

Building the American Anarchist Movement

Radical Collectives and Continental Convergences in the 1980s

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“Bowl a strike, not a spare—Revolution everywhere!” Members of the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League (RABL) chanted bowling-themed slogans as they marched against President Ronald Reagan’s threat to invade Nicaragua in 1988. Acting within a broad progressive coalition, RABL helped shut down major sections of downtown Minneapolis for three days in an outpouring of rebellion against the Reagan administration’s covert wars in Central America. Events reached a dramatic climax when a masked protester threw a bowling ball through the window of a military recruitment office.¹ The crash of the broken glass marked the beginning of a new era of anarchist militancy in the United States. The rage of a generation of young people raised in Reagan’s America threatened to explode.

Reflecting this mood, the pilot edition of what became the *Love and Rage* anarchist newspaper (published from 1990 to 1998) was simply called *RAGE!* The pilot, which was distributed at an action at the Pentagon in 1988, reflected growing anger at the Reagan administration’s wars at home and abroad, including the war on drugs. Promised a “new morning in America,” a generation of disaffected young people raised in the alienation of the suburbs found themselves shut out of political life. Many of their parents lost their unionized factory jobs to neoliberal outsourcing or were kicked off welfare. They grappled with the reality of skyrocketing inequality, precarious jobs, and violent policing. The hopes of social democracy—not to mention the liberatory movements of the 1960s and 1970s—appeared dead, and mainstream society seemingly offered little worth saving. Meanwhile, Reagan crushed the dreams of a better world in Central America by funding and training Guatemalan death squads, Nicaraguan Contras, and violent Salvadoran elites.

But dissidents emerged out of the cracks of the new society. A rising generation of young people encountered anarchism in mosh pits at punk shows and in street fights against fascists and police. A core group of anarchists across the country began to build a continental revolutionary movement. This article explores how several key collectives—including the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League, the Revolutionary Socialist League, the Youth Greens, and the Vermont Family—revitalized US anarchist theory and practice in the 1980s. Together, they formed a pole around which the diffuse anarchist scene began to cohere into a movement capable of coordinating strategic action across the country. Activists coming from these diverse groups (and many more) would expand the anarchist milieu in the 1990s and shape the turn-of-the-century antiglobalization movement.² Members of each group became involved with *Love and Rage*, an organization that used its widely distributed newspaper as a catalyst to build first an anarchist network and then a membership-based Revolutionary Anarchist Federation that shaped the movement’s direction. But first, local anarchist groups needed to encounter each other, exchange ideas, and build connections across North America.

This encounter occurred in large part through a series of four continental convergences that took place from 1986 to 1989 in Chicago, Minneapolis, Toronto, and San Francisco. Very little has been written about these gatherings. Sociologist Lesley Wood posits that social movement theorists tend to ignore these kinds of convergences in part because the disciplinary norms of what counts as social movement activity reduce them to the level of cultural background to the

¹ “Minneapolis Revolts!” *RABL Rouser*, no. 3 (1988): 1–2.

² For more on anarchism in the antiglobalization movement, see David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (AK Press, 2009); and Tomas Rothaus, *Another War is Possible: Militant Anarchist Experiences in the Antiglobalization Era* (PM Press, 2025).

“real” organizing.³ Beyond the gatherings, historians have written little about anarchism in the late twentieth century. Anarchist history typically focuses on earlier periods, and the burgeoning history of the United States in the late twentieth century has generally dealt much more with the rise of the Right than the evolution of anarchism and the Left.⁴ Yet it was in this period that anarchism was reborn as a major tendency on the American Left since marginalization in the early twentieth century.⁵ This article argues that the series of continental convergences in the late 1980s was crucial to the revitalization of North American anarchism as a revolutionary movement in the late twentieth century. In the pre-internet era, these gatherings provided essential spaces for anarchists from different backgrounds to encounter each other, engage in political debates, and take collective action in the streets. Through this process, anarchists transformed what had been a diffuse milieu characterized by small-group action and countercultural institutions into something approaching a coordinated continental movement.

Convergence #1: Chicago “Haymarket Remembered” (1986)

Chicago sparked global outrage in 1887 by executing several anarchists for alleged involvement in throwing dynamite at a labor rally for the eight-hour day in May 1886.⁶ These men became known as the Haymarket Martyrs, who are remembered around the world each year on May First, International Workers’ Day. A century later, in May of 1986, a range of progressive groups came together to organize a labor celebration in Chicago. The Haymarket Centennial Committee included liberals, socialists, communists, and union officials—but not anarchists. The latter feared that the martyrs would be shorn of their revolutionary anti-state politics and turned into toothless progressive labor forerunners. A small group simply called “Some Chicago Anarchists” thus decided to organize a competing anarchist remembrance of the Haymarket Affair.

The process of organizing the remembrance revealed significant political tensions within the anarchist movement of the 1980s. Two dozen anarchists attended an initial planning meeting called by Impossible Books and held at Chicago’s Autonomy Center. Some attendees wanted an anarchist gathering, others a riot. Reflecting its syndicalist commitments, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) called for a “Revolutionary Labor Conference” that attendee Jon Bekken said would “stand in the tradition of Haymarket to discuss ways of rekindling a mass revolutionary labor movement including fighting for the four hour day.”⁷ Against this, a delegation from the

³ Lesley Wood, “Anarchist Gatherings 1986–2017,” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 18, no. 4 (2019): 892–908. For more on the role of convergences, broadly speaking, in radical history, see Christina Heatherton, *Arise!: Global Radicalism in the Era of the Mexican Revolution* (University of California Press, 2022).

