

Anarchy Summer Tour Burns Across the Country

Aragorn!

2006, Fall-Winter

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To start out the hottest summer, (to date) the planet has had, I decided to help out by spending two months driving around the country, burning fossil fuels and talking about *Anarchy* and a variety of other anarchist topics to people all around the Midwest and East Coast. Much of the collective joined the tour at one point or another and together we visited over two dozen towns and attended five different weekend events over a nine week period.

As a member of the new collective I wanted to get involved in the enormous project of understanding people's perception of the magazine and getting direct knowledge of local anarchist politics throughout the country. I was able to do this because of personal economic devastation (resulting in not having a job) and the generosity of my close friends. I kept my expectations of audience, interest, and economics virtually non-existent, fearing that approaching new people and places with even a modicum of hope would guarantee a result of despair. I was not disappointed.

The Examined Life

I made the choice before I left that I was going to blog this trip. I ended up writing one to three posts per week. The upside to writing frequently is that it was a way for me to keep my friends back home apprised of what I was up to and for me to keep track of the specifics of the wheres and whens of the trip. It also allowed for a pretty accessible way for people to share their thoughts about my visits to their town and argue with each other (as if the internet doesn't provide enough opportunities for this otherwise).

There were, however, quite a few downsides to blogging the trip. Just as I am not a spectacular letter writer to friends who I would love to keep in touch with, and so am not in the habit of that kind of writing, it ended up being pretty inconvenient to write about the prior day's events for friends-out-of-sight. I have also never been that interested in photography,

not from a lack of desire but due to a personality that does not lend itself to interacting with the environment through a device. I never think to take pictures until the moment has long passed, so bringing a camera and taking pictures was counter-intuitive. On top of all that, I ended up highly self-censoring my blog. While I did honestly reflect on my own presentations and the process that I was going through as I learned how to speak to audiences non-, barely, and differently anarchist, I tried (successfully for the most part) to speak well of the places and people that I met along the way. The one time that I didn't (in relation to Paul Finch from the Northwest Anarchist Communist Federation) I regret as it fed into a particular binary that I have long since grown bored of.

This said, I am fairly pleased with the results of writing about the trip as I took it. It demonstrated a little bit of a journalistic perspective and ended up making the tour, the magazine, and to some extent me, more approachable.

The Anarchist Flea Market Circuit

Part of the motivation for touring as long as I did was to attend the variety of anarchist events that happened throughout the summer on the East Coast. All together I got to the Montreal Anarchist Book Fair in the middle of May, the Our Lives Ahead conference (Indianapolis, IN) at the end of May, the Allied Media Conference (Bowling Green, OH) in the middle of June, the

Mid-Atlantic Radical Book Fair (Baltimore MD) at the end of June, the Earth First! Rendezvous (Western VA) in early July and the Providence Anarchist Book fair in the middle of July.

One conspicuous trend at these events was the Anarchist Flea Market. This is the group of people who, products in tow, descend on any town that is throwing an anarchist event. This makes sense in that all of the established anarchist projects require some income and are hard pressed to find a better source of revenue than a high concentration of anarchists who are in the same location for a day or two. It is arguably true that established anarchist print projects (books distributors, magazines, and publishers) represent something like a thread of continuity through anarchist circles. Most of the people involved in these projects have been involved to a greater or lesser degree in the anarchist milieu for a decade or more and are, as a result, informed, interesting, stubborn, and conscientious. Furthermore the distance between towns is far closer on the right hand side of this country than on the left coast. You can reach virtually every major city on the East Coast within six to eight hours including Montreal, New York, Boston, Providence, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. It is pretty easy to justify the travel expense and effort on the East Coast in a way that is not true on the West.

The disturbing elements of the Anarchist Flea Market are what you might expect. An unfriendly tension for anarchists is the reality of living within a capitalist economy and, as a result, most projects that are distinctively anarchist also involve economic exchange.

