

London and the Spectre of Anarchy: Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* as Urban History

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Summary

This article discusses how the criminal threat of anarchist attack was treated in G.K. Chesterton's novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday*. The novel captures a particular moment of public concern about terrorism and serves as an object of cultural history in its depiction of London as a den of crime. The plot focuses on an undercover policeman who infiltrates a terror cell. The kind of terrorism depicted was a real threat, yet Chesterton parodied both the aspirations of anarchists, and the anti-terror efforts of law enforcement. This article considers the historical background of anarchism and how the history of the city is part of the novel's framework.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is 'n bespreking van hoe die kriminele bedreiging van anargistiese aanval hanteer is in GK Chesterton se roman, *The Man Who Was Thursday*. 'n Bepaalde oomblik van openbare kommer oor terreur word in die roman vasgelê en dit dien as 'n objek van kulturele geskiedenis in die uitbeelding van Londen as 'n misdaadnes. Die intrige fokus op 'n geheime polisieman wat 'n terreursel infiltreer. Die aard van die terreur wat uitgebeeld word, was werklik 'n bedreiging; tog het Chesterton die anargiste se aspirasies, sowel as die anti-terreur-pogings van wets-toepassing geparodieer. In hierdie artikel word die historiese agtergrond van anargisme, en hoe die geskiedenis van die stad deel van die roman se raamwerk is, bestudeer.

G.K. Chesterton's novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, was first published in 1908 and tapped into the contemporary concern about anarchist threats. There had been a wave of anarchist-related attacks all over the world in recent decades, and anarchists seemed to be a looming political menace. The novel is set in London and this article will explore how the phenomenon of anarchism (as a historical fact as well as a literary plot) connects to the history of the city.

The hero of the novel is Gabriel Syme, a police officer recruited to an undercover unit. Syme meets Lucian Gregory, an anarchistic poet, and challenges him to prove he is serious about anarchism. Gregory then takes Syme to a secret meeting of anarchist leaders. The central council consists of seven men, each using the name of a day of the week; during the meeting Syme – presenting himself as a keen anarchist – ends up elected to the vacant position of “Thursday”.

As he attempts to subvert the anarchist council from within, Syme eventually discovers that five other members are also undercover detectives. They soon find out they were fighting each other and not real anarchists, and the question is raised of whether anarchists themselves are more smoke and mirrors than real threat. The realisation that the members of the council are actually police officers is both a relief and a horror. If they are all policing each other, who are the real anarchists? Some have seen a religious message in this novel, but I wish rather to uncover its message about the atomisation of urban life, and the fears for London under threat from anarchists (Boyd 2008).

The Role of Urban Anarchists

Terrorism underwent a profound change in the late nineteenth century, coming closer to the modern criminal and political concept we know today. This change was partly ideological (with new groups seeking the overthrow of capitalism), and technological (dynamite was invented in 1866) (Gage 2009: 4). Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, considered the father of anarchism, had coined the phrase “property is theft!” in 1840. Anarchism as a doctrine would grow in support and visibility in the turmoil of revolutionary Europe. Bombings could also be carried out by an individual, so the “dynamite bomb was thought to equalise the power of the individual with that of the police” (Phillips 2003: 67).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, anarchist attacks took place around the world, from targeted assassinations to bombings aimed at the general public. Spain and France saw multiple attacks though the 1880s. In 1891, US President William McKinley was shot by anarchist Leon Czogolz. McKinley’s death was part of a wave of international assassinations, including those of Marie François Sadi Carnot, president of France, in 1894; Antonio Cánovas, prime minister of Spain, in 1897; the Empress Elizabeth of Austria in 1898; and King Humbert of Italy in 1900. For many anarchist sympathisers, the understanding of “propaganda of the deed” was not limited to the extremes of bombings. Smaller rebellions against “the system” also filled this role, including everything from petty theft to rent strikes and common-law marriage (Skirda 2002: 53).