⁴ Andrew Cornell’s history of twentieth-century US anarchism, for instance, ends in the early 1970s. *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century* (University of California Press, 2016). Even books that focus on the Left and social movements in the 1980s, like Bradford Martin’s *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (Hill & Wang, 2012), give short shrift to anarchism.

⁵ Spencer Beswick, “From the Ashes of the Old: Anarchism Reborn in a Counterrevolutionary Age (1970s–1990s),” *Anarchist Studies* 30, no. 2 (2022): 31–54.

⁶ See James Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America* (Pantheon Books, 2006).

⁷ Jon Bekken in *Mob Action Against the State: Haymarket Remembered . . . an Anarchist Convention* (Seattle @’s Haymarket Remembered Project, 1987), 6–7. *Mob Action Against the State* was a zine put out after the convergence that contains essays, reflections, photos, and even poetry from dozens of participants. It can be found online at <https://www.sproutdistro.com/catalog/zines/history/mob-action-against-the-state/>. For histories of the IWW, see Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Quadrangle Books, 1969); and Franklin

anarchist magazine *Fifth Estate* (a hotbed of “anticivilization” critique from the likes of John Zerzan) proposed “an orgiastic celebration of life” that would “revolve around guerrilla street theater.”⁸ Nothing could be agreed upon, and Bekken noted with frustration that “it was also clear that most people found the labor conference, the idea of shorter hours, and the working class in general quite boring.”⁹ A perceived disinterest in the labor movement and working-class issues more broadly was a frequent criticism of the new wave of anarchist activism in the post-1960s era. For their part, an attendee from *Fifth Estate* reported that “we are calling for an earthquake on May First 1986 to wreck the armory where the Police monument to the cops killed at Haymarket is kept, as well as the police stations, banks, shopping malls, factories and offices which keep making Monday—and everyday—martyrs of us all.”¹⁰ Just about the only thing that everyone could agree upon was to bar nonanarchists from decision-making power, especially the Maoists of the Revolutionary Communist Party.¹¹

Despite the tensions, the convergence was a success for the fledgling movement. The gathering was attended by around four hundred people from across North America, mostly white and two-thirds men, almost all young.¹² It featured a wide range of workshops that produced robust discussion and debate between competing political tendencies. Perhaps most important to a nascent movement-building tendency was a workshop on “Building the Anarchist Movement,” although the session was generally regarded as a failure. Audience members shouted down the presenters, leading, as one attendee reported, to “a big debate on what we should do, if it was acceptable to vote on this, if we should divide into groups, and other organizational matters” that took up most of the time.¹³ Some of the most contentious workshops centered on ecology and the question of technology. An “Anarchism and Ecology” workshop, led by the direct action group Earth First!, was dominated by debates around technology, worker control, and ecology. All participants agreed that it was necessary to connect anarchism and ecology, but they did not agree about how to do so. Some attendees argued that technology was necessarily alienating and “ecologically dangerous,” while members of the IWW maintained that if workers held power, they would naturally develop ecologically sound technologies because—unlike capitalists who profit from environmental destruction—it is not “in workers’ interests to damage the environment.”¹⁴ Despite some grumbling about endless debates, one participant reflected that “the workshop had a dramatic impact on my thinking” and helped to shape a “cohesive philosophical outlook.”¹⁵ These kinds of debates between anarchists from across North America were crucial for the evolution of anarchist theory and strategy in the 1980s.

Rosemont, *Joe Hill: The IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Workingclass Counterculture*, 2nd ed. (PM Press and the Charles H. Kerr Library, 2015).

⁸ Bekken in *Mob Action Against the State*, 6.

⁹ Bekken in *Mob Action Against the State*, 7.

¹⁰ Fifth Estate Collective, “Detroit Seen,” *Fifth Estate* 19, no. 2 (1984); digital versions of *Fifth Estate* are available at <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/>.

¹¹ See the discussion in *Mob Action Against the State*, 9–15, as well as “Plans for Haymarket Centennial: Anarchy to Reign Again in Chicago,” *Fifth Estate* 20, no. 3 (1986): 9.

¹² Dogbane Champion (David Watson), “Haymarket Centennial: Anarchy in Chicago,” *Fifth Estate* 20, no. 4 (1986): 1.

¹³ David in *Mob Action Against the State*, 28.

¹⁴ Craig in *Mob Action Against the State*, 27. For a broad history of radical environmentalism in this period, see Keith Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Craig in *Mob Action Against the State*, 27.

The Chicago gathering was also notable for two major street demonstrations. The first, on May Day itself, was the official march hosted by the Haymarket Centennial Committee, which took place annually in the working-class Pilsen neighborhood. Over 100 anarchists attended a march of around 400 people, where they clashed with the Maoists of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) over leadership. Protesters shouted competing chants: A participant named Hal reported that “the head spokesperson for the rcp was droning on incessantly through her bullhorn, ‘world revolution! Not world war!’”¹⁶ The anarchists responded with “Smash the state and have a nice day” and “No governments left or right—RCP ain’t too bright.”¹⁷ After breaking with the official march, the anarchists proceeded alone in a sea of black flags until a standoff with the police ended with the negotiated release of two arrested comrades. The next day, the anarchists led their own march. Most of the demonstration was relatively tame; one marcher recounted that “we just went walking around to various financial and governmental landmarks, chanting and waving black flags, doing some street theatre.”¹⁸ But as people began to disperse, “chaos broke out,” including small-scale property destruction.¹⁹ The police arrested 38 people and charged them with “mob action against the state,” a label which they gleefully embraced and used as the title of a postconvergence zine.

