

Anthony Comegna ([00:00](#)):

Crispin Sartwell is not only one of the best follows on Twitter, in my opinion, but he's also an absolutely prolific author. He's written a bewildering number of articles and books for all sorts of different publications, on a wide array of topics from rock music criticism to the subject of our conversation today, the many, many different types of anarchism and anarchist history.

A very condensed list of his books includes *The Art of Living*, *Obscenity*, *Anarchy*, *Reality*, *Exquisite Rebel: The Essays of Voltairine de Cleyre-Anarchist, Feminist, and Genius*, and *How to Escape: Magic, Madness, Beauty and Cynicism*.

So strap in because we're about to launch ourselves through centuries of anarchist thought with one of the traditions best representatives working today. It's Dickinson College professor of philosophy, Crispin Sartwell on Ideas in Progress.

All right, let's just get right into it. I'm wondering really, what kind of anarchist are you? So, I was hoping you could just sort of lay out your own point of view for us here at the start. What, type or sort of style of anarchist are you and what term, if any that's out there now, do you identify with the most?

Crispin Sartwell ([01:40](#)):

Well, I guess I think of my politics basically as anti-authoritarian. That's the term I would choose if I was choosing a single one to express my view. So, I guess the basic distinction among kinds of anarchists is communist versus individualist anarchists. I suppose the first anarchists I read were communist anarchists like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman way back in the early seventies when I was a kid. But I suppose that I've spent most of my career somewhat more interested in the individualist tradition. Which, it's a long story. I might say I associate my politics say with Theroux. The individualist tradition is to a significant extent, an American tradition, people like Lysander Spooner and Josiah Warren and Benjamin Tucker.

I guess the easiest way to put the disagreement between them, I suppose it could be a profound disagreement about the nature of human beings, about whether the basic human agent is a individual or a collective. But then individual and individualist and communist anarchists tend to disagree about private property and the role of private property. Even a lot of individualists might be considered pro capitalists or free market anarchists, I suppose. A lot of times I guess I think of myself as like what Voltairine de Cleyre, the American anarchist I've done some work on, called an anarchist without adjectives. I'm ready to see how people organize themselves when they don't face a coercive authority and I'm willing to accept any experiments in living that emerge in that context, within reason. So, some might be more individualist and some might be more collectivist, I guess.

Anthony Comegna ([04:04](#)):

So, you mentioned your background in a sort of more left wing anarchisms like Emma Goldmans and it's interesting to me because I heard you on, I think it was the Non Serviam podcast talking about your family background and how that influenced you. Tell us a bit about that.

Crispin Sartwell ([04:22](#)):

Yeah and I'm kind of working on a book about this, not that it's really focused on my family background, but that comes into it in the context of the history of 20th century leftism. But yeah, I was raised by, my mothers parents were communist party members from the 20s into the 60s and my mother and my stepfather were both kind of what you'd say far leftist, really very sympathetic to Mao by the late sixties. I was born in 58. So, when I was about 13, I started reading a bunch of political theory and philosophy,

and I spent a little time being a Marxist and kind of following my parents. But then as I read all these texts by people like Trotsky and Lenin and stuff, it started to strike me like, this is a totalitarian oppressive conception of politics.

Actually I think I first probably ran into anarchism reading communist stuff that condemn the anarchist, like Marx was obsessed with why the anarchists were wrong. So, I think I just kind of followed the thread and pretty soon I was reading people like Emma Goldman, and I was arguing extremely with my parents and stuff. But yeah, I'm kind of a red diaper baby or a red diaper grand baby. So, I kept on with the radical politics, but you know, try to do a non authoritarian flavor because I just thought it was obvious that you didn't want to be ruled by now or Stalin or whatever. Like that's, that was the worst outcome I thought. So

Anthony Comegna ([06:24](#)):

Did that cause any tension in your family while you were sort of going on that journey to the anti-authoritarian version of anarchism?

Crispin Sartwell ([06:32](#)):

Oh yeah. I was in a constant political battle with my parents throughout my adolescence, I guess like a lot of people one way or another, but yes. Partly we were arguing about like, what's the best way to think about the peace movement and the civil rights movement. My parents were kind of active in that, and what kind of political philosophy should underpin 60s, early 70s counterculture and stuff. But yeah, we had brutal fights for decades. I'm still kind of fighting with my 95 year old mother about this, believe it or not. She's kind of mutated more like a liberal, she's going to be pretty happy to vote for Biden, who is no Mao. She's mellowed, but we're still kind of fighting about the role of government. I don't know, we slide into the same style of fight from 75.

