

Anarchy in Minneapolis

Dogbane Campion (David Watson)

1987

During the summer solstice weekend of June 18 through 22, some 250 to 300 people converged on Minneapolis, Minnesota, to attend the Anarchist Gathering. It was the second of such continental gatherings, the last one having been held in Chicago in the Spring of 1986 to commemorate the Haymarket Affair. (See FE #323, Summer 1986 for a report on the Chicago Anarchist Gathering.)

People came to Minneapolis from all over the country, with a handful from Canada and outside the U.S. Youth was the accent, with most people between 18 and 22 years old, and few over 40. There were no old-timers present who had participated in the movement during its classical heyday, which sadly brought home to us how a whole generation, some of whom we have been fortunate to know, is passing away, and with it, a wealth of history and experience. There were definitely more men there, but women numbered at least a third of the participants. Nearly everyone was white, with a handful of Hispanics and blacks, and while the class make-up was uncertain, a significant number appeared to be students or marginals. About 20 people attended from Detroit.

Minneapolis is your typical midwestern city, containing some tree-lined and comfortable neighborhoods along with a lot of ugly concrete buildings and freeways: The physical layout is fairly grim (though not as bleak as Detroit), and the Mississippi River, which runs through town, appears to be at least as abused as Detroit's brutalized waterways, perhaps even more. It is also a very friendly city; people are relaxed and don't suffer the paranoia so common here in Detroit. There is a socialist-populist working class culture that has created, among other things, a lot of co-ops and co-op restaurants, and local restaurants and pizzerias even placed coupons in our conference brochure welcoming the anarchists to town.

Thursday night there was a welcoming party at the Back Room Books, an anarchist bookstore and the sponsors of the gathering, which, after some drinking and noise got flushed out by some zealous, and obnoxious cops. Given the mild nature of the town, there was none of the brutality one would have expected, say, from Los Angeles, New York, or Chicago cops. A couple of people were arrested and later released.

Friday and Saturday were filled with workshops on such topics as putting out a publication, sexism and racism, technology, monkeywrenching, theatre, animal liberation, anarcho-communism and paganism. The workshops ranged in quality, but many were intense, with a high level of discourse, and a cooperative spirit. Friday night there was a banquet with delicious vegetarian food, and on Saturday night a great concert with Detroit's Layabouts, The Mean Guys from Hell, who actually were from St. Louis, and San Francisco's Forethought. Everyone danced until they dropped and the cops stayed away.

Sunday people gathered in a park to wrap things up; proposals were discussed for a newsletter and for the planning of a gathering in Toronto next year, and there was time to criticize and discuss the Minneapolis event. In the evening the pagans held a solstice celebration in a park along the Mississippi, which I was unfortunately unable to attend.

On Monday a War Chest Tour through downtown Minneapolis was held, which visited various capitalist and government institutions, many of them war-related. (See the accounts below.)

Kindred Spirits at the Gathering

While many participants seemed well grounded in anti-authoritarian ideas, a significant number seemed very inexperienced and had come to Minneapolis out of curiosity and to learn: about anarchy. Unfortunately, there was little in the way of education and historical discussion to give people a background. Nor was there a chance for people to discuss as a group what was going on locally, through regional reports to the whole conference, perhaps.

We met many kindred spirits at the gathering, and many perceptive people with a strong understanding of the manifold aspects of modern domination. But there was also an amorphousness to the conference, and the amorphousness raised some important questions. On the one hand, it's clear that died-in-the-wool anarchism, with 'chapter and verse quotations from the nineteenth century luminaries, is only a moribund ideology, a variant of leftism which has little to offer in the way of a critique of the contemporary forms of domination. On the other hand, some newcomers to the movement seemed to espouse only an extreme version of liberalism mixed with highly personalistic, new age platitudes about individual liberation, giving the impression that for some, anarchism is not much more than a fashion. It's common knowledge that the culture industry has colonized the circle-A just as it did the peace sign during the 1960s; if an authentic, liberatory, revolutionary movement is to emerge, this domestication must be combated.