The Chicago gathering was a crucial first step in the development of a continental anarchist movement. Hundreds of anarchists met each other for the first time, built relationships, debated questions of theory and strategy, and tested their mettle in the streets. It also revealed major tensions and disagreements among anarchists, many of which would prove to be irreconcilable. Immediately afterward, it was unclear that anything much would come of it. The Chicago anarchists had conceived of it as a one-off event. Anarchists in Toronto tentatively agreed to host another one in 1988, but some activists could not wait two years. A group of young radicals involved with a bookstore called Back Room Anarchist Books in Minneapolis took matters into their own hands and issued a call for a second anarchist gathering the next year.

Back Room Anarchist Books and the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League

Minneapolis was central to the development of the anarchist movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Although it is a relatively small city that receives less attention than typical centers of Left politics, Minneapolis has a notable left-wing history, from the 1934 Teamster rebellion to the 1970s “co-op wars” and the 2020 George Floyd uprising.²⁰ In the 1980s, anarchists in Minneapolis ran a small space called Back Room Anarchist Books, out of which they theorized a new vision of revolutionary anarchism and helped build a revitalized national movement. Although it was

¹⁶ Hal in *Mob Action Against the State*, 22.

¹⁷ Chartreuse Colada in *Mob Action Against the State*, 19.

¹⁸ Nicole in *Mob Action Against the State*, 20.

¹⁹ Nicole in *Mob Action Against the State*, 20.

²⁰ See “The Struggle is Our Inheritance: A History of Radical Minnesota,” a pamphlet that was originally written in the lead-up to the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul. It can be found at <https://libcom.org/article/struggle-our-inheritance-history-radical-minnesota>. See also Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers’ Strikes of 1934* (Haymarket Books, 2014); Craig B. Upright, *Grocery Activism: The Radical History of Food Cooperatives in Minnesota* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Vortex Group, eds., *The George Floyd Uprising* (PM Press, 2023).

primarily a bookstore, Back Room was an early example of what became known as infoshops: an autonomous space meant to share radical books and zines, host meetings, and coordinate anarchist activities in the city. It hosted a broad array of young radicals ranging from an anarchist pagan collective to the antiracist skinhead Baldies.

Back Room played an important role in the formation and political evolution of key antifascist and anarchist groups, including the Baldies, Anti-Racist Action, and the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League. It provided a friendly “third place” for a generation of Twin Cities youth, exposing them to anarchist politics in the process through cheap anarchist books and discussions with other participants.²¹ The Baldies and Anti-Racist Action used the infrastructure provided by Back Room to host meetings and shows, develop their politics, and connect with international antifascist networks. Infoshops and anarchist bookstores like Back Room were major distributors of underground information in the pre-internet days. It was through the Back Room that the Baldies encountered anarchist publications from Britain, including accounts of how antiracist skinheads were organizing with other antifascists to fight the far-right National Front²² Young people around Back Room also gained experience with what it meant to organize, including basic things like facilitating effective meetings. Punks hanging out at Back Room parties would often pick up the radical literature that lined the walls. One publication they began reading was the *RABL Rouser*, a newspaper put out by the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League.

The Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League (RABL) played a central role in the evolution of revolutionary anarchism in the Twin Cities and nationwide in the late 1980s, eventually providing the nucleus around which Love and Rage formed in 1989. They did in fact sometimes meet at a local bowling alley, and they each chose “action names” based on professional bowlers. RABL involved a number of people who had been involved in or supportive of antiracist skinhead work. Their newspaper *RABL Rouser* featured articles on anarchist theory, feminism, antiracism, and antiwar activism. RABL theorized and practiced what they called “revolutionary anarchism.” In “Bowling for Beginners: An Anarchist Primer,” RABL offered an initial definition: “Anarchy is not chaos. Anarchy is the absence of imposed authority. Anarchy is a society that is built on the principles of respect, cooperation and solidarity. Anarchy is wimmin controlling their own bodies, workers controlling their own workplaces, youth controlling their own education and the celebration of cultural difference.”²³ Successful social movements, they argued, always involve people taking power into their own hands and collectively struggling for a new world. RABL rejected the need for a revolutionary vanguard, arguing that “only the masses, completely involved and in absolute control, can make a real revolution.” In the end, “anarchism is about people empowering themselves to take control and to lead their own lives.”²⁴ RABL operated

²¹ The idea of “third places” was developed by Ray Oldenburg in the 1980s. See his book *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Paragon House, 1989).

²² For more on the history of US antifascism, including Anti-Racist Action, see Mark Bray, *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook* (Melville House Publishing, 2017); Shannon Clay, Lady, Kristin Scharz, and Michael Staudenmaier, *We Go Where They Go: The Story of Anti-Racist Action* (PM Press, 2023); Moe Bowstern, Mic Crenshaw, Alec Dunn, Celina Flores, Julie Perini, and Erin Yanke, eds., *It Did Happen Here: An Antifascist People’s History* (PM Press, 2023); and Spencer Beswick, “Smashing Whiteness: Race, Class, Punk Culture, and Anarchist Anti-Fascism,” *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*, no. 2 (2024): 87–117.

²³ RABL, “Bowling for Beginners: An Anarchist Primer,” *Love and Rage* 1, no. 5 (1990): 12.

²⁴ RABL, “Bowling for Beginners,” 12.

as a militant anarchist pole in Minneapolis's radical Left, pairing local action with an ambitious vision for forming a national anarchist organization.

