

# QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

## A conversation with Uri Gordon

The author of 'Anarchy Alive!' says the economic meltdown is a sign capitalism has reached its limits and explains why he won't be voting or serving in any army

Over the telephone Uri Gordon does not sound like he's gloating, but for an anarchist such as himself, the earth-shaking economic developments of the past six weeks have to have provided some satisfaction. After all, today's anarchists are certain of the wrong-headedness of the modern capitalist system, with its inevitable march toward a greater concentration of the world's wealth in an increasingly smaller number of hands. Most also see the need for a radical change in humanity's relationship with the environment, an understanding that seems to have been adopted by at least much of the West in recent months, as the effects of oil depletion and climate change become felt. Gordon, 32, is the author of "Anarchy Alive!: Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory" (Pluto Press, 183 pages, \$26.95/16 pounds), a somewhat high-brow analysis of contemporary anarchism. Raised in Haifa, Gordon received his doctorate in political theory from Oxford University in 2005; his thesis served as the basis for the book. But as he describes in the book's introduction, he arrived in the United Kingdom in the fall of 2000, after the anti-globalization movement had begun to draw tens of thousands to its demonstrations, and shortly before the huge protests in Europe against the imminent allied invasion of Iraq. He soon found himself spending as much time on the barricades as in the library. He resolved the apparent conflict, he writes, when he realized that "I could easily construe my activism as fieldwork, and actually gear my academic work to the needs of activists."

"Anarchy Alive!" deals with most of the big questions curious readers might have about the movement: its connection to the violently revolutionary anarchism of the early 20th century, and the views of today's anarchists on violence; the attitude of anarchists to technology and to environmental issues, and why it is that so many of the protesters against Israel's West Bank separation barrier seem to be anarchists – part of a general discussion of anarchism and the question of Israel/Palestine.

Gordon describes the integral concept for anarchists of "prefigurative action," which in the simplest terms means that they are not waiting for a revolution in order to begin living according to their beliefs. Since another major tenet of the movement is the need for decentralization of all aspects of life, it makes perfect sense that many anarchists live in small communities, and try to achieve a level of sustainability. Gordon, for example, is a resident of Kibbutz Lotan, up the road from Ketura, where he teaches politics and ethics at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies. (He has also contributed several opinion articles on environmental themes to Haaretz English Edition.) He spoke to us from there.

**Q** How did you happen to become an anarchist?

**A** I grew up in a left-wing family, although my parents were not politically active. I did my army service in Army Radio, and reported from the West Bank during 1996-1997, covering the redeployment from the cities. I became interested in environmental issues after my release, when I picked up a book, "Our Angry Earth," by Isaac Asimov and Frederick Pohl. It helped me realize that this would be the defining issue of the coming century. I started studying politics and economics at Tel-Aviv University, looking at environmental issues from a philosophical and economic perspective; I also became involved with groups like Green Action and in the struggle against the Trans-Israel Highway. It became clear to me that exploitation of nature by humans is intimately connected with the exploitation of humans by humans.

**Q** How would you summarize the basic tenets of anarchist beliefs?

**A** We object to centralization of power, to hierarchical structures in society and to the institution of the state. We're opposed to capitalism and social classes, to school systems designed to produce obedient workers and citizens, and to most forms of organized religion. We believe in horizontal forms of organization, in voluntary association and mutual aid, and believe that decisions should be made at the smallest or most local level possible.

**Q** Does this mean that you won't vote in the upcoming election in Israel, or wouldn't serve in the army today?

**A** I probably won't vote. In principle, I don't want to signify my consent to be ruled, or my acquiescence to a system whereby we get to choose who pushes us around. Elections give people the illusion of democratic participation, but as the famous Jewish anarchist Emma Goldman said: If voting changed anything, they'd make it illegal. And no, I wouldn't serve in any army of any country. If everyone were an anarchist, there wouldn't be armies and there wouldn't be wars.

**Q** You seem to be ignoring the basic characteristics of human nature. Given the choice, societies – even the kibbutz – seem to prefer capitalism, inequality as it may be. And humans also seem to be naturally aggressive, no?

