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# Oscar Wilde

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Great Anarchists




RUTH KINNA &
CLIFFORD HARPER

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# OSCAR WILDE

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# GREAT ANARCHISTS

These short introductions delve into the anarchist canon to recover some of the distinctive ideas that historical anarchists advanced to address problems relevant to their circumstances. Although these contexts were special, many of the issues the anarchists wrestled with still plague our lives. Anarchists developed a body of writing about power, domination, injustice and exploitation, education, prisons and a lot more besides. Honing in on different facets of the anarchist canon is not just an interesting archaeological exercise. The persistence, development and adaptation of anarchist traditions depends on our surveying the historical landscape of ideas and drawing on the resources it contains. The theoretical toolbox that this small assortment of anarchists helped to construct is there to use, amend and adapt.

Agitate, Educate, Organise!



# OSCAR WILDE

Scholar, poet, playwright, socialite and wit, Wilde is one of those magnetic figures that everyone now seems to want to claim a piece of. His literary genius accounts for some of the competition. But the vindictiveness of the reaction to his public disgrace as a "posing sodomite" is at least as significant for his story. Wilde endured two years of hard labour after his libel action against the Marquis of Queensbury, father of his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, collapsed. When the jury at this first trial failed to reach a verdict the Crown felt compelled to retry the case: he received the maximum sentence for 'gross indecency'. Wilde was the cultural superstar of his age and he was dropped like a stone. His name was removed from theatre hoardings, performances of his plays ceased; friends disappeared and the institutions that had once gloried in their association with him moved

quickly to erase his memory. Wilde's illustrious school in Enniskillen – the so-called Eton of Ireland – scratched his name from the honours board that boasted his scholarship to Trinity College, Dublin – later restoring it when Wilde was rehabilitated. The ferocity of the public outrage explains why liberals, libertarians of all stripes, and especially gay rights campaigners are now eager to declare him as their own.

Can anarchists also lay claim to Wilde? The Soul of Man Under Socialism, the essay he published in 1891, usually puts him in the anarchist frame, typically as a kind of individualist. As the book makes clear, the individualism Wilde had in mind was defined by art. This was the "most intense mode" of individualism the world had ever known.

Wilde's defence of art explained why, taking aim at orthodox Marxist social democracy, he rejected authoritarian and "industrial-barrack socialism". It also explained why he despaired of common-sense reformist socialism: the socialism of the Fabians and other democratic do-gooders. This was practical, dull, unadventurous and

unambitious. Its proposals were conceivable in conditions that were objectionable and which should be rejected as "wrong and foolish". It charted a map of the world that did not include utopia and so it was "not worth even glancing at". Art was equally at the heart of Wilde's reformulation of Henry David Thoreau's observation "that government is best which governs least". Wilde's version was: "the form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all". Finally, Wilde's conception of art as individualism contextualised his depiction of Kropotkin as the "beautiful White Christ". The apparently flowery language Wilde used in De Profundis, the letter he wrote in 1897 just before his release, builds on the interpretation of Christ's message that he presents in The Soul of Man. This was "Be thyself". That Kropotkin had experienced the hardships and humiliations of prison was significant for Wilde, but the fulsome praise he heaped on Kropotkin reflected his view that Kropotkin had followed Christ's teaching precisely. Having had the option of keeping his head down and enjoying his privilege, Kropotkin decided that he could not live contentedly in

conditions that denied the soul's development. Indeed, Kropotkin was the nihilist who rejected "all authority because he knows authority to be evil, and welcomes all pain, because through that he realises his personality". Throwing in his lot with the anarchists, Kropotkin became the "real Christian"– artist and individualist.