Despite their roots in a relatively small city, RABL played an outsize role in transforming US anarchism and organizing the national movement. They took the experience of their organizing to the national level, as some members began making connections and building relationships with anarchists across the country, including squatters in NYC's Lower East Side, anarchist Cuban exiles in Miami, ex-Trotskyists in the Revolutionary Socialist League, and antiracist punks from the Bay Area to Boston. They threw themselves into the series of annual anarchist gatherings, viewing them as a vehicle to organize a stronger movement. RABL also helped organize anarchist contingents at national demonstrations like the one at the Pentagon in 1988 against war in Central America. They simultaneously started preparing for what would become the *Love and Rage* newspaper, in part through a newsletter called "Mayday," which grew out of the continental convergences. Perhaps most importantly, they planned and ran "building the movement" organizing tracks at the national convergences, where they met with other pro-organization anarchists across the continent and laid the groundwork for *Love and Rage*.

Convergence #2: Minneapolis "Building the Movement" (1987)

The anarchist gathering in Minneapolis in 1987 was more intentionally planned than the 1986 Chicago gathering, with the explicit goal of organizing a more coherent movement. *Fifth Estate* noted that Minneapolis "might be a good place to begin examining who we are or even if the term 'we' is appropriate."²⁵ Lines continued to be drawn within the anarchist milieu between different tendencies and conceptions of anarchism. The Minneapolis gathering was also larger, with more attendees, a wider range of workshops, and more focused discussions. Part of the difference lay in who organized the conference. Unlike the previous gathering, organized mostly by the older folks in "Some Chicago Anarchists," this one was put on by younger people around Back Room Anarchist Books who intended to use the convergence as a step toward national organization. Some of the core people who would eventually form the nucleus of *Love and Rage* were central to this effort and were already strategizing about building revolutionary anarchist cadre and organization.

The Minneapolis crew framed the convergence around "Building the Movement." While they hosted the usual wide range of workshops, including anarchist/punk DIY staples like how to dumpster dive for food and brew your own beer, the focus was on facilitating strategic conversations and building organizational infrastructure. Thus, throughout the gathering there was a "movement building track" of strategic discussions and meetings. They drew on historical and contemporary examples of anarchist and other antiauthoritarian modes of organizing in order to address a series of building blocks for organizing a stronger movement, including workshops on "putting out a publication," "opening and operating a bookstore/center," and "anarchist participation in coalitions."²⁶ Although some political divides grew clearer through these discussions, one participant reported a strong "feeling of solidarity and camaraderie" throughout the gather-

²⁵ "Bits of the World in Brief," *Fifth Estate* 21, no. 2 (1987): 2.

²⁶ "Building the Movement Anarchist Gathering 87 Handbook" (1987), 4, Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Library.

ing.²⁷ The Minneapolis gathering also featured a militant day of action with the name “Increase the Pressure Warchest Tour,” which built on several years of militant street actions in Minneapolis and avoided some of the fallout from the poorly planned days of action in Chicago. As one demonstrator put it, “the cops seemed to have wanted to avoid a major confrontation, whether it was out of fear, or because we out-numbered them, or maybe the good vibes from the Pagans were too powerful for even a cop to handle.”²⁸ Anarchists in Minneapolis were beginning to combine militant street actions with building durable organizational structures.

One concrete outcome of the gathering was the formation of a loose anarchist network called Mayday. The network soon launched a newsletter called *Mayday: A Continental Newsletter for the Anarchist Movement*, which provided a structure for ongoing communications. The first issue reported on the plan for a “continental project-planning meeting” that was adopted at the Minneapolis gathering. This consisted in the short term of establishing a continental mailing list for the newsletter as well as one interim meeting between each annual convergence to help plan the next gathering and work on plans of action around political projects arising from the Mayday network.²⁹ Thus the basic foundation was laid for a sustained continental communication and organizing structure. For the two years it was published, *Mayday* helped keep the movement connected in between convergences and facilitated more effective planning. In 1989, one participant published a letter in the newsletter calling for a monthly continental newspaper, which the Mayday network supported because “the newspaper could reach a large, broad audience” rather than acting solely as an internal communications platform for people already active in the anarchist movement.³⁰ Once the movement was more effectively organized internally, in large part due to advances at the Minneapolis convergence in 1987, it was possible to build further.

Socialists Become Anarchists: The Revolutionary Socialist League and the Youth Greens

The Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League also began to work with an unorthodox Trotskyist group called the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL, 1972–89). The RSL did not accept the standard Trotskyist argument that the Soviet Union was a “deformed workers’ state” that was still socialist on account of its nationalization of property. The working class, they insisted, had no real control over production; it was the state that owned the means of production, not the workers. In fact, capitalist social relations (wage labor, commodity production, and so on) were reproduced with bureaucratic elites in the state playing the class role of capitalists. Thus, the RSL argued that the Soviet Union and the rest of the socialist states were actually “state capitalist.”³¹ As the US communist movement floundered in the 1980s and the RSL saw the continued decline

²⁷ Gabriela, report from Minneapolis included in Dogbane Champion (David Watson), “Anarchy in Minneapolis,” *Fifth Estate* 22, no. 2 (1987), 22.

²⁸ G. Dondini, report from Minneapolis included in Dogbane Champion (David Watson), “Anarchy in Minneapolis,” 23.

²⁹ “Plan for a Continental Project-Planning Meeting Adopted at the June 1987 Minneapolis Conference ‘Building the Movement,’” *Mayday: A Continental Newsletter for the Anarchist Movement*, no. 1, August 1987, 3–5, Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Library.

³⁰ Ned Day and the Newsletter Collective, “The Continental Newspaper Project,” *Mayday: A Continental Newsletter for the Anarchist Movement*, no. 7, October 1989, 5, Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Library.