**A** I don't agree. If you ask people, do you want to take orders or do your own thing, to compete or to cooperate – I think that if they had the choice to think about it, rather than being indoctrinated by a society based on competition and hierarchy, they would choose cooperation. Anarchists always say that their forms of organization are not novel. Most human relationships are naturally horizontal and cooperative. There's a difference between order and hierarchy. Anarchy is also a form of order, but it's based on agreement, rather than command. On agreed rules rather than



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enforced laws that protect the privileged from the many.

**Q** But just look at the way people behave in Israel, driving – and parking – as if there were nobody else on the streets.

**A** People behave the way they do because of their culture and their mutual expectations. It's not surprising that in a culture that educates us to compete with each other and either to command or to obey, you'd get people trying to elbow their way around and do as much as they can for their own benefit. Anarchism also calls for a revolution in consciousness and culture, one that will allow free rein to human sociable instincts, to mutual aid.

**Q** It all sounds good, but what if everyone really were an anarchist? Would we have institutions like hospitals, universities, or even airlines?

**A** Centralized economies aren't the only way to organize production and services. In an anarchist system, any form of productive activity would be owned and run directly by the workers, rather than by private bosses or the state. Production would be for need, not for profit. Various workers' enterprises would coordinate between themselves to perform any larger scale tasks. The basic idea is that, if you leave people to their own devices, they will organize quite well, and that top-down, centralized forms of organization are in place to maintain existing systems of privilege and domination, rather than in order to get things done.

Look at Catalonia, during the high stages

of the Spanish Revolution, in 1936. There was a well-formed anarchist system. The peasants owned the land, tram workers ran the trams, and everything functioned – and this was in middle of a civil war. The original kibbutzim were also anarchistic, even if they didn't call themselves that. In Degania, the founders said, we are trying to create a society without exploited and exploiters. We want direct democracy, from each according to their ability and to each according to their needs.

**Q** You say you wouldn't serve in the army today. But what if every Israeli said that – surely you don't deny that Israel has genuine defense concerns?

**A** I think that occupation creates terrorism, and not vice versa. If all Israelis had the political consciousness to refuse to go to military service, we would have already arrived in a revolutionary situation. It would mean that they had all shed their artificial, drummed-up fears and risen up against their exploiters. In general, though, when people discuss politics, they put themselves in the place of the politician and imagine what they would do. But people like you and me aren't being asked what we think the state should do. Whatever agreement the political elites end up signing is not going to be the end of the conflict. It's only the beginning of the peace process. What matters at this stage is building ties of binational solidarity and cooperation, to have grassroots movements that seek to show and demonstrate with their own acts and lives that another Middle East is possible. You don't have to be an anarchist to agree that it's through everyday relationships that peace is accomplished. So when my friends and I go to villages of Palestinians whose lands are being confiscated for construction of the segregation barrier, we are showing with our own bodies that something is stronger than the perpetual threat being projected by parties on all sides of the political spectrum. We are showing that we have values that transcend all forms of separation.

**Q** Do you see the economic meltdown as a vindication of your beliefs?

**A** I think the current global financial crisis is definitely a strong indication that capitalism is reaching its limits, and so I am convinced that various efforts to "buy time," in this sense, are not going to cut it. On one hand, we are reaching the limits of the finite planet that we live on – of the resources we can extract, and the pollution we can emit – and on the other, a system of capitalism based on speculation on future debt is no longer managing to function. The way out is not for governments to bail out the banks, but for people to begin creating grassroots structures that are self-sufficient, and that will allow them to detach themselves from both capitalism and the state.

**Q** We're talking just before the election in the U.S., but it occurs to me that you probably don't care who wins it.

**A** Actually, I want Obama to win, because I hope that when he breaks everybody's hearts, people will then wake up to the fact that it doesn't matter whether it's a blue or red puppet in capitalism's hand. At the same time, in the short term, we've had eight years of a very right-wing administration in Washington, which has dragged the whole world into a very bad position, and just the relief from that will make a difference in the lives of many Americans, and many Iraqis, hopefully, and Palestinians and Israelis.

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