Anarchism as a doctrine has a peculiar fascination for scholars. It both repels and attracts. It attracts because it embodies rage — the particular rage people have when they see man as an obstacle to his own humaneness. It is the ultimate statement of how outrageous the human condition can be. But it is precisely because man does not live by rage alone, but must master it by discovering proximate means to solving the ordinary problems of daily life, that anarchism repels. It seem a romantic luxury at best — a cry of pain for the future, just as nostalgia is for the past and, like nostalgia, this cannot fail to be attractive.

Perhaps because of this anarchism is not a mere reflection of anger but also a contributing source. It is thus more than a lightning rod for the anger that exists. Anarchism is associated with unreason and bombs, violence and irresponsibility. The ancestral cry of the anarchist in the 19th century is that ‘the only good bourgeois is a dead one’. On this score the doctrine remains unregenerate. But its attack is not limited to capitalism. The anarchist rejection of socialism and Marx because of their centralist contradictions is equally complete. Hence anarchism assigns itself a position of extreme vulnerability. Moreover none of the major social doctrines can absorb anarchism because, where it is most fundamental, it is anti-political — that is, it does not really offer political solutions. Although the language of today’s anarchism is more psychologically sophisticated it remains a primitive doctrine which wants to convert a structural condition of hate into a sentiment of love, and by the same token transform rage into peace.

Some theorists of anarchism such as Kropotkin stressed the need for rationality and theory. Others perhaps more persuasive because of their own personal vitalism urged the importance of violence, as did Bakunin. The virtue of anarchism as a doctrine is that it employs
a socialist critique of capitalism and a liberal critique of socialism. Because of this its doctrines remain important even when they lead it in the direction of terrorism and agitation, much of it of the hit-and-run variety. This critique is one cause for its revival which comes as a surprise because anarchism had appeared to have run its course in the early part of the 20th century. It was quaint, its leaders slightly comical, and relegated to a shelf of antique doctrine which included Annie Besant and the Theosophist movement and the burned out engineers of Technocracy, Inc.

Clearly, anarchism has turned out to be like other antiques, capable of renewed significance in the social and aesthetic lives of many people. It has darkened with time. Some of its power is black. The black flag belongs now to black people as well as others. (In this respect anarchism is reaching out to people other than the bourgeois radicals who were its most ardent followers in the past.) In India the effects of Ruskin’s doctrines on Gandhi and in Japan the more direct acquaintance with the writings of early anarchists also helped to give anarchism a more international flavour, and a universality lacking in its earlier period when confined to Western Europe, Russia and the USA. Anarchism today is a form of liberalism which rejects capitalism; as a doctrine of individualism divorced from the classic western form it has relevance despite the flamboyance and gesticulations of some of its practitioners. The latter should not dissuade us from recognizing that the ground covered by anarchism is as a normative antithesis to contemporary capitalism and socialism. Anarchism in this normative sense can be separated from its organizational characteristics and seen to stand on its own. Indeed, in the nature of the case organization could never be a strong point of anarchists. As a moral phenomenon, no matter how much it waxes and wanes it has constant roots in the fundamentally offending character of organization qua organization.

In this commentary, and it can be no more than that, I will consider four main aspects of anarchism as a normative force. First, compared with socialism or liberalism it can be seen as a discontinuous phenomenon. There has been no consistent accumulation of ideas and theories. This discontinuous quality of anarchism, however, is as we have suggested, likely to be confusing. Anarchism may appear to be dead when it is dormant and exceptionally fresh when it springs to life. Secondly, as a doctrine it differs from others insofar as it is concerned with meaning more as rejection but projects no specific structural solution. Moreover, because anarchism leaves