Anthony Comegna ([07:35](#)):

So, were you a like political or ideological anarchist before you became an academic?

Crispin Sartwell ([07:42](#)):

Oh yeah, from childhood really.

Anthony Comegna ([07:47](#)):

How did that impact your progress through the academic world?

Crispin Sartwell ([07:53](#)):

This is a little hard to assess in some ways, but I think I've had political problems in every job that I've been in. I think it's affected my career negatively. I guess maybe I didn't really know how people hear the word anarchist. It sounds insane to the average college provost. The idea that one of their professors is an anarchist almost sounds funny, or it sounds disturbing. I could go into some detail on various political problems I've had, but yeah, I think it's been a real struggle and I do think it has affected like the shape of my academic career and kind of how far I got, I guess you'd say,

Anthony Comegna ([08:49](#)):

Well, provosts are one of the Archons, right? Not too surprising.

Crispin Sartwell ([08:56](#)):

Yeah, although they're fairly non-coercive usually.

Anthony Comegna ([08:58](#)):

Usually.

Crispin Sartwell ([09:01](#)):

Yeah, I never had a provost pull a gun on me or take me off to a holding cell, so far.

Anthony Comegna ([09:11](#)):

I imagine that lots of colleagues give side glances again when they hear the spooky word, oh, he's an anarchist.

Crispin Sartwell ([09:20](#)):

Yes. They might not even mind that so much, just maybe less than administrators overall. But as soon as they realize that I'm an anti-Marxist and an anti-communist and stuff like this, or at least the way we understood communism in the 20th century as this kind of overwhelming statism. At any rate, with my colleagues often, it dawns on them at a certain point that I'm just not a leftist, sort of, or I'm not the right kind of leftist. I guess I experienced academia basically as politically unanimous. There's definitely like a social and career type price to be paid for going a different way, I suppose.

Anthony Comegna ([10:14](#)):

I wonder if you get stuck with more or less committee work because of your anarchism.

Crispin Sartwell ([10:20](#)):

I'd say they really avoided assigning me to committees. Believe it or not, I'm the chair of the information technology committee right now at Dickinson, but I think this was some kind of mistake or something. But year, I've gotten out of a lot of committee work just because like, do you want an anarchist on your committee? What is he going to...

Anthony Comegna ([10:43](#)):

Well, let's go ahead and turn into some of the history here, because I'd really like for listeners to get a sort of broad overview of the many different kinds of anarchism that are out there and to get some comparison going between them. I'm wondering first, how far back in history do you see anarchism going? Because I tend to think of it, most people will locate it in the modern period, but I tend to think of it as something that is like as old as time itself. It's certainly older than government, not having a government is older than government. So, what do you think about that?

Crispin Sartwell ([11:19](#)):

Well, I guess I agree that, if we thought about the specific political tendencies that we associate with anarchism, they probably emerged in the 19th century, basically. But I do think it's like a universal impulse or it's like it's a basic alternative that you see in some form, although it's often repressed so you don't see it that clearly with regard to any system of authority, like the idea of skepticism of authority I think runs deep and you've probably run into it wherever you run into authority, actually.

So, I think like Daoism, an ancient Chinese anarchist philosophy, it's anti-statist basically and quite explicitly. So, I do think it's a sort of universal impulse. Now, anarchism proper as a movement maybe gets going in Europe, basically simultaneously with Marxism, as a response to industrial capitalism and stuff. That's quite a bit more specific. But I do think it builds on an anti-authoritarian impulse that you get wherever you have authority, basically. Wherever you have authority, people are bristling at that authority. People are cocking an eyebrow at that authority.

Anthony Comegna ([12:47](#)):

What are some of the main impulses behind that, that move? Because the factories have been around for quite a while, at least in some degree, certainly massive modern States had been around for a few centuries. So, what is it that's special about the time period where the anarchist movement really gels together?

Crispin Sartwell ([13:09](#)):

Well, like I said, I think maybe there's two separate movements or maybe only one of them is well thought of as like a mass movement and that's European collectivist anarchists, anarchism of the 19th century. For one thing, a lot of it in the work of Mikhail Bakunin or Peter Kropotkin builds on the work of Marx, rests on a class analysis of society, shares basically a Marxist diagnosis of capitalism and the crisis of capitalism, and the kind of Marxist vision of revolutionary liberation as well.