Nor was leftism challenged strongly enough at the conference. For example, when a Detroiter protested the presence of members of a trotskyist sect (with a "soft line" on anarchism, presumably for recruitment purposes) at workshops, others considered him a sectarian. This kind of mushiness comes from lack of experience, and leads to a situation where the "anarchist movement" remains a compost heap for leftist recruiters. Even at the gathering in the park, no consensus could be reached to kick out the maoist RCP, a veritable cult, which was selling its "literature" to people who had walked by to check out our crowd.

Paganism is another problematic current. I have a sincere sympathy for animism and the spiritual wisdom of tribal peoples, representing as they do a powerful critique and opposition to rationalism and modern instrumentalist civilization. But the discourse I saw in the pagan workshop (and in discussions with a few people who had participated in the solstice celebration) raised more questions than it answered. There was a marked anti-intellectual attitude among many that made it difficult to discuss historical paganism and the relationship between it and anarchy. The contrasts pagans made with christianity were frequently simplistic, and they had no answer to how paganism was to avoid authoritarianism except to say that it is a "powerful tool" that could be misused.

For tribal peoples, a spiritual relationship with the earth had a context and was deeply rooted in the social, but for modern (detribalized) people, it can be dangerously contrived. Pagan anarchists (or anarchist pagans, as the case may be) should consider the problem of charisma, emotional identification, and domination, as well as the myriad pagan-fascist and socially quietistic spiritual movements in the U.S. and Europe before they announce that paganism is "inherently libertarian" and "the essence of anarchy," as one starry-eyed solstice worshiper told me the next day.

As a general, intuitive orientation, animism makes sense, but to refuse to see our actual separation from nature and the problems and responsibilities it raises, to throw away a necessary skepticism, is to reduce the animist insight to ideology—which has potentially sinister consequences. (The 19th century anarchist throwbacks who briefly picketed the pagan workshop, however, without even discussing the question with the pagans, were certainly no better in their rationalist positivism. They can't even imagine the sacred character of the very land they are trodding on; they need to take at least a year off, get out in the woods, and read some good books about primal peoples.)

Someone suggested putting together a discussion around the theme "Beyond Anarchism," which might have led in an interesting direction. I believe in the need for a new revolutionary discourse which stands on the history of revolutionary movements, a critique of technological civilization and instrumentalism, and a visionary recognition of our primal roots. But that is as yet too much to expect of the anarchist movement, and may always be.

Nevertheless, the wide variety of anarchist views comes with the territory, and underlies both the movement's strengths and weaknesses. The classical anarchist movement was eclipsed once and for all in the 1930's with the defeat of the Spanish Revolution, and it's not about to be revived. As George Woodcock writes in the epilogue to his history of anarchism, "Lost causes may be the best causes—they usually are—but once lost they are never won again."

But, he continues, “ideas do not die... And when we turn to the anarchist idea, we realize that it is not merely older than the historical anarchist movement, but it has also spread far beyond its boundaries.” Anarchism as ideology is, like all isms, a wasm. But anarchy lives, and an anarchist orientation is critical to a struggle for human liberty. In fact, a generalized antiauthoritarian orientation is playing a role in the wider radicalization that has begun to sweep this country since 1980, particularly though not exclusively among young people. It can play a healthy role in overcoming the error made in the past, as in the 1960’s, in succumbing to authoritarian politics, reformism, spiritual quietism, and social passivity.

Anarchy as a general perspective and living idea can shift the entire political spectrum of the current radicalization, moving it towards a more revolutionary and liberatory position by its intransigent vision of freedom and its rejection of hierarchy and all forms of domination. By renewing and deepening a vision that includes past forms of freedom (anarchies) and contemporary forms of revolt and radical social discourse, we can move beyond ideology towards genuine radical transformation and egalitarian human communities. But anarchists must critically view their own counter culture, history, and current trajectory. If we can, we may assist in opening up the whole of society in a way that can take it all, as somebody once said, beyond the point of no return. Everyone else is arguing the logic of power. We can make a difference. Let’s do it.

Thanks to the entire Minneapolis anarchist group for the hard work that went into organizing the gathering.

Responses

FE Note: The following are three responses from among those who attended the Gathering. Space limitations kept us from printing others we had received, but they will be published in our next regular edition. We welcome other responses.

”...feeling a sense of solidarity.”

