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The Making Of A Middle School Anarchist

Anonymous

2023

The summer I was thirteen, I read Emma Goldman to prove that I wasn't an anarchist.

My journey started when I saw a friend from my online school's queer liberationist collective tell the world (i.e., a 100+ member Skype chat) that he was an anarchist. Of course, we had no common ground ideologically, despite my having founded our queer liberationist collective. Following his declaration, he was met with the fury of a thousand suns (i.e., middle school cliques). Comparisons were made to the Anarchists from Marissa Meyer's Renegades series, apparently a cabal of supervillains. A girl expressed shock: could an actual human, not a sci-fi character, be an anarchist? A small group debated whether anarchism existed. Then, the Conservative Teen Brigade noticed he had, by way of a typo, fashioned himself an *archist*. Some joked incessantly about archy, while others insisted he was passionate about arcs. All this, simply because my friend had said was that life was more than an endless, violent struggle for dominance. His faith in humanity was optimistic, maybe, but in line with basic decency. Right

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then, I realized basic decency could get you mocked. You think statism and capitalism reward casual violence? They have nothing on middle school.

The worst part of seeing trolls come down on my friend was that a part of me—the part that had read a little David Graeber for the hell of it—wondered if I might agree. I couldn't let that happen. I was already being trolled because I read feminist theory for fun, listen to classic queercore, and quote issues of the Gay Liberation Front's magazine in casual conversation. The repressive uniformity capitalism rewards had influenced me, but like many a sad teenage lesbian, I'd rejected assimilation. If, on top of my homosexual-dumpster-fire personality, I was a freaking anarchist, my already-ailing social life would collapse like a dying star. To ensure I was only vaguely liberal with a slight anti-authoritarian streak, I decided to read anarchist theory. This scheme wouldn't have won any awards for strategic planning—but I'd heard of Emma Goldman online. Embracing the capitalistic impulse to package one's identity, I intended to skim and vehemently disagree with a chapter of *Anarchism And Other Essays*, enough that I could tell the popular girls I'd checked and totally believed in hierarchy.

That... didn't happen. Goldman's argument turned out to be the logical conclusion of what I and my peers had learned in kindergarten. Her critiques of domination evoked my experiences of teenage queer antagonisms, the way trolls established a hierarchy with the girls, gays, theys, and thems at the bottom. Because I'm an outspoken lesbian, older boys had dubbed me bitch and whore. My community theater groups were plagued by toxic hierarchies, mostly due to teens' all-consuming desires to seem cool. I'd even seen representative democracy's failings during my short-lived run for middle school vice president. Obviously, my experience was far from unique: why else were there thousands of novels detailing the tortures of junior high? All Goldman believed was that society shouldn't operate on

the same principles as that socially sanctioned hell known as middle school.

I kept reading to see if I could muster the intended outrage but instead found myself agreeing more and more. At my summer classic literature program, while other teens in my pod scrolled Instagram, I pulled up “Anarchism: What It Really Stands For.” The classic text read like a romance novel without the romance; it was a dream of liberation, written in a reassuringly matter-of-fact tone, the occasional note of poetry thrown in. By the end, I couldn’t help but wonder if this particular brand of common sense could also be beautiful and meaningful. I read “The Psychology Of Political Violence” all in one night after feeling like a social reject at the camp dance. It turns out I can’t dance, but I definitely wanted to be in her revolution—and as I read, I thought more critically about the brutality I’d always projected onto anarchism. It dawned on me that violence was a cycle perpetuated by a violent system; suddenly, I had a partial explanation for middle school BS. When I stayed after class to talk with our professor, I told him, almost confessionally, that I had been reading Goldman. As everybody else filed out of the room, he declared she was almost an anarchist. “That’s not a bad thing,” I responded, daring him to say something middle-school-esque. He smiled. It’s not, but it’s better to be in the minority if you’re an anarchist. What the hell did he mean? Part of me wondered if he meant anarchism was only valuable because it shifted the Overton window to the left, legitimizing DSA-style socialism and other moderate ideologies without creating change. But maybe he meant having unusual politics made you different, the kind of different that most people shouldn’t be, even if you had a shot at changing society or at least changing minds.

As the summer passed, I realized I couldn’t let minority status stop me. When my family embarked on a month-long camping trip to California, I spent every waking hour in the backseat studying basic decency—reading Goldman and Bakunin, bing-

ing Kim Kelly articles, listening to Howard Zinn lectures on anarchist history, writing angsty poetry, my queer heart catching on fire as middle America rushed by. When I got to LA for my LGBTQ+ leadership camp, I knew I'd never again let any violent system go uncriticized. When a counselor lent me her copy of *Days Of War, Nights Of Love*, I pulled an all-nighter to read it as my inner insecure teenage girl whispered her questions: would any girl even consider dating a tragic lesbian who became an anarchist in the back of her parents' car somewhere in Nebraska? But when I got home, I promised myself I would do more than read theory, blast anarcho-punk, and cry; I would fight for liberation.

The violence of eighth grade hasn't killed me yet. These days, I've been volunteering with Madison Infoshop, continuing to organize with my queer liberationist collective (now the first nonhierarchical organization in my school's history), and educating friends about anarchism. And as for being a minority? As Goldman said in the book that changed my life: "Ours is merely a more poignant repetition of the phenomenon of all history: every effort for progress, for enlightenment, for science, for religious, political, and economic liberty, emanates from the minority, and not from the mass."

I started the summer desperate to have normal politics but instead realized that anarchism made perfect, heartbreaking sense. Middle school is about conformity, hierarchy, and politically inaccurate science fiction. But even though middle school is not only a coercive institution but one built on assimilation and oppression, it isn't the worst thing to be a minority. In fact, it turns out middle school is one of the times when it's most meaningful to think outside the violent majority.