So, I think partly it's Marx actually, who shifts the anarchist movement, even though he's highly, highly opposed to it. I guess, I think the conditions in the late 19th century, as true factories existed in some form for a couple centuries before that anyway, but the world capitalist economy based on industrial manufacturing really gels in the mid to late 19th century, I think, and maybe capitalism, the way Marx thought about it, as a world exploitative system is emerging.

A lot of these anarchists kind of take that whole analysis of Marx about where they are in history, but reject the authoritarian style of transformation that Marx recommends. But in the United States, the individualists, I think, that maybe comes more out of maybe an organic extension of American values of individual freedom and individual rights and so on. It's maybe an extreme democratic tendency, people again, like Lysander Spooner or something like that. They're classical liberals of an extreme kind, like they emphasize individual rights relentlessly. But that's primarily maybe an intellectual and literary movement rather than like a mass labor movement or something that has transformative societal effects.

Anthony Comegna ([15:41](#)):

I've thought for several years now that one of the most interesting figures in intellectual history overall is William Godwin, the English man who married Mary Wollstonecraft and father of Mary Shelley. He's considered to a lot of people at least, the founding father of anarchism, libertarianism and socialism, and even to some extent, individualism, all mashed together in the same figure. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on William Godwin and how it is exactly that he could be considered a founder of all these, by now, very different kinds of traditions.

Crispin Sartwell ([16:26](#)):

Yeah. He's a fascinating figure, truly, important novelist as well, and really a central figure in a lot of ways in British romanticism of the late 18th century and early 19th century. It's been a while since I read him too. But yeah, even I think the first anarchist like anthology that I got when I was a kid started with

Godwin. He very clearly expresses overall skepticism about the legitimacy of state power and suggests that there's a future without that, like after a total kind of dispersal of coercive power. He's an interesting figure too, because he was a gigantic figure during his own life and incredibly influential. His son-in-law Percy Shelley, for example, very much had Godwin's politics. He was incredibly influential in the romantic movement in various ways.

The novels were influential too, and it's really wild and cool that he did marry Mary Wollstonecraft, which kind of puts the history of feminism and the history of anarchism together, and they have been very together. Emma Goldman is another really good example of that. But Godwin proceeds the kind of split, certainly proceeds the split between individuals and communist anarchism and he proceeds the Marxism and the modern configuration of the left. But he is already reacting to the French revolution and very enthusiastically basically, and has a vision of where that might go or how that might go in an anti-authoritarian direction. Yeah, I think he was influential on a lot of radicals of the 19th century, although I don't know that say Marx shows any awareness of him, for example. I don't think you see a lot of references to him in Bakunin or Kropotkin. Emma Goldman I think mentions him a few times.

So, I'm not sure how directly influential he was, but really an inspiring figure, almost a wacky idealist though, a little bit unrealistic maybe in his expectations. Basically his argument for anarchism is that people are good and are being distorted by coercive authority into being bad, it's kind of Russo a little bit. But he has this very, maybe unrealistically, annoyingly positive vision of what human beings really are that his whole philosophy rests on in a certain way.

Anthony Comegna ([19:31](#)):

Yeah, he has this kind of amazing like cosmic conception of liberty, that it's written in the stars or something like that and it's only our bad choices that mess that up and distort the process of flourishing. There are just these wonderful passages where he talks about how the whole universe is contained within the human mind and stuff like that and just the preciousness of all of it and taking care of people in their lives. I love Godwin.

Crispin Sartwell ([20:05](#)):

Yeah, what is it, the critique of justice or what's the of that? The [crosstalk 00:20:13] Yeah, it really is kind of an astonishing book and he does have these poetic flights of kind of metaphysics of freedom and stuff like this. I kind of started wondering if Hegel had read him. Even the way he pictures history as kind of just about to lurch into this much better phase. Reminds me a little bit of Hegel and Marx, who follow Godwin, but I have no idea whether they read him or not.

Anthony Comegna ([20:45](#)):

Also, I loved what you had to say about the American tradition, because I think there's a lot to that, especially going back to the days of the early frontier. People were always trying to escape the prison colonies, essentially, especially in the 17th century, they were massive prisons. People were always trying to flee and just live out on the frontier and marry who they wanted and trade with the Indians and just be at peace for a little while. I think there's a lot to that. I wonder if you can say a little more about that and link up some of those figures you mentioned, like the fascinating and fun Josiah Warren.