Should anarchists claim Wilde? Anarchists should surely reserve a place for him in the pantheon of Great Anarchists, but perhaps should not expect him to rush to fill it. Wilde never identified as anarchist and he dodged all the ideological markers that were beginning to be applied in the late nineteenth century. Wilde's first play, Vera; or the Nihilist, was a disaster, closing in New York only a week after it opened, and he quickly disowned it. Yet for all his embarrassment about its literary merits, his choice of topic gave a clue to the tenor of his thinking. He described himself as a "born antinomian" - someone who rejects moral law and obligation on the basis of faith. He was "made for exceptions, not for laws". His social theory bore the imprint of William Morris' socialism. The ethos of the arts and crafts

movement was stamped all over the lectures he delivered in North America in the 1880s, just before his rise to fame, and it is detectable in The Soul of Man, too. Yet Wilde directed his invective against social compliance rather than capitalism per se. Moreover, The Soul of Man had little of the romance of Morris' News From Nowhere, published the year before. Wilde injected Morris' love of nature and decorative art with a more flamboyant, darker aesthetic. His friend and literary executor Robert Ross spotted an affinity with Nietzsche. In the twentieth century the art-historian Herbert Read reworked this striking amalgamation, albeit to very different effect. Art and creativity were central to both but whereas Read recruited art principally to the service of education, Wilde pursued it to find a path to deliverance.

## AGAINST DEMOCRACY

Unexcited by the promise of the Gettysburg Address, Wilde rewrote Abraham Lincoln's epigram about democracy as "the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people". He was opposed to democracy for two reasons. First, democracy was a form of government and like other forms it was a mechanism for the exercise of authority. In contrast to oligarchy, which was "unjust to the many", or ocholcracy (mob rule), which was "unjust to the few", democracy was most like despotism: "unjust to everybody, including the despot". It replicated the "sceptre of the Prince" and the "triple tiara of the Pope". Yet in contrast to despotism, it was not obviously unjust. On the contrary, democracy was the kindest form of government and it used carrots rather than sticks to bring people to heel. This was the peoples' opiate – not religion, as Marx had it – because it rendered the routine cruelty and brutality of government acceptable, thereby dampening opposition to tyranny.

Wilde's second objection to democracy was that it left class divisions between rich and poor intact. These were rooted in property ownership. Wilde argued that property imposed burdens on the rich and poor alike, channelling the energies of the owners to the preservation of the prestige and status that property conferred and reducing non-owners to poverty and starvation. The effect was the same in both cases: the worship of property "crushed true individualism" and made "gain not growth its aim". Wilde admitted that the rich were more able to realise individualism than the poor. Byron, Shelley, Victor Hugo, Baudelaire all fell into this category. But he nonetheless believed that property compromised art; none of these writers was able to achieve what they might otherwise have accomplished in a propertyless regime. Likewise, taking issue with the scholars who celebrated the great men of history, Wilde denied that Caesar or the emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius had perfected themselves. A perfect life could only be lived in perfect conditions, where one was not "wounded, or worried or maimed, or in danger". Property made this impossible.

Democracy was toothless against property because class tensions reinforced the principle of ownership. Property owners lived in perpetual fear that a sudden change in economic fortunes would strip them of all their possessions and the rights that came with them, but never dreamed of giving up their assets for the sake of serenity. The poor, too, struggled to maintain property. If they were keen to alleviate the worst effects of maldistribution, their aspiration was to be rich and possess the things property laws denied them. Indeed, poverty had so degraded the poor that most were unable to understand that property was the cause of their suffering. Wilde commented that starved peasants had happily died for "the hideous cause of feudalism" during the French revolution. Likewise he believed that too many of the poor had absorbed the language of virtue, thrift and charity to utilise democracy as a tool for property's abolition.

Democracy levelled out access to rights and removed the exclusive liberties and powers that property owners enjoyed: its promise was to stabilise the power relations and hierarchies of knowledge that property underpinned. In authority the people were politically

disempowered but culturally supreme. Having once bemoaned the arbitrary power of the despot, they now revelled in their capacity to determine what was right, good, just, virtuous and beautiful, and impose these standards uniformly. Eagerly punishing waywardness and rejoicing in their obedience to the rules and conventions they introduced, the people had become oblivious to their own degeneration. Democrats went through life as automatons, "thinking other people's thoughts, living by other people's standards, wearing practically... other people's second hand clothes, and never being themselves for a single moment". If by some fluke they appreciated the uncommon art of an individual, they usually absorbed it without any reflection on the oppression they exercised. The people were priests without souls.