³¹ See the introduction to Ron Tabor, *A Look At Leninism* (Grass Roots Press, 1988).

of the actually existing socialist states, they began to question the fundamental principles of their politics.³² They increasingly identified an authoritarian essence within Marxism itself rather than just its Leninist and Stalinist varieties. The RSL's main theoretician, Ron Tabor, wrote a series of articles in their newspaper *The Torch/La Antorcha* critiquing Leninism, thus laying the foundation for their move toward anarchism.³³ As the RSL was embracing a more libertarian socialism, they began searching for new political allies. The RSLers began to make overtures toward the parts of the anarchist milieu that they found promising, particularly RABL. Thus began a relationship that eventually led to the RSL dissolving and joining with RABL and others to found Love and Rage in 1989. This relationship epitomized the changing leftist zeitgeist of the late twentieth century, as anarchism gained ground against state socialism during the decline and fall of the Soviet Union.

The youth section of the Green Party also turned toward anarchism in this period, in part through their encounter with RABL. The Youth Greens officially formed in 1989, but they had been developing as a political tendency over the previous two years. Organized by former students at Murray Bookchin's Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont, they advocated revolutionary eco-socialist politics within the Green Party and within broader movements. Prefiguring today's climate justice movement, they argued that humanity's devastation of the planet was caused by social problems, particularly capitalist profiteering off environmental destruction. Paul Messersmith-Glavin, a founder of the Youth Greens and later member of Love and Rage, reflected that they were heavily influenced by the founding theorist of social ecology, Murray Bookchin, and "in particular [by] his understanding that the ecological crisis was based in the crisis in society, and that to end the attempt to dominate nature, we would have to end forms of social domination. We understood that social relations like capitalism, patriarchy and racism were at the root of the ecological crisis."³⁴ Thus, society must be radically restructured in order to save the planet. The Youth Greens were mostly anarchists and libertarian-minded socialists who advocated direct action, movement building, and dual power over electoral reformism. Yet they followed Bookchin in his distinction between "politics" as face-to-face communal decision-making at the municipal level versus "statecraft" as the alienated political practice of a state machinery controlled by the ruling class.³⁵ The Youth Greens criticized the Green Party's drift toward conventional party building as a capitulation to statecraft. They eventually embraced anarchism as a more fitting political home.

The Youth Greens played an important role connecting the US anarchist movement to their counterparts in West Germany. The German antinuclear, squatter, and anarchist movements came together in an extra-parliamentary opposition movement that was anticapitalist and antis-tate. Guided in part by Murray Bookchin, the German Greens were born as a "movement" party that was democratically organized and controlled by grassroots activists. More important for US anarchists were the West German *Autonomen*: young radicals who squatted in hundreds of abandoned buildings and turned them into group housing, social centers, movement bars, and

³² For a look at the post-1960s US communist movement, see Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che* (Verso Books, 2002).

³³ These articles were then collected into Ron Tabor's book *A Look At Leninism*.

³⁴ Paul Messersmith-Glavin, "Remembering the Earth Day Wall Street Action," *Counterpunch*, 23 April 2015.

³⁵ See Murray Bookchin, *From Urbanization to Cities: The Politics of Democratic Municipalism* (AK Press, 2021).

cultural spaces.³⁶ The squatters innovated the use of black bloc tactics, wearing all black and covering their faces to remain anonymous and act collectively at demonstrations. One Youth Green recalls that during a visit to Hamburg, Germany, in 1988, he was swept up into a militant black bloc that transformed his understanding of the possibilities of militant street action. He was then introduced to “this fundamental alternative, revolutionary dual power” that the *Autonomen* were building in their squats and on the streets.³⁷ This was the Youth Greens’ vision, which was a far cry from their parent party’s turn toward conventional politics. The Youth Greens attended the San Francisco anarchist gathering in 1989, where they met the folks who were organizing Love and Rage and realized that these were their comrades. A year later, a group of Youth Greens moved to Minneapolis and formed an affinity group called AWOL, which affiliated with Love and Rage.

Convergence #3: Toronto “Survival Gathering: An Anarchist Unconvention” (1988)

In the lead-up to the Toronto gathering, the Canadian media spread fear about a coming “invasion” and proclaimed that “officials fear anarchists’ idea of a good time.”³⁸ Without any idea of what anarchism meant—and clearly with no desire to learn—journalists warned of an incoming invasion of 15,000 skinheads, white supremacists, and neo-Nazis coming to wreck the city. While there may have been some antiracist skinheads in the crowd, the anarchists would not have taken kindly to any neo-Nazi presence at the convergence. The Toronto gathering was a festival of resistance and a celebration of the new world to come. It was also an extended strategy session to figure out how to bring this new world into existence. The media ended up being right in one aspect, however: Since the planned day of action took place the day after the United States shot down an Iranian passenger jet full of civilians, outraged demonstrators responded by engaging in widespread property destruction and street battles with the police.

The organizers called the convergence a “survival gathering,” which received pushback from Americans who felt the term had negative connotations of just eking out existence. In Canadian English, however, survival had positive connotations and implied a flourishing existence.³⁹ This reflected the growth of the anarchist movement over the previous years. Anarchists were not yet at the center of the Left, but they were moving from the discredited, unorganized margins into a position of influence. They would come out of Toronto stronger and better organized than at any point since the 1960s, ready to form the *Love and Rage* newspaper the following year. Further, since the gathering was held in Canada, the aspirations to truly continental organization began to take shape. The next year, there was a Mexican contingent at the San Francisco gathering, and there were initially plans to hold a 1990 gathering in Mexico City.

The Toronto gathering centered strategic discussions but also featured a series of free-form conversations, a festival, and a number of punk shows (including MDC playing under the name

³⁶ See Spencer Beswick, “Living Communism: Theory and Practice of Autonomy and Attack,” *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*, no. 33 (2023): 158–177.

³⁷ Paul M., interview with author, 24 August 2021.

³⁸ Cited in the Fifth Estate Collective, “Anarchy in Toronto: The 1988 Gathering,” *Fifth Estate*, no. 329 (1988).

