reclaiming the
spaces of political
resistance

Dr Jonathan Charley

"Britain is being turned upside
down - as much by new forms of
social conflict as by technolo-
gy. The rural poor are destroy-
ing machinery, raiding bread
shops, and attacking the work-
house. They are even dismantling
the fences around private land.
The city is not much better. The
urban 'rioter' is assaulting
chapels and the homes of politi-
cal opponents. In the name of
Ludd, Rebecca and Captain Swing,
saboteurs have smashed and burnt
the property of employers and
magistrates. There are even
tales of spectral figures clad
in women’s clothes and with
blackened faces conducting a
nocturnal and clandestine cam-
paign to destroy the toll-gates.
Where will it end dear reader?
These conflicts and grievances,
far from having been resolved,
seem to be escalating. As if in
honour of their French counter-
parts, seditious soldiers, sail-
ors and workers gathered for
a drunken rally on Spa Green in
the East of London with a
rumoured plan to storm the Tower
of London and liberate the pris-
ons. A rumour that materialised
in Wales, when on what is already
being called Welsh Bastille Day,
paupers destroyed the Carmarthen
workhouse in 1843. A day barely
seems to pass without a report of
yet another workers’ trade
organisation involved in a dis-
pute over wages and the intro-
duction of new machinery. Ever
Fearful of threats to civic
order, the Government’s response
to these incidents has been to
increase its involvement in pre-
scribing routes and preventing
assembly, and after last week we
can be sure that crowd control
will become a permanent feature
of our everyday life. As if ter-
riified by the possibility of the
London rally spiralling out of
control, the government took no
chances and dispatched 170,000
special constables to Kennington
Common in order to prevent the
declaration of the People’s
Charter. As a consequence, it is
trumoured that this ancient com-
mon and meeting place is to be
appropriated, fenced off and made a royal reserve, which I would suggest is only likely to exacerbate tensions between workers and the State."

**Paris 1878**

**Tear down the city**

"Going to Paris is always a memorable affair. But meeting Mr Kropotkin promised to make it unforgettable. We sat at the top of Montmartre where they are planning to build the basilica of Sacré Cœur. Mr Kropotkin, almost incandescent with anger, called it an act of symbolic revenge designed to crush the bones of martyred communards who lay at the foot of the hill. This was indeed a moment for reflection. I spent the rest of the afternoon being entertained by Mr Kropotkin's rather wild attitudes to urban planning. It should have been otherwise, he opined: "One can only reflect on what might have been." With glassy eyes he recalled the barricades of the Commune that artisans under the supervision of café owners had constructed to the height of a three-storey building. He talked with passion about how impromptu workers clubs were set up in theatres, about the suspension of symbolic payments, and about the story of a 'worker architect' who was in his opinion far more imaginative in his revolutionary zeal than Ledoux or Boullée. He carefully explained how during the Paris Commune of 1871 as the Vendôme statue lay in pieces on the ground, the Commandant carpenter, Jean Louis Pindy had set fire to the Tuileries before retreating with other communards to Belleville, igniting buildings as a defence measure against the advancing Versailles troops. They wandered down to the river, and there can never have been such a contrast in emotions. For my part I was shocked at how this once beautiful palace had been virtually destroyed. But... as for Mr Kropotkin he simply exclaimed with unbridled joy how wonderful the new vista had become with its overgrown crumbling monuments and how fine it was that in at least one of Europe's cities the dwelling place of emperor's had become a scenic ruin. By all accounts the carpenter Pindy escaped the government's butchers, and has ended up being voted in as the Paris Construction Union's delegate to the Workers' International. Furthermore with what appears to be the full support of Mr Kropotkin, Pindy is planning to table a motion calling for the foundation of a dual federation of communes and trade unions. Bizarre though this vision is, of a society run by worker communards, it would seem to have gathered considerable support amongst other French workers."

**London 1659**

**Occupy the land**

"The very soul of the English revolution is currently being fought over. On the right are the moderate Levellers like Lilburne. On the left the Diggers, or as they like to be called the True Levellers who fully intend to interpret things literally and once and for all, "level man's estates". The radical wing of the Digger movement like the Buckingham Levellers is broadly in sympathy with Gerard Winstanley's 'Law on the Platform of Freedom'. Published in 1652, this incendiary document makes explicit demands for the common ownership of land and labour. It includes a call to nationalise forests, fens and wasteland through out the country as part of a programme to redistribute landed property to the poor. The Diggers, driven it would appear by some diabolic force, see no reason why anyone apart from rich landowners could object to such a programme. They argue that it is perfectly in keeping with the sentiments expressed three years before in Waltham on Thames. On that spring Sunday in 1649 inspired by the foundation of other Digger's communes, a small band of revolutionary soldiers declared the abolition of the Sabbath, of tithes, magistrates, ministers and the Bible.
New York 1931
Strike against unfair property owners