By altering the basis of authority and retaining class divisions, democracy summoned two appalling monsters into being: public opinion and popular taste. These were in fact creatures of the deeply conservative elite in which journalists and critics prevailed. Wilde was horrified by

their dogmatism and banality. Journalists "invite the public to discuss an incident, to exercise authority in the matter, to give their views... to carry them into action, to dictate to the man upon all other points, to dictate to his party, to dictate to his country... to make themselves ridiculous, offensive, and harmful". They "supply the public with what the public wants" and "compete with other journalists in making that supply as full and satisfying to the gross popular appetite as possible". Critics exacerbated the problem by acting as brakes on innovation and experiment. They assessed art by the standards of the past to maintain the status quo. Wilde called the past "what man should not have been" and the present "what man ought not to be". Democracy structured both long into the future and was anathema to art and true individualism.

## ART ACTIVISM

Wilde recommended disobedience – "man's original virtue" – as the cure for democracy. Physical force was one aspect of this art, probably the best form available to the impoverished. Just as charity reduced the have-nots, rebellion ennobled them. An "ungrateful, unthrifty, discontented" poor man had real personality. Wilde admitted it was safer to beg than to steal but believed it was "finer to take than to beg". His view dovetailed with Emma Goldman's recommendation: "Ask for work. If they don't give you work, ask for bread. If they do not give you work or bread, then take bread". Identifying individualism with the spirit of revolt and fearful that democracy would smother it, he also called for agitators to "sow the seeds of discontent" amongst the poor. Wilde rejected the view that force signalled a failure of reason. Violent revolution made "the public grand and splendid for a moment". It had also "solved entirely" some of "most important problems of the last few centuries", notably "the continuance of personal government in England" and "the

feudalism of France". Returning to the theme of press freedom and justice, he commented that it was "a fatal day when the public discovered that the pen is mightier than the paving stone, and can be made as offensive as the brickbat".

Refusing to bow to public opinion was his preferred strategy. This form of disobedience was not rebellious or deliberately transgressive for that gave too much ground to tyranny. Byron had battled too long with "stupidity and hypocrisy and Philistinism". In Shelley, too, the "note of rebellion" was too strong. In terms of professional practice, the non-compliant artist "selects his own subject, and treats it as he chooses". The insubordination was the refusal to draw inspiration from the past in order to make art intelligible, popular or marketable. Thus the individualist created something that had never been. In a broader sense, Wilde's view was that artists perfected personality through self-reflection, just as Christ had done. In this sense, too, individualism was about self-expression and creation and behaving as one willed, whether or not others approved. But above all, it was about

finding peace with oneself. Jesus said: "You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. Be yourself. Don't imagine that our perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things... Ordinary riches can be stolen from a man. Real riches cannot".

Wilde denied that the individualism he cherished was selfish or egotistical. Selfishness "is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live". Artists were unselfish because they let everyone follow their own paths. They had no desire to impose on others: this was egotistical. He also denied that art was self-sacrificing. Self-sacrifice was about duty. Art was about inclination and voluntarism. It admitted no compulsion. However, individualism involved pain and demanded resilience. Inevitably, individualists would confront hatred, fear and ignorance. Wilde cautioned the true personality not to fight but suffer and find sympathy in suffering. The real Christ was "maimed and marred". He was the tortured, sombre soul depicted in medieval art, not the beautiful composed figure that featured in Renaissance pastels. Artists would find their

souls living "intensely, fully, perfectly", tolerating pain as "provisional and a protest". The present seemed bleak but the prospects for art were good. Wilde looked forward to joyful individualism in socialism. Refusing all laws and authority except its own, it would be "freer, far finer, and far more intensified than it is now".

# Great Anarchists

BY RUTH KINNA
& CLIFFORD HARPER

1. Peter Kropotkin
2. Voltairine de Cleyre
3. Mikhail Bakunin
4. Louise Michel
5. Oscar Wilde
6. Max Stirner
7. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
8. Lucy Parsons
9. William Godwin
10. Errico Malatesta


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