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Why anarchists might be best prepared for a zombie apocalypse

Samantha Swindler

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Twenty years of organized anarchism sounds like an oxymoron, but the Institute for Anarchist Studies is celebrating its 20th anniversary this Friday with a party and fundraiser in Southeast Portland.

I needed to know more.

Local anarchists Paul and Lara Messersmith-Glavin helped relocate the Institute for Anarchist Studies from New York to the Rose City earlier this year.

The Institute doesn't have a physical presence beyond a local post office box, but it made sense to move it to Portland. Of the 11 board members located across the U.S. and Canada, three, including the Messersmith-Glavins, live here.

Lara teaches at Portland Community College and Paul is an acupuncturist at Seven Star Acupuncture. They invited me to their home to talk about social revolution while their 4-year-old son watched "Go, Diego, Go" cartoons in the living room.

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The Institute is an anarchist think-tank that provides grants and publishing opportunities for anarchist writers around the globe. It publishes an annual journal called "Perspectives on Anarchist Theory" and a nonfiction book series about anarchism.

When you think of anarchy, you think chaos and a total absence of social structure, but adherents say there's a difference between that definition and the principles of anarchism.

Anarchism is the theory that self-governing, cooperative communities can exist without capitalism, centralized government or national borders.

That's pretty radical – and I remain skeptical of the idea – but it's not as nonsensical as a total absence of governance and authority.

"The idea of non-governance is so funny if you've ever been in an anarchist space because we're some of the most rule-bound people you've ever met," Lara said. "We're so careful about the language we use and the way in which we pay attention to each other. It's the exact opposite of hooliganism."

In fact, she said, the movement takes inspiration from a notable non-hooligan source – the Quakers. Decisions are made in a directly democratic way. Consensus, Lara said, doesn't mean everyone must agree but everyone must feel heard.

This was not what I envisioned. Wouldn't it be better, I suggested, to rename the Institute?

Lara thinks not.

"There are times when the word anarchist can be exciting for people, and we'll use it intentionally because immediately people get electrified," she said. "And then there are times where people already think they know what it means, and it makes them stop listening, so instead of using the word we'll talk about the principles instead."

She has a point. If she'd asked me to write about the 20th anniversary of a left-leaning, anti-capitalist, direct-democracy organization, I would have passed.

But anarchism? Tell me more.

And specifically, tell me how the zombie apocalypse will work.

I read a lot of dystopian fiction. There are plenty of visions of the world after governments collapse, and none of them are good. Why do anarchists think their social experiment wouldn't end like the sixth season of "The Walking Dead"?

Paul, who's also a fan of the show, says "The Walking Dead" is what happens when people influenced by capitalism are set adrift in a cruel world. Because capitalism is cruel and dominant, he says, humans become cruel and dominant.

"Sometimes people make the logical leap to, that's just human nature," Lara said. "And that's the part that anarchists resist. No, it's not human nature, it's the nature of this system. This is what it has created."

The anarchist argument is that people in cooperative societies are more able to resist chaos in catastrophe. Lara cites examples from the book "A Paradise Built in Hell" that looks at how communities came together after earthquakes and hurricanes. Human nature, the anarchists argue, is malleable.

To be clear, I think there are plenty of holes in anarchist theory – the lack of a viable economic model, the idea that we need no police and socialism can work without corruption – but I enjoyed my conversation with Paul and Lara because they got me thinking about human nature and social structures in a way I hadn't before.

Take the practical application of anarchism to every-day life. When Lara is asked to run meetings at work, she applies anarchist principles: collaborative agenda setting, clear time keeping, asking people who don't usually speak to say something, asking those who dominate a meeting to step back.

Coworkers think she's a meeting genius.

"I go into an anarchist meeting and we all do this without thinking," Lara said. "And that means that we've learned something. That means that we have a culture... It means in some other circumstance, we would already have the skills to be able to talk to each

other and make decisions in a much less frantic and power hungry fashion.”

Which brings us back to ”The Walking Dead.”

”I think the zombie apocalypse hits an anarchist convention, we would immediately circle up and there’d be facilitators and people would be making sure there was water and somebody would be finding bathrooms and I think it would be different,” Lara said.

Anarchists believe if you change social conditions, ”you change the nature of what it means to be human,” Paul said. If you create social conditions of empathy, solidarity and altruism, it becomes human nature.

Man, I said, you anarchists are really optimistic.

”I’m a Chicago Cubs fan,” he said, smiling. ”I have to be an optimist.”