This seems to result in a consensus by anarchists to pursue the least financially rewarding projects possible. Radical book publishing and selling, or indeed publishing in general, is very competitive, centralized, and labor intensive so naturally anarchists are deeply attracted to it. As a result the relative success of AK Press (success in this case meaning growing to the level of being a small company with paid staff rather than being a one or two person volunteer project) dominates conversations about how to better do the impossible (meaning being a sustainable publisher). Outside of publishing projects the only other members of the Anarchist Flea Market are the very small number of artists who hitch their wagon to the anarchist train.

The Anarchist Flea Market demonstrates the disconnect between the quality of our projects (and products) and our desperate lack of a marketing department.

Regionalism and Universality

During the weeks between these events I traveled throughout the land, from Minneapolis to Kansas City in the west to Chapel Hill and Montpelier in the east. Mostly I spoke on anarchist topics for anarchist audiences and was inspired and informed by the different activities and projects in each of the towns I visited. Many projects were consistent thematically but the regionalism of the anarchist milieu was reflected in the specific emphasis and biases of each project.

Perhaps taking a cue from the punk rock DIY scene, there are several small publishing distributions based out of a number of towns that table at a variety of events including punk shows, community, and radical events. Kersplebedeb, Alive and AWOL, Old Mule, Fire Starter, One Thousand Emotions, Swarm Press, the Institute for Experimental Freedom (IEF), A New World in our Hearts are just a few that I met that reflected the interests of the distributors and the group of people that surround them. One project that stood out for me during the trip was the IEF. Rather than distribute the same old things they “attempt to wrestle detourment from the grasps of

the adbusters-types and postmodern advertisers, and place it back into the hands of agents of revolt.” They redid covers of two of my zines to great effect.

Food Not Bombs continues to be a way that an anarchist community feels like it has a positive relationship to the geographical community it inhabits. It also provides an entrance for young people with activist inclinations to meet each other and have a project that is easy to understand and be involved in.

Most communities offer Food Not Bombs on an infrequent schedule (once or twice a week) that reminds me how impressive it is that the Bay Area does eleven feedings a week total (every weekday on both sides of the bay plus Sunday in Oakland).

Infoshops and bookstores serve as community resources, time drains, and important topics of conversation in each of the towns they are in. As anyone in the publishing world knows, independent bookstores are having a very hard time. The rise of chain stores through the 80s and 90s has greatly centralized book consumption. The advent of the internet allows the illusion of far greater access to niche topics than would otherwise be available as well as another outlet to purchase things. Include the difficulty of having a radical intention with your storefront and it is a miracle that any of the radical independent places I visited can survive. These included Boxcar Books, Arise! Books, International Books, Crossroads Infoshop, Madison Infoshop, Red Emma’s Bookstore, Black Sheep Books, and Lucy Parson Center.

One way to organize an understanding of the communities that I visited would be into categories of college town versus established anarchist community. To generalize the college towns, audiences were of people aged 20-24 who were somewhat new to anarchist thought but were very engaged with current ideas and conflicts about tactics, ideology, and strategy. The established anarchist communities tended towards a wider age range and a more sporadic interest in topical anarchist themes. An example of this would be St. Louis, an incredible city for anarchists for a variety of reasons. It seems to be a rustbelt town that is only slowly growing into a thriving post-industrial city with housing costs that reflect this. This means that the broader anarchist community has actually been able to make more-or-less permanent spaces in the community. The extent of these exceed this report back, and will be a topic for another time, but include several interesting literature projects and multiple owned buildings and homes within a community of fairly young people. This means that the people in St. Louis seem a lot more concerned with refurbishing their homes than they do the bombing in Lebanon or the Green Scare. Another, more positive consequence is that the town seems likely to continue to be a source of living anarchism for decades to come, as opposed to the Midwest college towns with their perpetually high turnover.

Post What? Federation of Who?