The *British Medical Journal* in 1906 published a short article on “The Psychology of the Anarchist”. The article argues that anarchists are not necessarily insane; rather that anarchists consist of two types. The “misguided enthusiast” (who may be highly intelligent and sane), and the “perverted follower” (the “insane or degenerate, easily influenced and specially liable to emotional appeals”). The latter were those encouraged by the former to commit violence in aid of political goals.¹ A similar analysis could be made of modern terrorist organisations: the charismatic leaders, and the (often psychologically vulnerable) followers, who are persuaded to strap on the Semtex vest.

As with terror groups today, the level of media and public interest in anarchists was disproportionate to their numbers (Shpayer-Makov 1988). However, that is the general rule of terrorist groups: the number of operatives is necessarily small (a disinclination to participate in violence being fortunately widespread among humans) but what they lack in numbers they make up for in spectacular crimes. London was spared most of the outrages committed by anarchists, but Londoners were certainly aware of (and alarmed by) what was happening elsewhere.

Anarchists also came to prominence at the time of two key sociological advances. The first was the spread of mass media and rapid communication. The nineteenth century saw print media expand for a newly urban, literate population, and those publications could report news from all over the world, thanks to the telegraph. The second was the rise of the professional police force, with surveillance or detective roles within its purview. Anarchists (and other political dissidents) found themselves under the supervision of police agents across Europe.

Nor were anarchists in London only under surveillance by British authorities. Various European states had agents operating in different cities to keep track of troublesome countrymen abroad, particularly political dissidents in exile (Jensen 2013: 70; Paola 2007). Compared to other nations in Europe, Britain was very open to foreigners. The Aliens Act of 1793 had been repealed in 1826. Through the rest of the nineteenth century, this made the UK the destination of choice for many political exiles, who were allowed to carry on their politics publicly. No political refugee was refused entry or expelled until the Aliens Bill of 1905 (Zamoyski 2014; Gainer 1972).

This meant that wave after wave of political dissidents of various stripes had gravitated to London. Italians in the 1820s, then Poles, Spaniards, French in the 1830s. Most of the Poles were republican, and joined with the Radicals and Chartists in the UK. Austro-Hungarian authorities considered London to be a hotbed of subversives (Zamoyski 2014). In the 1890s, Britain was reluctant to enter into international cooperation to monitor anarchist

1. “The Psychology of the Anarchist”, *The British Medical Journal*, 9 June 1906.

groups, or to crack down on publication in the UK of political materials, which advocated violence, for distribution abroad. Britain's freedom of the press and common-law traditions were against the kind of agreements requested by Spain, France, and others. This reluctance, however, contributed to the "European mainland's stereotype of a selfish Britain that assured its own impunity from bomb attacks by offering anarchists an asylum that they exploited by venturing forth to assault the population and rulers of the continent" (Jensen 2013).²

This is not to say British authorities were oblivious to the risks of terrorism, just that the main threat in London had been hitherto from another source: Fenians. Fenian attacks had been a looming threat since the Clerkenwell Outrage of 1867 (which killed 12), and at least 10 bombings between 1880 and 1885 (which led to the creation of Special Branch).

The situation for anarchists in London was mocked in the newspapers, with a reporter alleging:

In France they are guillotined, in Germany imprisoned, in Russia sent to Siberia, in Turkey bowstrung, in Italy put into fortresses, in Spain treated to the garrote, and in America either hanged or electrocuted. But in England, in the midst of this enslaved and downtrodden metropolis, they assemble in Trafalgar Square on Sunday afternoon, under the protection of the police, to propound their doctrines of universal annihilation and to flaunt under the statue of Nelson their banner with the mottoes: "Neither God nor master." "Property is robbery!"

The reporter summarised the anarchists' arguments as "Everybody who has anything is a monopolist and ought to be abolished".³

The rally described was in response to the incarceration of the Walsall anarchists. This ring were arrested in 1892 for allegedly making explosives, later believed to have been led by an agent provocateur working for the newly-established Special Branch.