³⁹ “A Survival Gathering: An Anarchist Unconvention,” final mailout (1988), The ArQuives: Canada’s LGBTQ2+ Archives.

My Dog Charlie to pass under the notice of Canadian authorities). A greater focus was placed on women's and queer liberation than previously, and there were a number of workshops and presentations on women's and queer issues.⁴⁰ For instance, there was a workshop on "Wimmins Health Skills: A hands-on session teaching wimmin self-speculum exams, breast checks, self-insemination and fertility awareness method of birth control/conception timing."⁴¹ This workshop fell squarely in line with the anarchist approach to women's autonomy: In order to facilitate true self-determination against patriarchy and the state, women felt that they must develop the skills to know and care for their own bodies.⁴² But some women were dissatisfied with what they perceived to be the perpetuation of male dominance at the gathering, which would lead to a women-only preconference in the lead-up to the following year's gathering in San Francisco.

The planned day of action turned into a militant street battle with the police far beyond what had been seen in previous years. This was largely because the day before the demonstration, the United States shot down the Iranian passenger jet, killing hundreds of people. Anarchists exploded in rage and took their anger out on a number of corporate and state targets that had been conveniently listed and mapped in the gathering's guidebook. As they marched, black-clad anarchists chanted "Eat the rich; feed the poor" and "We don't want your fucking war! We don't want your fucking state! This time we retaliate!"⁴³ After several years of escalating "warchest tours" and militant days of action, many anarchists were increasingly willing to take collective risks in the streets. Something new was clearly being born: A police sergeant was quoted saying, "We can't pen them in. This is like Europe. Usually [protesters] go limp, we pick them up and take them away. This is definitely new—running in the streets."⁴⁴ But some anarchists felt that the days of action were beginning to balloon out of control and detract from the positive work of the gatherings, resulting in arrests and injuries and leaving local organizers to clean up the mess after everyone else left town.⁴⁵ These growing criticisms would come to a head the following year in San Francisco, when the planned day of action went particularly sour.

Despite some reservations about the day of action, the Toronto gathering was a major success. Coming out of Toronto, anarchists felt that the movement was growing exponentially. Reflecting on both local protests in Detroit as well as the Toronto anarchist gathering, *Fifth Estate* expressed that "the last seven months have probably been the most active ones we've experienced in recent memory" and noted that "the current radicalization appears to be generalizing at a rapid pace."⁴⁶ San Francisco would be the biggest gathering yet, with thousands of attendees. The momentum was building just as the decline of the Soviet Union was becoming terminal, thus appearing to discredit state socialism and opening space for anarchists to further expand their influence on the Left and build a new revolutionary antiauthoritarian movement.

⁴⁰ Fifth Estate Collective, "Anarchy in Toronto."

⁴¹ "A Survival Gathering," 4.

⁴² See Spencer Beswick, "To Repulse the State from Our Uteri: Anarcha-Feminism, Reproductive Freedom, and Dual Power," *Radical History Review*, no. 148 (2024): 90–106.

⁴³ Fifth Estate Collective, "Anarchy in Toronto."

⁴⁴ Quoted in Fifth Estate Collective, "Anarchy in Toronto."

⁴⁵ Mike Gunderloy, quoted in Fifth Estate Collective, "Anarchy in Toronto."

⁴⁶ Fifth Estate Collective, "Detroit Seen," *Fifth Estate* 23, no. 2 (1988).

Anarchy in NYC, the Vermont Family, and Bay Area Infrastructure

New York City was home to one of the most developed anarchist milieus in the United States. It had been a center of an earlier generation of anarchists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁷ In the 1960s, it hosted Murray Bookchin's *Anarchos* magazine as well as the Black Mask/Up Against the Wall Motherfucker group. As NYC experienced a major fiscal crisis in the 1970s and 1980s, its many abandoned buildings became targets of young anarchist squatters. Their stronghold became the Lower East Side neighborhood in Manhattan, particularly surrounding Tompkins Square Park.⁴⁸ Anarchists established community gardens and fixed up dilapidated buildings and turned them into housing, cultural centers, and punk venues. Squatters fought pitched battles with the police to protect their territory, culminating in the Tompkins Square Park riot in 1988. The city also hosted a rich anarchist intellectual milieu anchored in part by the publisher Autonomedia (which published Hakim Bey's widely distributed anarchist text *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone*), institutions like the Libertarian Book Club, and squatters' publications like Seth Tobocman's graphic *World War III*.⁴⁹ Many New Yorkers traveled to participate in the convergences, and the city soon became the locus of the most developed chapter of Love and Rage, when several key members moved there to launch the organization's namesake newspaper in 1990.

One stalwart participant in the continental convergences was the Vermont Family, a roving band of anarchists that built connective tissue linking the dispersed milieu. The Family originally came together in the "Great Peace March for Global Nuclear Disarmament," in which hundreds of people walked from Los Angeles to Washington, DC, over the course of nine months in 1986. A core group of anarchists coalesced to form a traveling "anarchy village" consisting of several dozen people who organized themselves through consensus and promoted anarchism within the march.⁵⁰ After the march reached DC, the Family stayed together as a loose network of travelers, comrades, and friends. The name of the Vermont Family came from a sort of collective joke. One punk in the anarchy village shared a story he had heard about Vermont. Apparently, it was written in the state constitution that in 1991, 200 years after its founding, there would be a popular vote on whether or not the state would remain part of the country. Thus, a fantastical plan was hatched to convince anarchists to move to Vermont and push it to secede from the union. They were disappointed to find out that Vermont actually had no such plan to put its status to a vote.⁵¹ But the moniker of Vermont stuck, and many people in the crew adopted it as part of their action names.

