species survival.

While it is true that families can and have been used to further the goals of State institutions, it is important to understand that families have also functioned historically as agents of resistance to State power. For example, Jane Humphries uses the case of the working class in nineteenth-century England in the context of early industrial capitalism to conclude that in certain situations the family, rather than socializing its members according to the dominant values of society, acts as a successful promoter of "deviant" behavior and "unorthodox" ideas.²

From the nineteenth century on, American anarchist literature reveals a remarkable neglect of the family. Instead, emphasis is placed on individual liberty. This focus on the individual, endemic to American life, is reflected in writings of libertarians over the course of more than one hundred years.

In her study, Anarchist Women: 1870-1920, Margaret S. Marsh draws on the literature of anarchists of that period to conclude that nowhere on the spectrum of libertarian thought was there a significant attempt "to find a place for children within anarchist philosophy."³ Her conclusion regarding the neglect of these early anarchists to build a comprehensive social theory bears to a great extent on the voices of American anarchists in 1984:

Their failure in this crucial respect was indicative of an inability to translate radical commitment to practical action. It also suggests that the anarchists were primarily concerned, in the realms of sexuality and domesticity, with attacking the norms of contemporary society with regard to the behavior of men and women, rather than with creating a framework within which future generations could build a new society.⁴

According to one of the editors of Reinventing Anarchy, a 1979 collection of essays that claims to be representative of current libertarian thought in America, future anarchist society will see "social relations based on trust, mutual aid, friendship and love....these conditions may be more easily achieved outside of the family."⁵ Clearly, no one will dispute the ideal of trust, mutual aid, friendship, and love as the basis for social relations, however, what is neglected in this idyllic picture of the future is how these conditions are to be created and how they will continue from one generation to the next.

Long before Freud noted the connection between love and authority, Bakunin wrote that the rights of parents in an anarchist society "shall be confined to loving their children and exercising over them the only authority compatible with that love...."⁶ In his discussion of the family, Bakunin envisions the abolition of the juridical family; he does not present a picture of free-floating men and women motivated by individualistic concerns of self-interest. Indeed, implicit in his notion of the free marriage union are concepts of mutual responsibility and commitment to the marriage partner, to society as a whole, and to future generations.

CONCLUSION

One of the purposes of this paper is to suggest an agenda for anarchists interested in moving beyond rhetoric in their attempts to create a new social order. If the family is viewed as the primary model for collective action prior to the existence of any concept of the State, recognizing both the historical conflict within the family as well as the changing nature of that conflict will help libertarians to understand how the State has used the family for its own ends and what needs to be done to restore authority to the family while simultaneously reducing the power of the State. In an effort

to arrive at a program that offers both radical and human possibilities for change, anarchists need to analyse how the family has historically met those needs of women and men that are rooted in the social. The lines between the political, the economic, and the social need to be made clear. Finally, of vital importance is the issue of the value of work; what agencies will determine that value; who will decide the value of nurturance?

NOTES

1. William J. Goode, The Family, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1982), p. 5.

2. Jane Humphries, "Class Struggle and the Persistence of the Working-Class Family," Cambridge Journal of Economics (Dec. 1977), p. 256.

3. Margaret S. Marsh, Anarchist Women: 1870-1920 (Philadelphia, 1981), p. 97.

4. Ibid., p. 99.

5. Howard J. Ehrlich, et. al., eds., Reinventing Anarchy: What Are Anarchist Thinking These Days? (London: 1979), p.23.

6. Maximoff, G.P., ed. & comp., The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism, (Glencoe, Illinois, 1953), p. 327.