

Anarchist Studies Network Conference 2: ‘Making Connections’

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9 December 2012

It's a strange anomaly that anarchism is so marginal an idea in academia despite it being a major influence on contemporary social movement praxis, as well as having been the dominant proletarian ideology worldwide for decades leading up to the Russian Revolution.

As a framework for radical theorising, it is far less common than both Marxism and oppositional postmodernism (two traditions whose strong points anarchist-communism has the potential to synthesise quite well, by the way). However, there are many signs this is changing. This last decade has seen an explosion in anarchist academic work and the creation of anarchist studies networks based in North America and Britain. One such grouping, the ASN, held a three-day conference this summer in Loughborough, England, that two of the editorial collective were able to attend. There were roughly around 200 people in attendance, mostly from Europe and North America.

The Anarchist Studies Network should be commended for generously subsidising the costs and fees of unemployed and student attendees. At times the programme had up to seven sessions were running simultaneously, so our short feedback here is obviously quite partial, based as it is on what we attended and the general feeling we got from others we spoke with. Also, the scope of the programme was pretty eclectic, with streams themed under anarchism and education, religion, disability, non-domination, anarchism in different national contexts, post-anarchism and art, and bodily anarchy, to name a few.

One highlight was a roundtable discussion with members of various Industrial Workers of the World branches, in particular hearing about recent organising successes by Pizza Hut workers in Sheffield. Two of the best sessions made use of an open slot allocated for spontaneous discussions, workshops and so on. Gabriel Kuhn called a session that has resulted in the creation of an Independent Anarchist Scholars Network. It has started as an email list but it is hoped to grow to be a vibrant network of mutual support for anarchist scholarly work outside of the university.

A much warranted session on feminism (with possibly the highest attendance we witnessed of any billing in the programme) created space to look at the lack of concrete sessions on feminism in the conference programme, and also to discuss the dynamics of the conference overall in terms of what and who was lacking in terms of representation.

There were other related criticisms of the balance of content within the programme – possibly reflective of the general focus of many anarchist academics. While Occupy was discussed a lot, we didn't see many papers relating to the current European austerity agenda, the broader global capitalist crisis and the fight against them. Perhaps it is reflective of a strong post-structuralist influence on contemporary anarchist theorising that the big picture analyses were so rare. With some exceptions, the format of the sessions was of a conventional academic nature, not particularly participatory or inclusive, with the little time given to discussion often thus dominated by those who are more familiar and comfortable in such settings.

While it could be tempting to suggest that the increasing prevalence of anarchist theory and research within academia is something of an inevitability, we shouldn't take it that its course is mapped out by any means. We would hope that such a development would not reproduce some of the pitfalls of academic theorising in its detachment from wider society and general depoliticisation, but would build on the many existing links that are there, in and outside of universities, with real social movements. Overall, we saw much potential in this event to strengthen such links (and met a bunch of great people).

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