Despite a minor case of malnutrition and a regrettable lack of sleep, I would still refer to the ’87 Anarchist gathering as a success. In my mind there are two major incentives towards staging such an event. The first is to come away from the gathering with actual and concrete progress having been made. I believe that this was accomplished in several ways.

A task group was assigned to plan an anarchist communication group and publish a newsletter in an effort to solidify inter-anarchist contact. It will be called Mayday and appear bimonthly containing news and a calendar of events. It will be mailed to those on the Minneapolis and Haymarket mailing lists.

If you want to send pieces in for print, write to: Gabriela Arensdorf c/o IMWU, 12531-G Harbor Blvd., Suite 188, Garden Grove, CA 92640. To send in donations, or inquiries about the mailing list, please write to: Denise Unora, 1459 W. Foster, Chicago, Ill 60640.

Another aspect of the-gathering that I felt was very significant was the feeling of solidarity and camaraderie present throughout the entire gathering. What a difference it is to actually meet the person behind the letter or publication and to share laughter, anger, ideas, hopes and plans. These gatherings are important if for no other reason than to build personal understandings and friendships between so many individuals who work so diligently for a common struggle.

Lastly, I’m including my own personal praises and criticisms of the goings-on at Minneapolis. The first night (Thursday) party turned into nothing short of a disaster. Police raided and made a few (three was what I heard) arrests, and we all had a daring time walking the streets and waiting for word of what was going on. In my opinion, this predicament might have been either lessened or avoided altogether if individuals would have acted with more responsibility.

“Legally” speaking, the police had a reason for breaking up the party. There were many minors drinking, and there were many people drinking on the street. Although it is quite likely that they (cops) could have found another reason, or no reason at all to break up the gathering, I don’t see why we should give them the reason they need—and play right into their hands.

Yes, we are anarchists and we do not believe in laws, but we should realize we are currently living in this repressive state of affairs, and if we are going to have some sort of confrontation with the authorities, let us at least make it over something significant. I feel neither the desire nor the inclination to go to jail (or to be beaten by cops) over beer!

The War Chest Tour came off better than I had imagined. There were relatively few arrests, (six arrests out of roughly one hundred to one hundred and fifty people), and as a group we all did a commendable job of staying together—thereby reducing the chances of further arrests.

We women who chose to take our shirts off in front of the porn district wrote on our chests “Not for Sale” and other messages, and I for one was quite surprised that we were not arrested right then and there for that action.

Overall, I believe that the gathering was both productive and positive, and that any disruptive elements were outweighed by the sense of solidarity which seemed to be quite pervasive throughout the week. The Minneapolis collective did an outstanding job of organizing this gathering, and deserved a great deal of appreciation from all who attended. Hopefully we can all learn from any mistakes and make next year at Toronto as good an experience, if not better!

—Gabriela

Los Angeles, CA

”...need to be participants.”

I was pleased with the gathering in many ways. First, and most important, was the warm feeling that our small group of crazies in Detroit is not an isolated phenomenon.

Second, I feel energized after participating in large meetings, conferences, etc. with no hierarchical structures.

Third, the discussions resulting from the gathering among those of us who went from Detroit have been extremely valuable.

The women’s workshop was a disappointment to most of my women friends. Even in our movement, women are still experiencing the same problems some of us experienced in the late sixties, both personal and political. Since we are experiencing them we need to talk about them. Unfortunately the workshop didn’t move beyond that. In next year’s workshop I would like to hear the successes as well as the problems. We need to discuss how we empower ourselves and each other to speak out, to write, to publish, to take active part in discussions and to encourage women and men to recognize and work to change the attitudes and behavior we have all internalized so well. A mailing list was circulated and can work as a vehicle for that empowerment. Women, especially those who are isolated from other anarchist women, can use it to find non-threatening criticism and support.

The question of the lack of historical perspective was raised during a discussion of the workshops. It seemed to many who had attended a few dull workshops that a large number of participants had little, if any knowledge of previous anarchist movements. While some of us thought understanding at a gut level is just as valuable as “having an analysis,” others argued the necessity for reading history and a variety of perspectives. All agreed, however, that those workshops in which someone had taken the time to prepare an introduction were more interesting and had more people actively involved in the discussion.