"It is as if a single woman has travelled across continents changing her name as she arrives in the homes of the impoverished, determined to do something about their abject poverty. Olga, Francesca, Morag and now Emma. The Bronx is simply heaving with activity, slogans, banners, baton-wielding police and barricades. Hundreds of tenants led mainly it seems by east European Jews are piling up furniture against the doors and windows of their homes, refusing to pay rent to private landlords. This sort of event is almost becoming common. It reminded me of the famous Glasgow rent strike of 1915 when the women prevented bailiffs from carrying out warrant sales. On that occasion direct action by thousands of tenants not only resulted in significant housing reform but acted as a catalyst for what turned about to be the closest thing in recent British history to a full-blooded worker’s revolt. I doubt whether this American rent strike will escalate to anything like Red Clydeside or indeed the inauguration of any Parisian style commune in Manhattan, but judging by some of the rhetoric it is not just fair rents that are at stake, but the abolition of the whole rent system and with it wages as well!"

Samara 1918
Organise workers' councils at your place of employment

"It is only 18 May but it is already very warm here in Samara. The All-Russian Construction Workers’ Union has just met. In momentous fashion they voted to unite all the old craft unions, to support the nationalisation of the building industry and to push forward in their demands for the introduction of workers’ control in all construction firms employing over thirty employees. It would indeed be an impressive achievement if the Russians were ever to succeed in their objectives. But then almost anything seems possible at the moment. "Foreign capitalist contractors beware, it could be you next!" The discussions jogged my memories of an earlier episode in labour history, the short-lived Operative Builders’ Union of 1831–1834. Based in the Birmingham area, some think of it as a hopelessly doomed utopian scheme. But others consider it to have been one of the greatest of all experiments in cooperative direct action. Construction Workers, confronted by the introduction of competitive tendering and rampant jerry-builders set about organising an autonomous community. Inspired by Robert Owen, workers organised a socialist Trade Union, and sought to create a Builders’ Parliament and Builders’ Guild as part of a national campaign to develop a system of co-operative production and labour exchange. It was not to survive the rapid advance of the new private contracting system. But it did succeed in throwing down the gauntlet to all future generations of militant building workers including those assembled in Samara when it announced with bravado, that the Trade Unions would not strike for less work and more wages. No, they would strike to ultimately abolish wages altogether in order to become their own masters. Labour and capital would no longer be separate but indissolubly joined together in the hands of the workmen and women. It is in retrospect extraordinary how after one hundred years, the same ideas can emerge in a completely different time and space."
Anarchism

Anarchism encompasses such a broad view of the world that it cannot easily be distilled into a formal definition. Michael Bakunin, who did much to transform anarchism from an abstract critique of political power into a theory of practical social action defined it thus: "In a word, we reject all privileged, licensed, official, and legal legislation and authority, even if it arises from universal suffrage, convinced that it could only turn to the benefit of a dominant and exploiting minority, and against the interests of the vast enslaved majority."

Lyon 1870.

Anarchism is a movement for human freedom. It is rooted in normality as opposed to anecdotality - that is, anarchism is not some cult of bohemians and nihilists. Its central tenet is that the fundamental problem of human society is power and the quest for power.

Anarchism opposes both the insidious growth of state power and the puerile ethos of possessive individualism, which, together or separately, ultimately serve only the interests of the few at the expense of the rest. In anarchism, the first premise is that of the sovereignty of the individual and from this follows that all human freedom and the rights of the individual are paramount.

The argument against the state is that it, and its apparatus of maintenance, the government, are everywhere in the hands of a small ruling group, a privileged body separated by its formation, status and organisation from the population as a whole. This group collectively monopolises political decision-making. In some societies it may constitute an entrenched and self-perpetuating class.

Democracy adds to the illusion of freedom and equality by proclaiming the idea of majority rule. However, this is a rare occurrence in any democracy. A large percentage of the populations do not vote because they are either indifferent or frustrated.

Anarchism is both a theory and practice of life. Philosophically, it aims for the maximum accord between the individual, society and nature. Practically, it aims for us to organise and live our lives in such a way as to make politicians, government, states and their officials superfluous.

In an anarchist society, mutually respectful sovereign individuals would exist in self-regulating non-concerted relationships with naturally defined communities in which the means of production and distribution are held in common. This may sound utopian and impossible to work, but anarchists are not dreamers obsessed with an abstract ideal. They are aware that the perfect society may never be won and that the struggle may last forever. However, the ideal provides the energy to challenge things as they are, and attempt to make them what they might be.

Ultimately only the struggle determines the outcome, and progress towards a meaningful community must begin with the will to resist every form of injustice. This means challenging all exploitation and defying the legitimacy of all coercive authority.

Once the habit of deferring to politicians or ideologies is lost, and that of resistance to domination and exploitation acquired, then ordinary people have a capacity to organise every aspect of their lives in their own interests, anywhere and at any time, both freely and fairly.

Anarchists do not stand aside from popular struggle, nor do they attempt to dominate it. They seek to contribute to it practically whatever they can, and also to assist within it the highest possible levels both of individual self-development and of group solidarity.