The Vermont Family stayed on the road until 1989. In their four years of traveling, they played a crucial role that has gone unacknowledged in the histories of this era: They helped establish the interpersonal connections that were necessary to build a continental network of anarchists. A former Vermonter later reflected that in the age of the internet it is difficult to understand how

⁴⁷ For more on this history, see Andrew Cornell, *Unruly Equality*; Tom Goyens, *Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York City, 1880–1913* (University of Illinois Press, 2007); and Karen and Paul Avrich, *Sasha and Emma: The Anarchist Odyssey of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁴⁸ See Alexander Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting* (Verso, 2017).

⁴⁹ See Peter Kuper and Seth Tobocman, *World War 3 Illustrated: 1979–2014* (PM Press, 2014).

⁵⁰ Mike E., interview with author, 29 July 2021.

⁵¹ Christopher G., interview with author, 8 October 2021.

an anarchist milieu could function in the 1980s. It required people to travel and make physical connections between far-flung local collectives and projects. Some of the Family traveled in an old bus, while others hitchhiked; like a punk version of Ken Kesey's Merry Band of Pranksters, the Family spread anarchy everywhere they went. A few of them even made their way to West Germany, where they lived in squats and took lessons from the larger, more militant movement there. When major actions or gatherings were planned in an American city, members of the Vermont Family would often show up months in advance, put down temporary roots, and help organize a bigger and better event. They also helped plan and organize the series of continental convergences. The Vermont Family stayed on the road until 1989, when many of them went to San Francisco to help organize the anarchist gathering. Finding fertile ground, several of them settled down for the long term in the Bay Area. They established multiple collective houses that served as major hubs for both the local and national movement in the 1990s. Many of them remained active in Love and Rage, Anti-Racist Action, and other anarchist projects.

The radical scene in the Bay Area was centered on anarchist infrastructure, including Bound Together Books in San Francisco, the Long Haul social center and infoshop in Berkeley, and the fledgling *Slingshot* newspaper, which was founded in 1988 and still exists today. Some institutions, like Long Haul, had been founded by an older generation of radical hippies in the 1970s. The anarchist movement had a perennial target in the struggle over People's Park in Berkeley. This came from an early manifestation of the left-ecological movement in the 1960s, in which a coalition of groups united to defend a park from development, at times fighting pitched battles with the police. People's Park remained a continual space of contention for the coming decades.⁵² In the 1980s, a cofounder of the *Slingshot* anarchist newspaper was radicalized by the riots around People's Park.⁵³ *Slingshot*, which is run by a small collective, is one of the longest-running anarchist newspapers and a staple of the movement. San Francisco's well-developed infrastructure and anarchist milieu made it an ideal location for the 1989 anarchist gathering.

Convergence #4: San Francisco "Without Borders" (1989)

Thousands of anarchists came to the Bay Area for a weeklong convergence in July 1989 that far eclipsed the previous gatherings in scope. Building off of Toronto, there was an increased focus on feminism and on challenging patriarchy within the anarchist movement. A group officially decided to launch the *Love and Rage* newspaper, although the details were worked out in a follow-up conference in Chicago. Finally, a storied "first US black bloc" took place, which most people felt went quite poorly.⁵⁴ Of course, the gathering also must be located in its broader historical context: 1989 was a momentous year beyond the purview of relatively fringe anarchist politics. Later in the year, as the world was transformed by the fall of the Berlin Wall, anarchists found themselves well positioned to present an alternative to the failing socialist states.

One of the defining aspects of the San Francisco gathering was a continued focus on gender and feminism within the anarchist movement. Anarchist women formed the "Obnoxious Wimin's Network" in the late 1980s in order to build the anarcha-feminist movement and fight

⁵² See Keith Woodhouse's account in Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*.

⁵³ Jesse P., interview with author, 28 July 2021.

⁵⁴ For a history of the black bloc, see Francis Dupuis-Déri, *Who's Afraid of the Black Blocs? Anarchy in Action Around the World* (PM Press, 2014).

against male dominance in the radical scene. They organized a women-only gathering preceding the San Francisco gathering in which to address women's issues, talk politics without men dominating the conversation, and strategize about how to deal with sexism within the movement. Around 150 women (generally trans inclusive and often styled as "wimmin") came together on July 18 and 19 under the banner of the Obnoxious Wimmin's Network at the Collective Chaos anarchist space in Oakland, founded by members of the Vermont Family. Over the course of two days, they hosted a series of workshops and discussions on self-defense, sex work, pornography, sexual diversity, antiracism, and more. One of the best-attended workshops "explained how wimmin can take cont[r]ol of their health care away from the medical establishment and put it back into our own hands," including through demonstrations of at-home abortion techniques.⁵⁵ The gathering also featured a series of performances, including feminist rap from "The Yeastie Girls" and "rock/trash music" from the "Blue Vulva Underground."⁵⁶ The wimmin's gathering ended with "an open discussion [that] ran into the night, including the topic of dealing with sexism within the anarchist community."⁵⁷ This gathering helped establish anarcha-feminist connections and community that went on to transform the anarchist movement in the coming decades.⁵⁸ Men also held a corresponding gender-specific meeting that was criticized for being much smaller and less well organized, but which helped introduce feminist concepts to men who sometimes believed that their anarchist politics meant that they could not be sexist.⁵⁹

The anarchist gathering itself was a sprawling week of workshops, meetings, parties, and punk shows. The program listed a staggering range of events within the general categories of anarchist theory, antiracism, antisexism, current events, the environment and civilization, networking, public action, skills, "touch-feely," and workers/syndicalists.⁶⁰ Despite small hiccups, the gathering marked a major advance for the burgeoning movement. Some participants reported an optimistic feeling of growth in the anarchist movement: doubling numbers of attendees at each annual gathering, deepening connections, and the sense that participants were on the path to revolution. And yet, San Francisco was the last in this series of continental gatherings. The plan was to meet the following year in Mexico City, which would have pushed the anarchist milieu to engage more with their comrades in Mexico and across Latin America. But this did not pan out due to a multitude of logistical problems, although a smaller gathering was held in Mexico City a couple years later. Among the reasons for the break in convergences was that a number of anarchists left the San Francisco gathering with a sour taste in their mouths because of the fallout from the day of action.