My own experience in workshops was that there were many participants who hadn’t given much thought to the posted topic other than that it would be interesting to hear what other anarchists had to say about it. I had assumed that workshops would be for sharing and examining our thoughts and experiences concerning that topic, but when only two or three had anything to say about it, the workshop was boring. I think it boils down to that old question of individualism and responsibility to the community. People need to give some thought to the topic and be participants rather than observers.

But I don’t think reading is necessary to develop one’s perspective. I think we have glorified the written word and neglected oral traditions. History and ideas can be passed on through art, music, lecture, story-telling, and theater. I would like to encourage people to prepare more of those kinds of presentations for next year.

The third discussion, spirituality, became very heated. Although many of us agree we have developed intellectually while neglecting or submerging our spirituality, the question of how we should develop and express it is not easily answered. I think when we are developing our own ways of expressing our spirituality, it’s important to remember what is negative about Religion. Hierarchical structures, whether among people or deities, should be rejected as should rituals and language that are, or become, irrelevant to people’s lives. Also, submerging one’s self

in the whole can be a positive experience but care must be exercised so that the energy of the moment doesn't force individuals to actions they regret later. The open session to plan the solstice ritual was an attempt to democratize the ritual. I'd like to know what actually took place at the event.

I wish I could have been at three workshops at once. I missed quite a few I wanted to attend, especially the one on theater.

Thanks to the people who worked so hard in Minneapolis to provide the opportunity for us all to come together.

Della Nada

Detroit

"...better with Coke?"

On the last day of the Anarchist gathering in Minneapolis there was a march held downtown, starting at the Hennepin Government Building. People were outside waiting for a possible confrontation with the keepers of the government building, while some were standing on the balcony outside the place with signs they had flung over the edges with anti-authoritarian statements, as well as the anarchist black flag. Behind them was a line of people, some wearing bandannas over their faces. It was quite a sight.

Most of the people were standing down below. Around 100 to 150 people had gathered around a huge cement fountain waiting for things to start. I had heard that the Pagans the night before had put out some good vibes so as to protect us from the "bullies" who work for most of the places we were to visit.

We were motivated to get started by some drummers of a different beat. People were still in a festive mood after 4 days of talk and good music. Everyone was either chanting something, yelling or waving a sign, all with a pretty good sense of humor.

Every few blocks we stopped off at some corporate or government building and gave our best wishes for its destruction and all it stands for. At one point we headed down to Block E which is the porn district. There both men and women took off their shirts and exposed their bare chests with circles drawn around their nipples and below this, in writing, "Not for Sale."

People assumed the cops would do something but instead they just stood around and did nothing.

From there we headed down through the shopping district where some folks stopped off at a vendor selling cold ones. To me, this was actually the funniest stop! There was a line of anarchists, with their signs and masks, waiting to buy cokes and so on. Makes me wonder if we could throw a revolution without soda pop, or do things go better with coke—even anarchy?

The cops started to show force when some people started spray painting a sculpture. You can shout, hang defiant signs at government buildings and show your bare chests, but don't mess with art! So the art police came and made a few arrests. Off to jail with the anarchists

We ended up at a cement park with a high rise building on it and a real lovely water fountain made out of the same cement. By this time people were starting to fall back from the core of the march—a mistake because the cops started to show up in force and started busting people. I saw one cop with a half choke-hold on a demonstrator trying to pull her away. The only people near by were mostly on bicycles and they were getting knocked down by cops.

By the time most people on the march saw this happening, the cops had pulled their mace out and let everyone have it, including themselves. About six Or seven people were arrested, two or three bikes with bicyclists were knocked down, and a number of people were maced.

All in all, the march was enjoyable—there was a good feeling of solidarity and no one was seriously hurt. Also, the cops seemed to have wanted to avoid a major confrontation, whether it was out of fear, or because we outnumbered them, or maybe the good vibes from the Pagans were too powerful for even a cop to handle.

G. Dondini

Chicago/Detroit



Dogbane Champion (David Watson)
Anarchy in Minneapolis
1987

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/326-summer-1987/anarchy-in-minneapolis>
Fifth Estate #326, Summer, 1987

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net