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Robert Hough

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Modern-day anarchism isn't what it used to be

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One thing I've found about being a novelist is that the profession, while gluing you to a chair for the majority of your life, can also, on occasion, place you in unusual situations. Case in point: In September I published a novel which dramatizes anarchist Emma Goldman's plot to assassinate the Gilded Age industrialist Henry C. Frick, a mission she undertook with her lifelong companion, a fellow revolutionary named Alexander Berkman.

As such, I recently found myself with a table at an event called the Hamilton Anarchist Bookfair, which is held every September at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, a beautiful stone building from the mid-1800s that has hosted worker and union-related events since 1996. It was a beautiful fall morning, and I left downtown Toronto with my wife, who had charitably agreed to sell copies at the event, thus freeing me up to do some reporting. We arrived right at the start time of 10 a.m. Already the place was bustling. After checking in, I was given a table in a corner next to a vendor named Francois, who introduced himself as being a 'dis-tro.' This, I learned, was short for distributor: He sat behind a table

covered in anarchist-themed zines, all of which were produced by other people. “I’ve been selling zines for 25 years,” he told me. “And I’ve never made one myself.”

After perusing his wares, I picked up a 12-page, photocopied publication from 2024 called *The Third Rail; Criminals and Collaborators in the Time of Genocide*. On the cover was a picture of a grinning Joe Biden, who, in the interior pages, was referred to as “Genocide Joe, U.S. Puppet-in-Chief.” I gave Francois \$5 for the issue.

“Oh good,” he said. “My first sale of the day.”

I then left my table, where my wife was struggling to mount an *Anarchists in Love* foam-core poster on a malfunctioning easel I’d bought the day before at Midoco, and walked around the salon. After a bit of hunting, I found the event’s principal organizer; he was sitting in the opposite corner of the room, next to a display of T-shirts. I’ll call him “Jason” – he asked that I not use his real name, as he felt that police infiltration was a problem in anarchist circles. This surprised me: None of the people in the room, save for one young man who was walking around in a flak jacket, black mask and tinted glasses, looked at all dangerous. Then again, following the Anarchist Bookfair in 2018, a spree of petty vandalism did prompt the mayor of Hamilton to briefly outlaw the public display of Circle-A insignias in the city. It was also true that, in another zine I bought that day, a publication called *Azimuth*, there was a list of direct-strike actions perpetrated in Canada over the past year. Mostly, these involved setting parked Teslas on fire.

“Emma Goldman was very aligned with the trade union movement,” Jason told me. “The modern anarchist is a bit different. Basically, anarchism went away for quite a while. But in the nineties, it re-emerged in various subcultures, the most notable being the punk and zine cultures. Today, anarchism isn’t just one thing. It’s expressed by people with different goals and aims – it’s more that they’re united by the same anarchist sensibility.”

think it plays well with anarchists.” I nodded in agreement. At least “tabling” at the fair was free, though participants were encouraged to return a percentage of sales toward the collective, which in my case wouldn’t be a whole lot.

I decided to do another sweep of the room. It was still full, as it had been all day: Even the most cursory Google check will reveal that there is, indeed, a rapid and distinct resurgence in anarchism, with anarchic uprisings having recently occurred in Indonesia, Nepal, Peru, France, Chile and Hong Kong. As I moved past the various tables, it occurred to me that this uptick was likely a response to the autocratic governments that have come to power across the globe.

This, it turned out, was dead wrong. “Most people have come to the conclusion that democratic institutions themselves are corrupt,” Jason would later tell me in an e-mail. “This realization has led to a radicalization of people in general, which has been beneficial to both anarchists and groups on the far right.” These, then, were the people at the fair: decriers of both fascism *and* democracy, flipping through inky zines, yearning for a more palatable future. I bought a few more titles, ate an apple at the complimentary snack bar, and chatted with the editor of a collection called *Anarchist Fictions*, who encouraged me to join the Writers’ Union of Canada – “you get dental insurance!” she enthused. I then took a final look at the crowd – all those tattoos, all those piercings, all that umbrage – and decided to call it a day.

I started roaming the various tables, looking at books, zines and artwork. As Jason had promised, I was met with a potpourri of concerns. There were prison abolitionists (i.e. *Rattling the Cages*) and their close cousins, the police abolitionists (*We All Hate the Police*). There were numerous environmental zines (*Anarchist Ecology*) and there were punk publications (*Hamilton Punk History*) though not nearly as many as I thought there would be, given I heard many times that day that punk rock was all but single-handedly responsible for reviving anarchism in North America. There were LGBTQ titles (*Trans-Gender Revolution*), anti-psychiatry titles (*Madness, Disability and Abolition*), pro-Palestine titles (*No State Solution; On Social War, Israel and The Alibi of the States*), and revolutionary economics (*To Rob a Bank is an Honor*). Finally, there were the outliers: I flipped, fascinated, through the pages of *Fascist Yoga*, *A People’s History of Tennis* and *Occult Features of Anarchism*.