The San Francisco gathering sparked controversy for its day of action, which descended into mayhem. The days of action had escalated at each continental gathering, as anarchists sought to constitute themselves as a material force in the streets. They sought to prove that they were a revolutionary alternative to both the liberal social movements and the Revolutionary Communist Party. The flyers distributed to advertise the San Francisco day of action made it clear that the plan

⁵⁵ All quotes come from an anonymous report back "Obnoxious Wimmin's Network" printed in the *Without Borders Chronicle* (the "official" daily publication for the gathering) on 20 July 1989. I also consulted a flyer, "O.W.N. Gathering Workshop Schedule for Wednesday, July 19 1989." Both documents are from Mike E.'s personal collection.

⁵⁶ "Obnoxious Wimmin's Network."

⁵⁷ "Obnoxious Wimmin's Network."

⁵⁸ See Spencer Beswick "'We're Pro-Choice and We Riot!' Anarcha-Feminism in Love and Rage (1989–98)," *Coils of the Serpent: Journal for the Study of Contemporary Power*, no. 11 (2023): 148–171; and Beswick, "To Repulse the State."

⁵⁹ "A Bunch of Men," *Without Borders Chronicle*, 20 July 1989.

⁶⁰ "Gathering Workshops," 27 June 1989. From Mike E.'s personal collection.

was to be very confrontational with the police. The flyers had information about the possibility of getting arrested, and one showed pictures of black-masked rioters, including one who appears to have a slingshot⁶¹ The San Francisco day of action, which some point to as the first use of black-bloc tactics in the United States, started as a defense of Food Not Bombs's efforts to serve free food to homeless people in parks. Police had been waging low-intensity war on activists working with and providing services to homeless people, frequently arresting and beating them, and the day of action was an opportunity to fight back.⁶²

The demonstration began innocuously, with the usual sea of black flags and revolutionary chanting. The plan was originally to seize the Berkeley Inn—an abandoned hotel across from People's Park—and turn it into a squat to provide housing for the homeless.⁶³ This would have marked a shift from previous days of action toward a collective action that would have a lasting, positive impact on local organizing. But the police caught wind of the plan and surrounded the hotel. After scuffling with police, the black bloc encountered a Coca-Cola delivery truck that happened to have a Black driver. They forced the driver out, ran him off, and trashed the truck.⁶⁴ Whatever the evils of Coca-Cola, the optics of a mostly white mob in black masks abducting a Black driver were terrible. The action sparked widespread condemnation in both the mainstream press and the anarchist world, including a series of debates in the *Slingshot* newspaper. As one member of the day of action planning committee put it, the “confused and unfocused” demonstration consisted of a “testosterone-saturated march” that “alienated many potential supporters who saw it as a bunch of boys with masks running from the cops and breaking things.”⁶⁵ Young militants wanted to up the ante and spark rebellion through daring street actions, but clearly this sort of disorganized approach was not the answer.

Whatever the disarray from the day of action, one lasting impact of the San Francisco gathering was the official formation of the *Love and Rage* anarchist newspaper. By the time of the gathering, a core group of militants, largely based in Minneapolis, felt they had reached a critical mass of support for the project. After years of planning, they met in a workshop at the San Francisco gathering, agreed to launch a newspaper, and decided to hold a founding meeting later that year in Chicago. The newspaper, they decided, would not attempt to speak for the entire anarchist movement, but rather be a project of an organized revolutionary pole. The publishers of the newspaper would go on to use *Love and Rage* to build a federation that transformed the US anarchist movement in the 1990s.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The 1980s were a crucial decade in the transformation of the American Left. As the New Left fractured, the New Right rose to power, and the Soviet Union declined, anarchists began to build

⁶¹ Flyers from Mike E.'s personal collection: “Participate in the Day of Action, Make it Happen”; “Day of Action: July 26, 1989, It's Lunch Time”; “Day of Action!”

⁶² “Food Not Bombs: Arrests at Homeless Camp,” *Without Borders Chronicle*, 20 July 1989. From Mike E.'s personal collection.

⁶³ “Some Lessons from the DOA: One DOA Committee Members [sic] Criticism and Analysis,” 1989. From Mike E.'s personal collection.

⁶⁴ William Brand, “Anarchists Rampage,” *The Tribune*, 27 July 1989. From Mike E.'s personal collection.

⁶⁵ “Some Lessons from the DOA.”

⁶⁶ See Spencer Beswick, “Love and Rage: Revolutionary Anarchism in the Late Twentieth Century” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2023).

an increasingly coordinated continental movement. A handful of anarchist collectives across the country, including the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League, the Revolutionary Socialist League, the Youth Greens, and the Vermont Family, began to organize locally and make national connections. A series of annual continental convergences in Chicago, Minneapolis, Toronto, and San Francisco brought together thousands of radicals to network, share skills and analysis, and develop a fighting anarchist movement. Anarchists debated political theory and practical strategies for transforming their lives and making revolution. These gatherings led to the formation of the *Love and Rage* newspaper and laid the foundation for the striking growth of anarchism in the 1990s, which culminated in the turn-of-the-century antiglobalization movement.

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