British Anarchism (whatever that is) has been characterised by its idiosyncrasy, spontaneity and ability to re-create itself. The journal Aufheben famously diagnosed Class War’s ‘retarding influence’ and a queue of theorists have described anarchism in the UK as dynamic, provocative, but ultimately politically unimportant. Benjamin Frank’s Rebel Alliances throws a chair through the shop window festooned with the bawdy dummies of such doggy arguments. From the turn of the century and before, Franks outlines anarchism’s rise to pre-eminence as the means and ends to our future society. From its infancy to its bestial phase, Franks argues that to the extent that it ever had a core it has been as much a response to the foolishness of its own adherents. British Anarchism (whatever that is) has been characterised by its idiocy, spontaneity and ability to re-create itself. The 'anarchist ethos' has infiltrated strangely sombre Anarchist Studies and a few people at Mayday 2000 when Churchill sported a turban Mohican (and beyond).

It’s an appropriately epic sweep taking in Punk and DIY culture, ethics, Gen, class and non-class, ethnicity, sexuality, and everything from ‘spectacle’ to Test Card F and everything in-between, if indeed there is anything ‘in-between’.

By necessity is a concept wilting on the cleft-lick of Brown-Blair absurdism, Franks is quick to defend his terms. This is a geographical not a cultural definition. Second, as Franks points out, among the earliest anarchist groups in Britain in the modern era were ‘The Workers’ Friend’, Jewish refugees from Tsarist Russia, closely followed (in terms of impact) by such as the Spanish and Italian anarchist influence from the 1920s on. Finally Franks defends the inclusion of, for example, the Z6 County WSM (Workers Solidarity Movement) on the grounds that English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish anarchist histories are intimately linked: “Oppression is understood to be contextual and based on opposing dominating forces as they affect that locality, rather than a single universal form of domination that determinates all.

The writing is inclusive but not vague, rigorous and scholarly but not cut its own arse. He takes a reassuring sideswipe at David Miller’s ‘Practical Theory’ at Nuffield College Oxford, author of ‘Anarchism’, J M Dent & Sons, 1984, and not the co-editor of ‘Arguments against G8’ and Spinwatch as appended in the issue. Variant please accept our apologies) who managed to write a whole book on anarchism whilst denying it had any identifiable core assumptions and could scarcely be called a political ideology. But if the book has a subtext it is that anarchism has grown to dominate the anti-capitalist movement this has not come about overnight or without repercussion. Franks contrasts the rise of the anarchist ethos and practice with the collapse of Leninist and Trotskyist left. If New Labour is the last drool of Thatchersm (sic) is the final speck of Trotskyist dieteticism?

Franks knows his onions and as we (this is the Republican ‘we’) are troubled by, well virtually everything about the contemporary world, we asked him a series of less than searching questions and he coughed up a host of illuminating, bordering on entertaining replies.

**Variant:** Can anarchists operate in academia? There’s the strangely sombre Anarchist Studies and a few people at Goldsmiths and Lancaster University but it’s all a bit marginal and half-hearted. Is this a good thing? Or are there other ways that an ‘anarchist ethos’ has infiltrated and influenced?

As ‘an anarchist’, and certainly don’t speak on behalf of anarchists in (or out of) academia. Indeed, as the libertarian-aligned Dissent! rightly points out, “any one who claims to be speaking on our behalf is I’m tempted to answer your question with another one – can anarchists operate anywhere? Not that I am suggesting that anarchists are somehow bumbling incompetents, but that there is a contradiction in performing certain roles within capitalism and being an anarchist. An anarchist selling his or her labour as a shopworker, is in a sense withholding commodities from those who cannot afford them. The radical sales assistant may subvert this from time to time, turning a ‘blind-eye’ to a need-losing shoplifter for instance, but if they were to live up to their principles in toto and, say, give all the goods away to all the one who desired them, then they would be out of a job fairly quickly and without much chance of a decent reference. This is not to criticise subversive shopworkers, but this fine strategy is only feasible if you have something to fall back on or if everyone else simultaneously follows the same tactic (i.e. we had already reached a post-capitalist society).

