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In the “Anarchist Jurisdiction” of New York City, I’ve Seen a Summer of Beautiful Anarchy

Lucy Diavolo

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Summer in New York City is so famously lovely that it can feel like a bit of a cliché to discuss it. When the weather is nice, every tree-lined street promises some tiny hidden moment of joy or wonder at the beauty of a city that never sleeps, but can often feel like a dream. But this summer has been real in a way that also verges on nightmarish.

The year 2020 has provided no shortage of horrors, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the latest reminders of the racist, anti-Black nature of police brutality. Rounding out the final turn on a year like this, a federal proclamation about our city government “permitting anarchy” can feel almost funny, an impossible farce. It might also be easy to deride it as simply a cheap campaign ploy from President Donald Trump’s Department of Justice to rile up parts of his base — especially when Seattle and Portland, two protest hot spots, are also in the mix.

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The media has used “anarchist jurisdiction” to describe what’s laid out in the DOJ declaration, though the DOJ didn’t use that term itself. But the phrasing is as much a laughable oxymoron as it is a troubling descriptor that demonstrates how Trump and his administration are eager to demonize somebody and, in a worst case scenario, identify the political dissidents he wants to crack down on. Given that Trump’s politics are so often based in persecution and Attorney General William Barr is out to prosecute protesters, there is a very real threat embedded in this for anyone who believes in the power of protest, whether they call themselves an anarchist or not. This threat isn’t emanating just from the White House, but from Republican state leaders like Florida governor Ron DeSantis, too.

While there is a grave threat embedded in this rhetoric, there’s also a grand irony because this summer in New York has felt like a chance to embody many of the principles of anarchism — the actual political philosophy, not the scary idea of it people like Trump use to target activists and frighten others. From pandemic-prompted mutual aid to a Black-led popular uprising against police brutality, this summer in the Big Apple has been a fruitful lesson in the principles of taking care of each other when the government fails us *and* of standing up to government-sponsored violence and terror.

New York spent the spring weathering the vanguard of the pandemic in the U.S., with COVID-19 forcing the city into shutdown as those who died were buried in mass graves. For me, the seclusion of the lockdown has at times been a mental torment, but it’s nothing compared to the agonizing decisions many have had to make about returning to work, especially in service jobs, while the SARS-CoV-2 virus is still out there.

And while these are the kinds of terrors that haunt my sleep, 2020 has also provided antidotes to these spiritual poisons, like how New Yorkers have come together to lower the daily rates of confirmed cases, hospitalizations, and deaths from COVID-19. The pandemic isn’t over, but here, in a city infamous for residents with

gruff exteriors, even the sourest faces usually have masks on them, a sign of the shared struggle we're all trying to lessen.

And in New York as elsewhere, another antidote has been an explosion of mutual aid work. As I wrote in March, the city was one of several places across the country where organizers sprung into action to provide grocery deliveries for neighbors and soap for incarcerated people. The mutual aid network in the neighborhood where I live, Bed-Stuy Strong, is still going...well, strong! Just last week on Instagram, they celebrated six months since their formation with a call for continued support.

Work like this embodies the concept of mutual aid laid out by Peter Kropotkin, the famed anarchist theorist, in his work *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. In the book, he argues that the survival of any species relies on members of that species taking care of each other. Kropotkin challenges the evolutionary notion of “survival of the fittest” with a conception of mutual aid as a way for animals (including humans) to help each other survive regardless of designations of fitness.

A similar spirit has been embodied in the Black Lives Matter protests across the country. In New York, one needed to look no further than city hall's doorstep in Manhattan, where an occupation protest calling for defunding the police turned into an encampment offering services for houseless New Yorkers. In the midst of a pandemic, it was ordinary people who staffed the volunteer stations until a New York Police Department raid forced people out of the area. This happened not long after Trump sent federal agents into Portland and threatened to do the same in New York, a threat he repeatedly made this summer. (Seattle's headline-generating Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone — a.k.a. CHAZ — was broken up by local police around the same time.)

In this sense, the DOJ proclamation is not just a possible campaign strategy, but a continuation of the presidential pressure campaign on state and city leaders to adhere to his “law and order” vision for the country. I also fear Trump may be laying the ground-

work for something even more sinister because, as *Teen Vogue* labor columnist Kim Kelly wrote for the *Washington Post* this summer, there is a historical tendency to blame anarchists for unrest. If nothing else, Trump at least tries to create the appearance he keeps his campaign promises, so if he is promising his base a crackdown on anarchists, it's not impossible that we'll see it actually happen, even if it is litigated like the Muslim ban or border wall.

The possibility of a crackdown on organizing and protest is frightening for potential targets and for society at large, and it's not limited to a Trump administration. Democratic nominee Joe Biden in July specifically mentioned prosecuting "anarchists" in the same sentence as "arsonists" in a statement that served as a denunciation of federal property damage amid protests.

The potential chilling effect that this kind of crackdown could have is momentous, especially in a time when it feels like more and more people are becoming politically activated by the blatant injustices all around us. The pandemic and the uprisings have underscored the duality of the world's ugliness: Despite what horrors of state negligence or violence may come, there always seems to be some indomitable human spirit ready to stand shoulder to shoulder or lend a helping hand.

It's Emma Goldman, another well-known anarchist thinker, who offers some insight into how times of political strife create these conditions. In her 1940 book *The Individual, Society, and the State*, she shared words that feel as prescient now as they must have then.

"The world is at a loss for a way out," Goldman wrote. "Parliamentarism and democracy are on the decline. Salvation is being sought in Fascism and other forms of 'strong' government."

Amid this tumult, Goldman wrote she viewed the state as "a term for the legislative and administrative machinery whereby certain business of the people is transacted, and badly so." She believed it functioned as a way "to give an appearance of legality and right to the wrong done by the few to the many," and operated with the "open, tacit, or assumed" consent of the governed, though she

argued this "alleged consent" can be manufactured through educational indoctrination.

"That consent is the belief in authority, in the necessity for it," Goldman wrote. "At its base is the doctrine that man is evil, vicious, and too incompetent to know what is good for him. On this all government and oppression is built."

And just there, in contrast to a doctrine of humanity's viciousness, we see the beauty of anarchist philosophy — the assumption that individual people can come together to care for one another without the state at all. As she put it, Kropotkin had already "demonstrated that only mutual aid and voluntary cooperation — not the omnipotent, all-devastating State — can create the basis for a free individual and associational life."

Last night, I had plans to meet a friend in Brooklyn's Fort Greene Park, the site of some of New York's first protests this summer, where a burning police van became a potent symbol of rebellion. We sat in the grass near where the Brooklyn Liberation march had rallied, another defining moment of New York's summer. There was no fiery inferno there last night, nor an outpouring of solidarity for Black trans people. It was just a park on a Monday evening, with masked people moseying, jogging, lounging, and walking their dogs.

At one point, a corgi the color of a perfectly toasted marshmallow dragged their owner to us to say hello. For a brief moment, that friendly little dog's eagerness to plop down on our blanket and lick my face on the last night of summer felt like a better representation of New York's anarchist spirit than anything else — an avatar of the wondrous ways New Yorkers commune with each other even when the government thinks we've descended into chaos.