If I was understanding correctly, an abiding interest in environmentalism, queer rights or prison abolition did not, in of itself, make you an anarchist. Yet if you pursued these movements with an anarchist *characteristic*, then you were in the club – as Francois told me, “my anarchism is more of a political aesthetic than anything else.” Unlike in Emma Goldman’s days, when anarchism had a strict rule book, modern-day anarchism was more of a tone, a contour, a sensibility. Intending to figure out what that sensibility actually *was*, I headed into my third workshop of the day, a lecture entitled Anarchism 101.

I should mention that I had not fared well in my first two workshops, both of which had been held in a stuffy, smallish room next to the main exhibitor salon. The first, entitled The Coming Climate Catastrophe, was presented by a pair of environmental researchers who, given the number of graphs and tables they had loaded onto their laptop, seemed to know everything there was to know about planetary degradation. I lasted about 20 minutes, at which point I was feeling too terrified to stay any longer. The second was called Introduction to Insurrectionary Anarchism. I had high hopes for

this one, insurrection being the most controversial, not to mention seductive, aspect of anarchism. Again, I didn't last. There's a distinctly intellectual vein running through anarchism, and at times the presenter, who was fond of words like "conflictuality," sounded more like a PhD candidate in semiotics than a streetwise revolutionary.

In other words, I didn't have high hopes for Anarchism 101, which was given by a young woman with dark hair and a lot of tattoos. So I was pleased when she immediately got down to brass tacks: If you want to be an anarchist, you have to be anti-state, anti-capitalism, revolutionary, and opposed to hierarchy and domination (these were her presentation headings, by the way.) You also had to be revolutionary, and engaged in direct action. ("You're basically cutting out the middleman," she explained. "You don't *need* to petition a local councillor to start a food co-op.") You also had to adhere to horizontalism and prefiguration (she defined both of these terms, the problem being I was too busy noting that this was another example of anarcho-intellectualism, the result being I couldn't begin to tell you what they mean).

There were a few others, all leading to a grand finale: solidarity. In anarchism, there's a firm belief that if your friend or neighbour is oppressed, you are as well, end of story, their struggle is your struggle. This was evidenced by all the people at the book fair who had COVID masks – roughly one-quarter of attendees were wearing one, a fact that made interviewing difficult in a crowded, noisy room. When I asked Francois why *he* had one, he put it this way: "It's a product of solidarity and mutual care. I could be sick and not realize it, and without a mask I might pass it on to someone else."

So was *that* the anarchic sensibility? A desire to crumble current power structures, coupled with an abiding sense of responsibility toward others? If so, I had to wonder – let's say that the state, following an unrelenting series of direct strike actions, *did* crumble and capitalism *did* cease to function. What would replace it? Emma Goldman was firm on this matter: Once the revolution came, and

people were shed of the corroding influence of government, a new form of collective organization, yet to be fully imagined, would naturally and effortlessly rise up to serve the people well.

The difference is that Goldman spread her anarchic creed more than a century ago. To a one, I found the book-fair anarchists to be a lot more circumspect, even weary, about prescribing solutions, most likely because so many of those solutions had proved faulty in the intervening years. In one book I purchased, an introduction stated that anarchism is "a good method for asking questions, rather than offering blueprints." Soon after, I ran into one of the speakers at the ecology workshop; she was outside, chatting with a comrade, around the corner from where free chili was being served for lunch. When I asked her how anarchism would solve the climate crisis, she raised an eyebrow and said, "I never said that it would." Her friend nodded, and said, "It's just something anarchists should be talking about."

Still, there *are* models in place: a lot of modern-day anarchists look toward the Kurds, who have erected a liberated area in northeast Syria, where they are practising something called "democratic federalism." (Wikipedia says it has something to do with self-governing collectives.) There was an impressive amount of Kurdish-related literature for sale in the room, and Francois, my table neighbour, told me that "my primary interest in anarchism these days is the Kurdish liberation movement." Yet even the Kurdish example is looked on with a scrutiny that didn't seem to exist in the days of Emma Goldman. "The area is called Rojava," Jason told me. "And, yes, it's inspiring a lot of anarchists. But as soon as the Kurds set up in Syria, ISIS invaded, so they had to create a militia. And then, before you know it, the militia was being aided by the American government. So let's face it – there are problems with everything."

By this point, it was mid-afternoon, and my wife had yet to sell a single copy of *Anarchists in Love*. By way of explanation, she tapped the professionally art-directed cover of my novel and said, "I don't