In 1894, French anarchist Martial Bourdin attempted the first actual anarchist bombing in London. He ended up killing only himself, when the bomb detonated as he carried it through the Royal Observatory Park in Greenwich. This attempt plus the Fenian campaign influenced Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, which was contemporaneous to *The Man Who*

2. It is perhaps worth noting here the similarity with this view and that which emerged towards Belgium in 2015-2016, when it was suggested the Belgians had been happy to harbour members of Islamic extremist groups, as long as the bombers directed their actions abroad. See Andrew Higgins, Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura and Katrin Bennhold, In: Neighborhood Known for Extremists, a Trail of Petty Crimes and Missed Plots, *New York Times* (2015: 1).

3. "London Day by Day" *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 April 1893. Excerpted as "Lucky Times for English Anarchists" *New York Times*, 23 April 1893.

Was Thursday (published in 1907) but was set in 1886. It also features foreign spies and terrorists, and the plot of secret international cabals in London.

Anarchists are the perfect villains for literature, as they are so amorphous (anyone could be secretly an anarchist) and their aims so ill-defined. As terrorist groups and their role in the community imaginary, anarchists are unique precisely because they have no aims or ideals; ideals of nationalism or religion (fuelling other terrorist groups) are what they hope to destroy. Their association with “shady foreigners” played into existing stereotypes. There was a tendency in the popular press to call any foreign criminal in London an “anarchist” (Shpayer-Makov 1988). They are also a distinctively urban type, as Robert Redfield suggested:

Among social types that appear in this aspect of the cultural process in the city are the reformer, the agitator, the nativistic or nationalistic leader, the tyrant and his assassin, the missionary and the imported school teacher. (Redfield 1969)

The anarchist is the counterpart to the flaneur as the figure of urban modernity. Whereas one may be a flaneur, the anarchist is the Other. Their existence highlighted rifts in politics, as William Phillips has argued:

Despite their lack of numbers, anarchists obtained notoriety in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century because anarchist narratives exposed the hidden conflicts of other ideological discourses; each group feared and opposed the anarchists for reasons that reveal the assumptions and internal narratives of that group. (Phillips 2003)

Anarchists obviously threatened social order but threatened even other radical groups.

The narratives of the anarchist were also plastic enough to make them anyone’s villain. They are an urban product, lurking in alleys, in the back of smoke-filled bars. They don’t live in the countryside: the anarchist is a figure of industrial dissatisfaction. Perhaps a factory worker. A longshoreman. The anarchist is a working-class radical. Of course, the makeup of self-proclaimed anarchist groups was far more heterodox. Like many radical movements, those who claimed the mantle of leaders were typically more educated and from middle classes. The term “anarchist” cloaked a range of actual political goals, like the Serbian Black Hand who would come to global public attention with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and who were ethnonationalists rather than anarchists. Many had issues with labour rights, or socialist goals that were a lot more local and specific than global anarchy.

The history of anarchists and the cultural imaginary though is much broader, as “anarchist” attracted a broad definition. It meant anything from

socialism to nationalism, to general nihilist troublemaking. There was an edge of international mystery and even glamour to anarchy for a time. The idea of international cells, a global web of terror, gave anarchists more credit for centralised organisation than they actually deserved. Anarchy was an easy explanation for what were sometimes complicated or confusing political factions. Anarchists were believed to be dodgy foreigners, and it went without saying in common belief that London was full of them.

Against this backdrop, William Phillips suggests that *The Man Who Was Thursday* is a “dramatic shift” in the depiction of anarchism. Rather than the seeds of a revolution, Chesterton sees comic potential (Phillips 2003). There is certainly a dark absurdism to the story, described as “ludic” by other scholars (McCorristine 2012).