Crispin Sartwell ([21:27](#)):

Well, I think a lot of people in Europe or on the East coast of North America viewed the early, early America, as the chance to make a new start, the idea that anything could be possible, like you could ditch this whole European sort of authoritarian tradition and try something else. So, there were all kinds of experiments in living like sort of ideal communities and stuff on the frontier. Many of them were religious. I think the influence of radical Protestantism on American individualism is a little bit under appreciated. Even say the Quakers or even the Shakers or something like that, they're basically communities that express total respect for individual conscience, which is maybe the way they're reading the whole history of the reformation, like Luther and stuff like that. This is what Thoreau says as well, in a secular way, that I answered to no authority beyond my conscience, which for these radical Protestants, people like Anne Hutchinson even, in the Massachusetts Bay colony, the conscience is one's connection to God.

Eventually, maybe Thoreau thinks nature or something like that. So, I think that's what American individualism rests on, is the idea that each person administers their own relationship to God. So, then you get all these kind of radical Protestant communities and eventually secular communities like Robert Owens, New Harmony in Indiana, for example, trying non authoritarian ways of living, as you say, like trying to rethink family life, or practicing free love or plural marriage or these sorts of things. I think that's why maybe the American tradition in anarchism is less collectivist, profoundly less collectivist than the European tradition.

So, Josiah Warren is an example of somebody, first of all, he might've put out the first anarchist periodical, a thing called *The Peaceful Revolutionist*, in Indiana in 1820s or early 30s. I'm trying to remember now. I did write a book about this, but now my memory is vague. He tried to form communities, after he left the collectivist New Harmony community of Owen, he thought that their problem was that they tried to have communal property ownership.

So, he tried to form individualist utopian communities. In fact, one of them was called Utopia, in Ohio. I think it's still there actually, a little town called Utopia on the Ohio river, I believe, where people with no resources could build houses and so on and create a community through labor exchange. He had this whole kind of theory of labor notes as the circulating medium or the form of currency. He formed a series of fairly successful communities, the last one of which was *Modern Times* on Long Island, which is currently Brentwood Long Island, which was a wild, like free love counterculture utopia in the 1850s and 60s.

But anyway, there's all kinds of stuff emerging from this, both religious traditions, religious anti-authoritarian traditions. I would talk about people like Lucretia Mott and the Quakers and the centrality of kind of radical Protestantism to the abolitionist movement and sort of American anti-racism. A figure like Theroux, like in civil disobedience Theroux pretty much sums up this whole kind of atmosphere of American radical thought based on the sanctity of individual conscience and voluntariness of cooperative activity rather than coercion.

Anthony Comegna ([26:26](#)):

I love that you located Anne Hutchinson in this tradition too, because she's just amazing. She's one of my favorite figures period. It was funny, whenever I would teach US history at the university of Pittsburgh, I would spend a lot of time explaining antinomianism to them because even though 80% of the class considered themselves Christian or whatever, they actually know very little about the relevant theology. You'd explain antinomianism that people are only responsible for following Gods laws, as they see it, as they interpret them and we're not responsible to any manmade laws whatsoever and you don't have to obey them. Then she gets kicked out of the colony and she goes to Rhode Island and I asked them, how do you think a society founded on these principles would operate? And they'd

inevitably say, oh, it would fall apart, it'd be a disaster. I'm like, well, Rhode Island is still there. It's not a giant smoking pit in the ground. They manage just fine.

Crispin Sartwell ([27:33](#)):

It's pretty much a disaster, I think, Rhode... No, no, no.

Anthony Comegna ([27:40](#)):

I'm wondering too, does religion maybe distinguish a sort of left wing anarchism from a right wing anarchism? If you're opposed to government and the state, as we know it, but you still have a tremendous amount of respect for religious authority of one kind or another. Like a William Lloyd Garrison for example, who opposes government because he wants to usher in the government of God. What are some of the distinguishing features between left and right wing anarchism, as you see it?

Crispin Sartwell ([28:20](#)):

I would hesitate a little bit on the left, right thing, but it makes sense. Well, the individualist anarchist wing, first of all, there are a lot of religious anarchists of various kinds. Although, if you go to an anarchist group or something like this, you might get in trouble for saying that, and I have actually. A lot of anarchists think that you cannot believe in God and be an anarchist, basically because Mikhail Bakunin defined anarchism in terms of no gods and no rulers. So, the idea is that a god centered universe is conceived as a kind of monarchy, as an authoritarian political environment. So, by the time you get to the 20th century, most people who account themselves as anarchists are atheists, like the Marxists. On the other hand though, you have people like Tolstoy for instance, who's definitely an anti-statist and an eccentric, but a deep Christian, or you have people like I said, Lucretia Mott or as you say, Garrison.

