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Actual Anarchists Talk About New York’s ‘Anarchist Jurisdiction’ Designation

**They commented, you will not be surprised to
learn, by committee.**

Talia Lavin

September 22, 2020

It was surprising news to the some 8 million New Yorkers who awoke yesterday, the last day of summer, to find that, according to the federal government, we were all living in an “anarchist jurisdiction.” Across the city, the leaves on curbside trees were starting to turn, flowers remained in their orderly beds, and diners at the many impromptu streateries, tablecloths flapping in the brisk autumn breeze, continued uninterrupted. Yet federal tax dollars would now be withheld, we were told, because of “widespread or sustained violence or destruction” in the city. The Justice Department cited a \$1 billion decrease in the NYPD fiscal-year 2021 budget. Portland and Seattle got the same designation.

In the interest of fully understanding this much-maligned political ideology, and where our city fits in its history — not to mention the long-standing tactic of governments labeling

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anything they dislike “anarchy” — Curbed turned to some actual New York City–area anarchists to ask them about the new designation. Anarchism is often conflated with out-of-control violence, but that’s an inaccurate portrayal. As journalist and anarchist Kim Kelly pointed out in the *Washington Post*, “Key anarchist principles include mutual aid (a reciprocal approach to community care in which people share resources), direct action (the use of political protest to achieve a goal), and horizontalism (a non-hierarchical organizational system in which decisions are made by consensus).”

In typical anarchist fashion, most of the responses we received were mediated through organizations and committees — a feature of anarchist organizing perhaps even more ubiquitous than the black flag. But if one thing is clear, we’re a long way off from the hierarchy-free vision anarchists have for the city. The organizers of the Anarchist Book Fair Collective — which has moved its annual NYC event, usually a fixture and a draw for the “anarcho-curious” in Washington Square Park, online this year due to COVID — were vehement in their response. They pointed out that “jurisdiction” — “the official power to make laws and judgments,” as they put it — was a word inherently at odds with anarchist ideology. Furthermore, the collective pointed out, an omnipresent police force makes the designation even more absurd than the oxymoron itself. Just this week, the NYPD — seemingly unaware that New York City had “forbid[den] the police force from intervening to restore order,” as the Justice Department said — crushed a tiny anti-ICE protest just this week with bloody batons.

“NYC is a heavily surveilled and controlled city, with an enormous — and probably unnecessary — police force, who takes resources away from communities’ healthy development,” wrote a representative. An actual anarchist’s utopia, the representative noted, is very far from what the far right wants you to believe it is. “And, actually, that discourse normally also misrepresents what anarchist existence is.”

True anarchist existence, according to a response from the New York City Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Council, has a lot going for it. In an actual anarchist New York, “all New Yorkers will be as involved in building and caring for our city as they want to be, from block associations to councils for local food production or promoting racial justice,” wrote the MACC Information & Outreach Project. “We will embrace transformative justice and collectively determined community agreements over punishment, policing, or locking people in cages. The land of the five boroughs will be collectively nurtured and called upon to restore our health and our communities instead of sold, owned, rented, or polluted upon.”

In Our Hearts NYC, a local anarchist network, has spent the recent pandemic-straitened months demonstrating what mutual aid — the practice of helping people without the intervention of the state, a core tenet of their belief system — can look like in the five boroughs, working on creating a utopia one street corner at a time. One popular project, which has caught on around the city, is installing free-food fridges for those in need of direct relief. In Bed-Stuy, Bushwick, Fort Greene, and Upper Manhattan, fridges stocked by neighbors and for neighbors have popped up outdoors, perennially refreshed by systematic off-loading of surplus produce or just donations given on a whim.

The consensus of Brigada 71 — “a community of socially & politically conscious soccer/football fans supporting the New York Cosmos” whose slogan is “punk football, and football for all” — departs slightly from some of its more staid compatriots. (Though they describe themselves as “cosmopolitan anti-fascists,” and not all anti-fascists are anarchists, a recent blog post celebrates famed anarchist Emma Goldman.) “The designation is fucking rad,” they wrote to Curbed, adding an emoji of a black flag.