The Role of London

The Man Who Was Thursday is striking for its specific evocation of London, and use of the big city as an element of the plot. To Syme, Leicester Square looks “so alien and in some ways so continental”. London is English, yet also every-city:

Between the open square and the sunlit leaves and the statue and the Saracenic outlines of the Alhambra, it looked like the replica of some French or even Spanish public place. And this effect increased in Syme the sensation, which in many shapes he had had through the whole adventure, the eerie sensation of having strayed into a new world. As a fact, he has bought bad cigars round Leicester Square ever since he was a boy. But as he turned that corner, and saw the trees and the Moorish cupolas, he could have sworn that he was turning into an unknown Place de something-or-other in some foreign town. (Chesterton 1995: 37)

For a reader today, Syme’s description of Leicester Square recreates a lost London, the Alhambra having been demolished in 1936. He also demonstrates the discombobulation of the urban experience, the way in which a city can seem old and new at once even to a flâneur who is a long-term resident.

In these images of the city, Syme is consuming the city even as he traverses it: either in pursuit or being pursued by the anarchist interests he has infiltrated. Syme is that most urban of creatures, the detective.⁴ While not in the mould of whodunnit detective novels, Chesterton uses the plain-clothes police officer as his protagonist, who will guide the reader through the underworld.

4. For the detective as the quintessential urban figure, see David Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity*, Polity, Cambridge, 2001.

The Man Who Was Thursday, while subtitled “a nightmare”, is a love song to London in many ways. London and its police force, full of men like Syme and his colleagues, ready to defend the city. Defended from what, however? This is the nightmare, that perhaps the forces of control are the threat themselves. While Chesterton’s anarchist ring are in some ways a projection of all the most paranoid fears of anarchists, he was tapping into a very real concern of the period.

Indeed, the ideas voiced are seen in the speeches of revolutionaries through the twentieth century. Syme is, although a police detective, an everyman in this world of the strange. The idea that cities hold worlds within worlds, and hidden societies, is a recurring theme. Not just that they are literally hidden, meeting in underground bunkers and secret hiding places, but hidden in plain sight. The twist of identity, that any man may secretly be an anarchist – and any anarchist an undercover police officer – demonstrate the crowd effect of urban life. The ability to blend with their surroundings is a key skill for policemen and criminals alike and being unable to recognise who was who is part of the anonymity of the modern city.

Margaret Crawford has argued of urban detective fiction: “unlike the flâneur, who derives his pleasures by skimming along the visible surfaces of the city, the detective’s goal is to penetrate below the surface to discover the meanings hidden in the city’s streets. The detective’s unique access to these urban secrets allow him, like a psychoanalyst, to go beyond the purely visible to read the city’s collective unconscious” (Crawford 1996). The legibility of the city’s unconscious is a theme we can also see in Syme’s understanding of the city. He feels connected to London.

He also speaks of a London – and an England – that is full of marvels. His descriptions are an evocation of the sublime. This is what anarchists would threaten, he tells us, this is what we must defend. At the same time however, the confusion and dislocation of the technological age is evident. Old trust networks are broken down by volumes of population. We must deal with strangers every day in the city: and we must all become detectives in these encounters, figuring out who they are and what they represent from the clues before us. We must develop our own code of recognition. Anonymity exists even within the police force: Syme does not know his colleagues, who are also undercover among the anarchists.

Chesterton also argues against the stereotyping of anarchists as foreigners: the anarchist may not be a foreigner, but a man whose Englishness is not in question. Those who wish most to destroy the system may come from within rather than without. Likewise, those who are on the side of the good, to defend us, may be foreign, may be different. Appearances are deceiving, and there is more to being right than the importance of being English. He details the experience of living in London, the city that would be threatened by

anarchists. Its openness to all comers being its strength and its Achilles' heel.

The intertwining of the police and the anarchist council suggests that, in fact, the threat will come from within, not from abroad. He is also keen to point out that the danger is not "the poor" or the immigrant. The London we see is not one of slums and street criminals either. The threat of the anarchist is the threat of the earlier garrotting panic: its randomness making it more frightening than other crime (Davis 1980). Having money or living in a nice area would not be protection: indeed these things may make you more of a target to those whose goal is to create chaos.