As I had experienced from time on the East Coast (and the RAT conference in particular) the interests of the West Coast are very different than the East. This can be discussed in terms of a Red and Green division, or a Left and not-Left division (although that would be a selective reading of anarchists on the West Coast), or the relationship between anarchists and academia, unions, NGOs, or radical environmentalism but these would all be simplifications. The cognitive dissimilarity between the coasts is the point.

The Midwest, by and large, was ambivalent to most of the incendiary topics that consume the discussions on the Coasts. Perhaps this results from the generally practical orientation of the Midwest and a greater interest in carpentry than syndicalism, and food, than primitivism, but probably also comes from a general ambivalence towards theory and strategy. This isn't entirely parochialism as much as it is a matter of priorities. Living is more important than talking about living. Furthermore, sectarian issues that seem to crystallize large coastal towns into entirely separate anarchist factions are largely resolved in the Midwest with a general attitude of "it's all good." This indulgent perspective was frustrating as it made emotional engagement with people difficult. But it was also reassuring since it seems that avoiding sectarian bullshit is a necessary component to a sustainable anarchist community. I expect many of the people that I met in the Midwest will be around in 10 or 20 years.

On the other hand the details and specifics of the projects in the Midwest are virtually unknown outside the Midwest and they suffer as a result. Literature and propaganda projects (like ours) can be criticized for many reasons but the addition of a geographically centered anarchist publication would improve the feeling I had in most of these towns. There was a general despair in the Midwest about the lack of people: a lack that influences the kind and scale of possible projects. The typical conflict between transitory and immobile people is exacerbated by there being so few of either and by there not being a pre-existing infrastructure for projects and options. Projects tend to have to start from scratch or involve having to deal with the one person who is the founder and most concerned member. Predictable resentment ensues.

There Is Nothing Left to Learn

There was interest in an anarchist speaking tour despite the idea seeming like an anachronism. The concept of a traveler sharing information about other towns (without being a particular burden on the town they were staying in) was a welcome change from the traveling culture that only seems interested in taking, rather than sharing, resources. While my expectations about audience size were very low, people came out at every event I made it to. Much of the time these audiences wanted to talk about what anarchy was rather than about *Anarchy* or my specific presentation but they were consistently interested in hearing someone with more experience talk about the consequences, experiences, and particulars of anarchist politics.

When I originally planned the tour I conceived of my presentations as examples of a non-ideological perspective. Instead of having a stump speech about the magazine or my particular interests I offered each of my hosts about a half dozen different presentations including bolo bolo, community (and conflict), indigenous anarchism, second wave anarchy, the critique of the left, the Bay Area anarchist milieu, and anarchist people of color. Ideally this would have allowed a presentation to coincide with a current discussion or interest in a local community. Instead it caused a lot of confusion since most of my hosts didn't particularly care about which presentation I should give, meaning I usually chose the topic without really knowing the audience I would be speaking to. My theoretical inclination meant that many of my audiences didn't know enough about what I was talking about to ask what I was talking about.

Throughout the tour I grappled with the gap between what I was interested in talking about and what mixed audiences wanted to hear. I learned how to speak to a variety of audiences, how

to be responsive to them, when to talk theory and when to listen to where the audience was coming from.

Meeting Your Enemies, Real and Perceived

North American anarchism is quite factionalized given how small of a political tendency it is. I both participate in and am embarrassed by this. The argument *for* this factionalism is that it represents the very different motivations and traditions of contemporary anarchists. However, factionalism is not the same thing as engagement, critical or otherwise. More pointedly, factionalism as practiced usually looks like people interacting with each other as labels, as artificial constructions of perceived political identity, rather than as people.

In my case this included being called a post-leftist, a liberal, a lifestyleist, not-an-anarchist, and a crimethinker (often at the same time). When these kind of epithets start to get tossed around and remain the way that the resulting conversation gets framed, it demonstrates a real inability to communicate with actual human beings. This is ironic given that the general criticism is oriented around a perception of how to talk to “regular people.” During a few of these conversations the rhetoric was able to be set aside and, as a result, nuanced and I had interesting conversations about exactly what benefits and problems there are to the different approaches that exist within anarchism.

