

Outsider Anarchism

A review of METAtropolis, edited by John Scalzi

Margaret Killjoy

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Five award-winning science fiction writers got together, wrote a shared-world fiction anthology that explores explicitly anarchist solutions to the world's problems, and then got the cast of Battlestar Galactica to read them as an audiobook. And the anarchists, by and large, took no notice.

METAtropolis—released as an audiobook in 2008 and finally reaching trade paperback printing only this year in 2010—is a fascinating piece of outsider anarchist fiction. The authors are not consciously political radicals, but they are clearly inspired by the possibilities of autonomy that have been opened up in the 21st century. I would guess that not a one of them has read Bakunin, Rolling Thunder, or anarchistnews.org; they've struck upon the idea of mutual aid economics and horizontal structuring largely in a vacuum. They're completely unfettered by the assumptions that so many of us carry with us at all times.

This isn't to say that they've created utopias, or that the societies presented in METAtropolis deserve to be copied and pasted into a "traditional" anarchist context, only that these outsider pieces are useful—in showing us that there are many roads to anarchy—and fascinating.

The basic premise of the anthology is to explore—or perhaps explode—the concept of cities after the collapse of most of the tenants of western civilization, but not after an apocalypse. After an economic and governmental collapse.

The first piece is perhaps the most obvious example of the contradictions and the sordid beauty of a naive look at anarchism: Tyger Tyger by Jay Lake describes eco-anarchists who live in the forests of Cascadia. They are technology workers, genetic engineers who's main cultural export is open-source genetic code. They've got a slight bit of military hierarchy and they've got torture chambers for their political enemies. Their borders are closed and fiercely controlled. Not the sort of piece that a classical anarchist would write.

Elizabeth Bear describes a scavenger society built on reputation economics, a new-world-in-the-shell-of-the-old culture of recyclers and communists who've never read any Marx. But she also gets at the heart of what is being offered in the anthology: no author is trying to blueprint a utopia. One character in Bear's story points out: "It's not a utopia. It's just maybe something that sucks a little less."

Tobias S. Buckell describes an arguably horizontal nomadic structure that travels the country, happily utilizing a diversity of tactics from protest to bombings to shut down police infrastructure

and build vertical farms and other monuments to sustainability wherever they go. They ride bikes and forcibly dismantle people's cars, and are a sort of fanatical–yet sympathetic–cult of “zero footprinters.”

John Scalzi describes a more traditional, hierarchical city but sympathizes heavily with the barbarians at its gates, and Karl Schroeder describes an augmented reality city on top of a city with its own post-scarcity economic structure.

I'm not just fascinated by the cultures that these stories present, I'm fascinated by their authors' point of entry. I would suggest that technology culture in the 21st century is leaning more and more towards anarchist approaches. Centralization is being outed as the demon it is: centralization and homogeny are understood as the bane of a healthy online network, and many are beginning to realize that the same is true of offline networks. A sort of neo-tribalism is on the rise, as is simply understanding that people and cultures are more fascinating when viewed as webs, as horizontal networks, than as rigidly controlled and highly-formalized structures.

What's more, intellectual property is increasingly out of vogue. A sort of anarcho-futurist mentality is on the rise: that we should borrow and steal freely from each other's ideas, that copyright laws are an imposition on our aesthetic and creative freedom, that they stand in the way of moving our culture forward–or outward, or in whatever direction it feels like moving. Some are, I would argue, even beginning to understand that it is not that we steal ideas from one another, but that copyright and intellectual property actually represent theft from the public, enclosure of what by nature ought to be the commons. Knowledge knows no scarcity and there is no reason to charge for its dissemination.

Slowly, this critique of intellectual property is filtering out into meatspace, and now in the 21st century many geeks are coming to their own understandings of what Proudhon so famously stated in the 19th: property is theft.

Radicals would be fools to ignore this sudden appearance of fellow-travelers.

There is plenty to be critical about in METAtropolis, to be certain. I know many people who will reject the entire thing whole-hog because it proposes (or at least describes) genetically engineering pigs to better feed a “green” city. Its critique of technology is quite specialized, its critique of capital is occasionally bizarre, and its portrayal of protests is actually sort of cute in its naivety. But still, these authors are intelligent people and their proposals merit consideration at the very least.

But I'm not as concerned with how this might influence the radical crowd as I am excited about how this might influence a broader audience. Fiction is a powerful medium for the dissemination of radical thought, and here it has been utilized quite effectively: the line between utopia and dystopia are so blurred that it is almost impossible to take ideas from the book as prescriptive, and anarchism is presented as a fairly non-ideological movement or idea. There are no black flags, but there is squatting, permaculture, and direct action. And thank heavens, there's no appealing to the state. A mainstream book that talks about solutions to political problems without a hint of reformism: I can handle that.

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