Women are not participants in the action, nor are they there as props or onlookers to the male world. Gregory's sister appears at the start and the end, but she was not present for most of the action. She belongs to the "normal" London, the waking world that bookends the "nightmare".

That crime and policing are largely male spheres is evident. Pre-suffrage, the political role of women was necessarily limited. But nor does Chesterton feature those quintessential urban women, prostitutes or shoppers. That they don't have a role in the plot is one thing, but nor are they invoked as potential victims of the coming anarchist threat. Chesterton doesn't present "women and children" as the potential vulnerable victims, rather the city itself would be the victim of any attack.

The city is a living organism that would be threatened, and it is London that we are waiting to see saved, not "England" or more abstract ideals like democracy or freedom. A contrast can be made with the hero of another political thriller. The London that Syme runs through, is the same city as that of his contemporary hero, Richard Hannay, of John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. But the cities are very different. Both are the backdrop for political plots, but whereas for Syme the city is home, for Hannay it is only "home", the metropolis of the great empire which is admired from the distance of Cape Town, but up close is found wanting. He finds London boring and flees to Scotland. Hannay is precisely about defending abstract qualities of Britishness against alien threat, London itself is just a "god-forsaken metropolis", its value being only as the capital of empire, not in itself.

The author, through Syme, with his marvelling at elements of the city, is the opposite of Simmel's blasé urbanite (Simmel 2012). He experiences the city with fresh eyes despite long familiarity with it, in part because his contact with the anarchists has shown him that all is not as it seems. His experience of London demonstrates the personification of the city as in Michel de Certeau's ideas (De Certeau 1988). His wonder at modern transport and social organisation verge on absurd but serve in fact to make us marvel at the city and its technologies anew.

Syme's challenge is understanding how someone, who benefits from all the city offers, could want to destroy it. Gregory tells him:

So you talk about mobs and the working classes as if they were the question. You've got that eternal idiotic idea that if anarchy came it would be from the poor. Why should it? The poor have been rebels, but they have never been anarchists: they have more interest that anyone else in there being some decent government. The poor man really has a stake in the country. The rich man hasn't; he can go away to New Guinea in a yacht. The poor have sometimes objected to being governed badly; the rich have always objected to being governed at all. Aristocrats were always anarchists, as you can see from the barons' wars. (Chesterton 1995: 97)

In this, Chesterton was expressing the belief that anarchism was often an intellectual pose by the affluent rather than a sincere revolutionary goal from the downtrodden.

Although the book is Edwardian, it prefigures the Cold War spy thriller in many ways, and our current approaches to terrorism. The anarchists themselves are strange but also charismatic. Gregory, the young anarchist poet, seems like many earnest young people who were seduced into revolutionary movements over the last century. Chesterton also lays hints for conspiracy plotters – the conspiracy theory being another child of the information age. The idea of the secret High Council of anarchists can be seen in the same way as other paranoid theories about the Freemasons, the Illuminati, or whomever else. That there are many such cells, all over the world, that anarchy would be impossible to root out, can be taken as the message. We end with London at peace but for how long? The idea that we must cherish this city is part of Syme's conclusion.

However, in reality, ideas of shadowy anarchist forces were given official encouragement. One theory ran that there was an international hierarchy of anarchists: a Triangle (three men) running all operations in the USA, and they in turn getting approval from Europe before bombings were carried out. Jennifer Fronc argues against the likelihood of the Triangle existing, but such ideas were given credibility by being taken seriously by official investigators (Fronc 2009: 161).

Anarchist groups as existed were claimed by members to be nothing more than small talking shops, almost "coffee mornings" at which participants were not asked to commit to anything, or even to reveal their names. Such groups were easy targets for *agents provocateur*, and various crackpots, much to the exasperation of "true" anarchists (Skirda 2002: 52-53).