Even Dorothy Day in the 20th century, like the Catholic Workers Movement and so on, very anti-authoritarian but also religious. Now, on the other hand though, in the individualist tradition, you also start to get, it leaves its religiosity behind, for the most part. So, one big influence on individualist anarchism as it came to be expressed in the 20th century was Max Stirner's egoism. Now, Stirner is definitely anti-religious, more screechingly so than Marx, even. So, people like Benjamin Tucker and a lot of maybe the anarcho capitalists, I think you'd say, don't really have any kind of religious orientation per se, but I think they emerge more directly out of maybe this radical Protestant legacy and retain a lot of the values from that. Of course, we could consider the traditional association of Protestantism with capitalism too, according to [inaudible 00:30:55] and all this. So, I don't know, maybe all those developments are connected in various ways.

Anthony Comegna ([31:05](#)):

It seems to me that on the one hand, like if you're within the radical classical liberal tradition today, and you're an anarchist, you're either this self identified Ancap type or you are like staunch and firm no, I'm an individualist because there are things I don't like about capitalism. I'm wondering, like clearly we're all anarchists here, sure, sure. But going back to the very beginning of what you said, I think the anti-authoritarianism element is so important, and that at least pulls me very strongly toward the individualism side, even though I started out on the Ancap side.

Maybe I can get you to close this out here by saying a bit about the different wings of anarchism out there now, both within classical liberalism and within society at large. Maybe I'm being a bit too

hopeful, but it also seems like anarchist ideas are kind of surging right now. Just look at movements to abolish the police departments in certain cities, that's pretty massive.

Crispin Sartwell ([32:14](#)):

Yeah, if this whole thing that's happening now, these protest movements lurch in a more anti-authoritarian direction, I would be very happy. If their main impulse is not censorship, but rather skepticism about the police or whatever, I think that would be healthy. But I'm not sure what's going to happen along those lines. Ancap is interesting. I suppose the contrast between Anarcho capitalist and Anarcho collectivist is really a version of the schism that goes back to the 19th century. I guess you're calling it left and right wing anarchism. Contemporary anarchists or people I used to talk to, like in the early 2000s, their anarchism emerged out of the anti globalization movement, like the Seattle protests and stuff like that.

So, they basically thought of anarchism as fundamentally a word meaning anti-capitalism. So then, when you say an Anarcho capitalism or Ancap, they hear that as just a straight up contradiction. But you can see why people think it's not a contradiction that if you had no state coercive authority, a free market would emerge, it would be a free market economic model. Now, I've got to say that I think that we have to think about economic and political power together. So, that's why I don't really like this whole left right model exactly. I think that you cannot have the kind of economic power that gigantic corporations and stuff have without the state sitting underneath it.

So, I think that basically both the left and the right tend to contrast state power and corporate power and think that one can be pitted against the other, that if you reduce state power, you increase corporate power, or if you reduce corporate power, you increase state power. But actually I think they vary together, and I think the whole history of capitalism tends to confirm that the state is necessary to capitalism. Also, I think China right now shows that capitalism and authoritarianism, and political authoritarianism are quite compatible.

So, I actually think like the left and right authoritarianism have run together. So, you kind of face this monster of a political and economic power that are totally inter locked. So, my own view is that you're going to have to try to work on dismantling those simultaneously. You're not going to be able to choose between them because they enhance and supplement each other or are not distinct. So I'm trying to get beyond this left-right model, I guess, is what I'm saying.

Anthony Comegna ([35:50](#)):

Well, that was quite a rush for me and I very much hope you all found it as valuable as I did. Crispin's a terribly interesting guy. He's the rebel par excellence, and he's constantly out there producing. If we've whetted your appetite, be sure to check out the books I mentioned before and his long list of others, his blog, [eyeofstorm.blogs.com](http://eyeofstorm.blogs.com), his many, many articles from over the years and his several other podcast appearances on shows like Non Serviam. While you're at it, looking those up, why not drop a rate and review for Ideas in Progress. You'll have my eternal thanks and it will very much help us keep the progress coming.