The anarchist theory of revolution holds that human society is divided, not as the Marxists contend, purely by a class struggle between property owners and the dispossessed, but also by a struggle and tension between governors and subjects, between freedom and authority. Its guiding principle - based on the experience of centuries that on every occasion when people have entrusted their fate to authority, that authority has ended up enslaving them - is the belief that 'liberty' and 'justice' cannot be upheld through state power or any authority principle, even by the most apparently enlightened and radical political leadership.

It is the fundamental and uncontainable truth of anarchism that social power held over people is a usurpation of natural rights, power originates in the people, and they alone have, together, the right to wield it.
"I have to confess to never having seen anything like it. It was strange enough just in its shape. Moulded out of reinforced concrete in a street that lacks basic amenities, it resembles some kind of flying craft. It was built to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the revolution, and in fact a Trade Union workers’ club designed by one Konstantin Melnikov. The Russakova Club stands at the cutting edge of all progressive thinking. Its three impressive cantilevers and tall columns of glass were themselves an engineering and construction triumph in what remains a technologically backward country. In fact it is one of a number of innovative club buildings proposed by the new Soviet Government that are meant to operate as incubators of communism with a library, lecture halls, and canteen. It appears that the Union members participated fully in the formation of the brief for the building, and discussed both how it should look and what it should contain. By all accounts they were enthusiastic about the modern forms of Mr Melnikov and were keen to have a building that looked futuristic. This was in marked contrast to the rather conservative tastes of the local Party Commissar who demanded unsuccessfully that the club should have the same sort of presence as the neo-classical facade of the Moscow Soviet. For the time being at least the avant-garde workers appear to have won the argument."

top: Kevin Coyne in The Institution, film by Ian Breakwell 1978
bottom: The Anarchist Black Cross
A prisoner support organisation originally set up in Resist Russia in the late 1900s. Later revived as an international prisoners’ aid network in the late 1960s to help people imprisoned because of their resistance to fascist and authoritarian states.
assembled an audience of cheering workers and ceremoniously blew up the prison, lifted all restrictions on the press and declared unrestricted freedom of assembly and political association. At this point Nikita became rather over enthusiastic and started talking about free theatre, self-managed schools and other fantastic arrangements including matters of a sexual nature. As we parted company he thrust a note into my hand that he said had been nailed to the posts and fences throughout the liberated districts of the Ukraine. The gist of the proclamation explained that the only role of the anarchist army was to free a region from all political parties, power and dictatorship, and to guarantee the workers' freedom of action and liberty from all exploitation and oppression. Heady stuff, I think you will agree, although my friend Mr Ginzburg dismisses them as anti-Semitic lunatics, comparing them to the Krontstadt sailors who he insisted were actively undermining the authority of the new Soviet government. Whatever the truth of the matter, I will endeavour to find out."

It would appear that a different kind of revolution took place in parallel to that led by the Bolsheviks and had culminated in an anarchist army sweeping through peasant villages, liberating a zone that at one point stretched from the outskirts of Odessa, to the Don in the east, and Kharkov in the north. Land was immediately handed to peasant communes and in some towns the factories were occupied and placed under the control of workers' councils. Nikita maintained that from November 1918 to June 1919, the peasants of the liberated zone lived without any external authority, forming free communes and councils of working people. In numerous proclamations they declared themselves free from all state power, and were reputedly disposing of themselves and of the products of their labour quite independently. It also appears that whenever the Makhnovists entered a large village or town they

first years after the revolution when manifestations bounced around the streets calling for the complete democratization of planning and the development of new forms of revolutionary art. Militants like Aleksei Gan promised to transform art into a spontaneous mass action that would help create an unthinkable city of perpetual festivity. All distinctions between performer and audience would be broken. And it is true that people journeyed to St Petersburg just to participate in the voluntary re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace, whilst others stayed in Moscow and listened to the steelworker standing on a roof conducting ranks of hoofing factory sirens. Well, it appears that the same sort of euphoria has invaded the minds of Catalans. They are singing that the proletarian wants music made by machines and not by chamber orchestras, whilst pyromaniacs torch churches, speak of free love and an end to all discipline. Somewhat miraculously there appears to be no crime, and more practically the insurgents have begun to squat land and collectivize public services. How long the summer carnival lasts remains to be seen. It is not clear at times who is fighting who."

Barcelona 1936

Be prepared for the party

"This is an extraordinary place to be at the moment. I am deafened by a symphony of corks, songs, and gunfire. Down the road in Madrid 40,000 builders led by the CNT have gone on strike, whereas here in Barcelona the anarchist led Construction Workers' Union has become one of the headquarters of the resistance to Franco. Abad de Santillan who calls himself a libertarian communist is desperately trying to persuade other comrades of his plan for a 'mutual' and collectivized economy organised through the factory committees. There are plenty of other schemes afoot as well, and despite threats from Falangists, the city remains in festive mood. The atmosphere is a little reminiscent of the optimism that had gripped Moscow in the
National Congress Building, Brasilia 1956

right: (1) Majdanek concentration camp, Lublin, Poland
(2) The Boys Village, Aberthaw, South Glamorgan, Wales 1930