Chesterton is also depicting a phase in the professionalisation of police forces and the development of undercover policing. Special Branch was relatively new, and the notion of the undercover detective was still contentious. When the detective emerged as part of an organised force, a civil servant (rather than a private investigator), he was a figure of the bureaucratic age. Through Syme, although clearly competent and brave, we see how much he is in the dark. And this can be another reading of Chesterton's "nightmare" – that the police will be unable to anticipate and counter the

actions of such political groups, even with an army of skilled men like Syme.

The evocation of London makes this a distinctly urban novel (although not everything takes place in the city). Joseph Kestner called it the “pinnacle of the detective story as an urban genre” (Kestner 2000). Syme is the detective/hero in a narrative which is more a hall of mirrors than the steady unfolding of a crime novel. His descriptions of London have a dreamlike quality, that befits the city of fog and river-mist, often partly hidden, and offering hiding places for others.

Conclusion

The Man Who Was Thursday can be read as prefiguring Orwell, in expressing unease about the surveillance state. Or even suggesting that police, by monitoring dissident groups, end up causing crimes through their own *agents provocateur*. This was certainly an opinion that emerged about the Walsall Anarchist case (1892), in which several anarchists were convicted of bomb-making, thanks to a police agent within their ranks who many felt had actually instigated the plot. The case was controversial, and rallies in support of the imprisoned men continued for several years (Nicoll 1892).

The challenge of anarchists is that they represented the modern and urban while harking back to our most primal fear: the unpredictable danger. Anarchists as a group also managed to straddle two identities in the public (and press) imaginations: the first as a criminal group, bent on violence, the second as foreign agents. The idea that they lurked among us tapped into almost paranoid tribal tendencies, one played upon most effectively in police states. For those who saw chaos abroad and feared it arriving, the spectre of the bomb throwing anarchist was terrifying.

In truth, Britain did not suffer many anarchist attacks. This is perhaps surprising, considering how many anarchists were supposed to be in the immigrant population: as Chesterton was suggesting, the fears outweighed the risk. Even the most activist leftist groups in Britain didn't incline towards actually overthrowing the state. Nowadays, the anarchist seems a quaint historical curiosity, not a threat. The Red Scare is long gone. The fanatics we fear today tend to be religious or sectarian terrorists, not political.

But the kind of surveillance Chesterton was anticipating has grown by leaps and bounds. We have various anti-terror measures all over the city, from cameras to signs exhorting us to “see something, say something”. From the attacks of the IRA to ISIS, London's terror anxiety is reflected in surveillance apparatus everywhere. The city is full of CCTV to a degree beyond most other cities (Norris 2006). Foreigners are still monitored, lest they be importing unrest from abroad. Chesterton's work fit into a period of

transition gesturing towards today, in which consciousness of borders, citizenship and nationality were becoming more salient, the notion of foreigner became more clearly delineated. (Passports were not a requirement in the UK until the First World War).

And it is possible to draw comparisons between the anarchists of over a century ago and the dangers of groups like ISIS today. Part of the problem with anarchists, which made them particularly frightening, was precisely the fact that they were a faceless organisation. They were not a group with a known leader, whose aims were clear. The practical nihilism of putting anarchism into practice means it was never going to succeed as an outright goal, but it is precisely this nihilism and wanton destructiveness that has attracted many angry young men to other terrorist groups as well.

Chesterton's use of the anarchist in London was a parable about the role of police in the surveillance state, in a way that was quite prescient through the twentieth century. We've had more stories emerge in the decades since of radical groups being infiltrated by police officers, for good or ill. The discovery that the police had effectively created their own bogeyman seems rather apt when we consider police overreach and paranoia, but it lasted up to the present day.

If anarchism's goal was to rend apart European society, the Great War did it for them, and they largely fell from view. The rapid changes brought about by the conflict changed the political order in Europe. Anarchism had flourished as a peculiarly peacetime threat, representative not of an enemy state but of a worldview that would be rendered irrelevant by changing geopolitics. Effectively prefiguring the changing crime landscape of the twentieth century, the fears articulated in *The Man Who Was Thursday* reflect ongoing concerns about urban crime, the lure of terrorism, and the limits of police power.

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