

Anarchism from the Margins

Introducing New Developments in Anarchist Studies

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Anarchism is enjoying a rather remarkable renaissance, in theory and in practice, through the first decades of the twenty-first century. Notably this renaissance is taking place simultaneously in the streets and in the schools, in activism as well as in academia. The reasons for the resurgence of anarchism are varied but without question the primary impetus has been the community opposition to neoliberal capitalist globalism and associated regimes of austerity and repression along with the pressing fact of ecological crisis. Many are inspired to act by the enormity of current social and ecological harms and the growing realization among wider sectors of the population that these are not problems that can be resolved within the framework of state managed capitalist development. At the same time many among newer generations of activists, and some of the earlier generations, have seen or learned from the failures of previous frameworks of resistance politics, particularly the statist forms of the various Marxisms and social democracies. For many, anarchism stands as the most promising basis for analyzing and understanding contemporary capitalist societies and for informing an opposition to capitalist arrangements in such a way as to pose a realistic, positive, liberatory alternative.

In the North American context it is reasonable to suggest that anarchism, both as social movement and as social theory, is presently at the highest level of activity and influence it has achieved at least since the flourishing of New Left politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is also safe to say that the diversity and depth of anarchist ideas, and the range of research and scholarship, are well beyond that achieved in that earlier wave (which does not detract from the great quality of many of those works of the 1960s and 1970s). Not only areas of study for which anarchism has a more ready association, such as sociology or politics, but fields such as horticulture, literary criticism, aesthetics, urbanism, and technology studies among others have seen developments in anarchist research.

Impetus

Significantly, social developments in terms of struggle and resistance have intersected with developments in terms of academic research and scholarship at various levels. Younger people engaged in struggles in the streets against capitalist globalization and neoliberal austerity have entered the post-secondary classrooms bringing their critique of existing structures with them and turning their critical eye toward academic disciplines that too often reinforce or sustain existing relations of power rather than, as scholarship should anyway, contesting them. At the same time current students are faced with the political impotency and inaction of the recent challengers to radical theory, notably postmodernism and poststructuralism and various cultural theories that have lost attentiveness to political and economic structures of power, exploitation, and inequality, and which have substituted detached personalistic cynicism for engaged collective action. And such “critical” theories have proven of little use as tools in the most pressing struggles of the day, particularly against neoliberal austerity and the new enclosures of land and labor. Indeed, the trajectory of postmodernist theorizing has shown it to be too easily rendered an apology for or facilitator of such processes.

The new scholars have sought alternatives to moribund mainstream and orthodox theories and, as they may have in the streets, found overlooked, forgotten, discarded histories of critical and radical theory that provide better, more insightful answers to their questions—they have found anarchism. Notably they have found that not only does anarchism address important con-

temporary concerns, they have also found that anarchist theory was often present at the inception of the academic field they are studying yet has been written out of the disciplinary record with only status quo political motivations to answer why. Attention, thus, has been given to applying anarchist analysis to understanding and advancing social struggles but also to rethinking the narratives framing recognized academic disciplines and scholarly practices.

From the Margins: The NAASN Conference

In the present context there is growing interest in anarchism as an important area of scholarly activity. In the current period anarchism has emerged as a vital critical perspective within disciplines as diverse as criminology and literary studies, geography and communications. At the same time many community members involved in community organizing have become interested in anarchism as offering relevant perspectives on social justice. This is reflected, in part, in the emergence of the North American Anarchist Studies Network itself and the success of the five annual NAASN conferences. NAASN brings together activists and academics, anarchist and non-anarchist scholars, all with interests in anarchism.

From January 16 to 18, 2014 the Fifth Annual North American Anarchist Studies Conference was held at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) in Surrey, British Columbia. As part of the conference the First Annual Surrey Anarchist Bookfair was held in the Conference Centre on January 18. Thursday, January 17 also included parallel sessions on Indigenous Food Sovereignty. These events saw more than 300 people attend the Surrey campus and participate in a range of events from panel discussions to workshops to roundtables.

These facts alone represent something of a significant development, both in terms of the wide interest in anarchist scholarship and research, involving community members as well as students and faculty, and in terms of local community organizing, in a suburban working class context outside of mainstream activist spheres in Metro Vancouver. As suburbs of Vancouver go Surrey is perhaps the least well regarded. It is a place many downtown Vancouver activists simply will not go, at least willingly. Surrey has had an undue reputation as a bit reactionary, despite histories of union activism and broad social democratic politics that would hint otherwise. Still the idea of an anarchist conference and bookfair in Surrey was greeted by many activists and community organizers with a good deal of scepticism. Yet, and this shows something of the contemporary draw of anarchist ideas, it worked and worked wonderfully. People showed up. And stayed. Many asked if there would be another event the following year (there will be).

One of the great benefits of developments like the North American Anarchist Studies Network and its annual conferences is an opportunity for mutual aid support among academics and activists. It provides new venues in which unique cross fertilizations and hybridities can occur. In NAASN the boundaries between disciplines dissolve somewhat and real multi (anti-) disciplinarity can occur. New projects too emerge. In Surrey it was a curious, but welcomed, occurrence that several anarchist scholars lived in Surrey but were unknown to each other, despite having lived nearby for years. The conference introduced them, revealed them to each other. Out of this relationships have been built. The conference announced the formation of the Kwantlen Center for Anarchist Studies, a new resource for developing new anarchist works and for hosting and archiving some previous ones.

Perspectives

This book represents works presented for and at the Fifth Annual North American Anarchist Studies Network Conference. Everyone scheduled to present at the conference was invited to submit their final paper to the collection. Most did (some were committed to other venues such as specific academic journals).

The papers collected here show a sampling of the great diversity of anarchist research, scholarship, and action. They show a variety of styles and commitments, theoretical emphases and practical approaches, both in the scholarship represented and the anarchist projects engaged with by the authors. A wonderful range of issues are addressed.

It is hoped the collection will provide an important new venue for intellectual and practical, research, engagement, and exchange. Despite the exciting growth in anarchist research and scholarship it is still difficult to find venues for anarchist works within traditional academic publishers and journals. This collection provides an important opportunity for publications by a variety of practitioners which might otherwise not find a venue for publication given the still limited opportunities for such critical, even radical, work.

This collection should make clear the vitality and vigor of contemporary anarchist scholarship. These are incisive, engaging, and engaged works. They pose the potentially profound insights of anarchist thought in various areas of social life and show the contributions to social understanding, broadly understood, of theoretical perspectives still in development. It is hoped that *New Developments in Anarchist Studies* will provide a useful new resource for teaching within the classroom and beyond.

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