Beyond the exhausting elements of sectarian anarchist politics was one funny incident that is worth repeating. At the Mid-Atlantic Radical Book Fair I met someone who obviously was very informed about the modern anarchist scene and was wearing a t-shirt with the slogan “Commie Fag” (with the C replaced by a hammer and sickle). During our conversation I corrected someone making a sectarian comment about NEFAC—the Northeast Federation of Anarchist Communists, a federation of Platformists scattered throughout the North East (from Baltimore to Montreal). The Commie Fag was clearly in NEFAC, appreciated my correction, and after a brief chat invited me to lunch with a couple other members of NEFAC. After a brief sidebar with my companions about whether it was actually safe for me to go into a van filled with Platformists (who did not seem inclined toward creating a safe space for a collective member of *Anarchy*) I went and had a pretty good time. Despite my wariness about being outnumbered by hostiles, they actually didn’t seem that interested in me, or giving me a hard time, at all. They were far more interested in each other’s company and in talking about fighting nazis, dealing with their legal problems, and other topics that wouldn’t have been unusual at any meeting of anarchists of any stripe. I survived lunch with the NEFACers unscathed!

Conclusions

Anarchy has survived for the last 26 years by changing with the times and inclinations of the people producing it and reading it. The magazine moved to the newsstand and to a standard format to make it easier to be produced by fewer people. Today newsstand sales of the magazine are shrinking, and not just because of mistakes made since we have taken over production of the magazine; the entire magazine industry is shrinking. This is particularly true of journals like ours that do not appeal to a general audience and have a fairly small print run. Our desire to maintain

the magazine over the next 26 years means learning about our readers and discovering the ways that we need to change.

One lesson I learned was that the people who read our magazine are not necessarily the same people who came to the presentations. Partly this is because of how brief the time was between the decision to make the trip and the trips start, which made it impossible to publicize the event in the magazine. So the only way that people heard about the tour was through anarchist internet news sources, the *Anarchy* website, or local publicity. The conclusion I drew, from the audience demographic and the lack of subscriptions sold, is that the people who subscribe to magazines today are not the same people who compulsively read the internet or keep up with local events. Additionally many of our readers refuse to subscribe on principle and only buy the magazine through the newsstand or share friends' copies.

As a result of this tour, I believe more strongly than ever that there is a need for an anarchist publication that covers analysis from a broad geographic base in the US and a corresponding need for more anarchists to write about what they know. The few well-known interactive websites tend towards sectarian squabbles, and/or non-anarchist content, rather than providing space where people can experience a respectful, broadly conceived, and rigorous anarchist presence. The gatherings that happen around the land tend far too heavily toward commerce and (statist) activism and, as a result, skew very young.

I continue to be energized and inspired by the work that anarchists are doing around the country. In the fifteen years that I have been actively involved in the politic I have seen the scope of anarchists' vision increase greatly. What barely existed in a dozen major cities has spread to hundreds of small towns throughout the country. For every town that I made it to, I was told about another nearby that I should have gone to. While I would criticize the lack of imagination in the endless repetition of half-assed Food Not Bombs projects in each town, I realize the role that such projects fill and only hope that creativity outpaces resignation into future projects. The growth and pace of anarchists is what inspires me to continue working in my own town and to continue networking with different communities.

We aren't any closer to a general transformation of society than we were fifteen years ago. It is probably an illusion to believe that an insignificantly small group of radicals are going to do much more than observe if such a change were to occur. We are, on the other hand, entirely capable of having interconnected and interdependent lives in ways that capitalism does not allow, cannot contain, and will not control. I met dozens of anarchists this summer who are attempting to do just that.

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From AJODA #62
AJODA #62, Fall-Winter 2006, Vol. 24, No. 2

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