There are plenty of blatant and the person employed in academia (someone selling their labour time to the university). There are certain functions that are anti-antithetical to anarchist principles, for instance: awarding grades to students which privileges one group against another in the labour market, or maintaining property-rights by policing plagiarism. But if the life of the student is inextricably linked to academia, it can dominate the discourse, making anarchism appear to be a privileged discourse. Alternatively it could be an acknowledgment that for liberal theorists, such as Max Weber, alternatives will always appear outside of accepted ‘rational’ discourses: the recent clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) at anti-capitalist/anti-globalisation demonstrations is a self-conscious acknowledgement of the way dominant ideologies portray creative dissent as ‘ridiculous’ and ‘comical’. The anarchism of, say, Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin (and maybe we can squeeze in Charles Fourier here too), whilst having its origins in the Enlightenment, and recognising the liberatory potential of reason to transcend the limits of power based on traditional authorities and superstition, nonetheless had some appeal and was not purely scholastic at least. This is the contradiction, the debt contemporary anarchists pay to Nietzsche in his introduction to anarchism, as does the edited collection by John Moore, I Am Not a Man, I Am Dynamic!

A more worrying trend, though, has been for some theorists to adopt a wide variety of writers and thinkers into anarchism. Partly this is to shore-up anarchisms’ academic accreditations. So whilst Peter Marshall’s book _Demanding the Impossible_ is impressive on a number of grounds, one of the weaknesses is that he includes as ‘forerunners’ or ‘great libertarians’ an extensive menagerie of thinkers – the conservative theorist and MP Edmund Burke, the statistician Tom Paine, the ‘constitutional liberal’ John Stuart Mill, and even the Christian messiah (for a movement usually identified by its reaction to ‘God and the state’). Such accounts blur to the point of distortion anarchism as a revolutionary, anti-state, egalitarian movement. It also assumes that anarchism’s actual traditions are so weak it requires reinforcement from outside. Further, it also raises the questions: why anarchists should feel the need to become academically respectable? Who is it out to impress?

**Variant:** You commented about how publishers locked-on to your work as the anti-capitalist movement kicked in and your efforts to try and explain that it wasn’t all about panning in McDonald’s windows. But how do anarchists escape this stereotyping, and isn’t some of it their/our own fault? Maybe you can say something about the most creative interventions you have come across that don’t operate in this way but that have real impact on ‘everyday life’, real communities, ordinary
people etc.?

BF: I am not certain what a ‘real’ community or an ‘ordinary’ person is, as distinct from an unreal or ‘extraordinary’ person, but this is me being pedantic. I guess your point here is the highly pertinent one of how can anarchist principles and tactics be incorporated into everyday life?

I should stress that I am not a pacifist. There are times when panning in the windows of McDonald’s is not just excusable but is highly justified; the problem is in being stuck with one particular tactic (smashing windows) or one particular identity (the black-masked vandal) to deal with the myriad, ever-adapting modes of oppression. Dominant powers want to fix the range of responses, as that way we become more predictable and controllable – as a result actions become less threatening, less radical. Certainly it would not be in the commercial media’s interests to portray anarchists in a favourable light, so latching onto, universalising and thereby de-contextualising the ‘hooligan’ version of anarchism is hardly a surprising strategy: dominant powers constructed the stereotype of the black-coated, bearded bomb-thrower in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the ineffectual, effete ‘hippy anarchist’ in the ‘70s and early ‘80s.

To pick out just a couple of tactics risks prioritising them and thus creating a prescriptive taxonomy of responses. Nonetheless, to select a few provisional examples of some of the most creative interventions, these tend to be those which include those principles most consistent with a defensible form of capitalism: rejection of hierarchies, whether based on state, capital or other dominating structure; a repudiation of mediation and thus a renunciation of tactics based on vanguards and prioritising prefigurative methods, in which the means used have to reflect the values of the desired goals. Of course, these principles are adhered to by individuals and groups who do not necessarily adopt the ‘anarchist’ label. These radical moments hold out the possibility for even greater experiment and adventure and create new links of solidarity. So there are the practical steps like opening and maintaining social centres – from London’s Jubilee Street Club of the late 1890s, or the more recent ones such as the Autonomous Centre in Edinburgh, 1 in 12 in Bradford, Sumac in Nottingham or RampART and London Action Resource Centre in the South East. These are broadly run on non-coercive principles, and these venues open up opportunities for collaborations on a range of cultural and (anti)political actions. There are the workplace structures, such as the Solidarity Federation and the syndicalist IWW, which although in the UK are still tiny, nonetheless still provide useful advice, confidence and support to those resisting managerial authority.

No single struggle takes universal priority over all others. For instance, the fight against patriarchy is not necessarily going to eradicate racism, although it might help (and vice-versa). In certain contexts one type of resistance to oppression is, however, more critical than another. Similarly, no single tactic is sufficient, although in a given context one type of tactic might be more apt than others in resisting heteronomous power in a life-enhancing, liberatory fashion.