

A New World in Our Hearts

Book review

Peter Werbe

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a review of

A New World in Our Hearts: Eight Years of Writing from the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, edited by Roy San Filipo. AK Press, 2003, San Francisco, 139pp.

Letters to a Young Activist, Todd Gitlin, Basic Books, 2003, 174 pages

I haven't read either of the books listed above and have no intention of doing so. I'm reviewing them in the manner all of us do each time we peruse a library or bookstore shelf. "Hmm, that looks interesting; no, that probably will be boring," etc.

What links these two books in my refusal to read them is their enormous pretension and condescension that comes across after simply looking at the words on their covers.

The worst is from the Love and Rage book. It brags on its back jacket, "Love and Rage was a revolutionary anarchist organization built by activists...that sought to make anarchism relevant for the 21st century..." and assures the prospective reader that the text will "provide insights into the ideas and Methods of Love and Rage that will be useful to activists [and] agitators..."

Without turning a page, doesn't it occur to anyone with a passing familiarity with the sad history of this small group of squabbling militants that their efforts were a colossal failure? L&R started its organizing efforts at the 1988 Toronto Anarchist Gathering which saw over 1,000 people in attendance, and ended, not with a bang, but a whimper," with 42 faction-worn, manifesto-laden participants, many of whom were ready to leave anarchism for Maoism.

The overall weightlessness of their wheel-spinning efforts (not to say that some of their actions weren't worthy) can best be reckoned when, despite all of their claims of significant impact on the anarchist movement and the larger political situation in North America, little changed because of them during their tenure from 1989 to 1998, and nothing diminished upon their barely noticed exit as a formal organization. (For instance, on the one page I thumbed to in the book, an article extolled the L&R work in Detroit. Maybe I was asleep during that period, but if their group [about five] did anything of any significance, I missed it.)

In fact, a year after their unlamented departure, the Seattle anti-WTO demonstrations burst upon the scene with methods and organizing techniques light-years away from the Old Left bullshit of manifestos and position papers and factions that typified L&R.

Some have argued that the group at least had the significance of carrying us from one era to the next—the global justice movement.

Rather, the L&R experience is a case study of what not to do. It was Leninist in anarchist's clothing comprised at its core of an odd couple arrangement of the rump of the post-trotskyist Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL) and the Minneapolis anarchists led by the ex-anarchist, Chris Day. It burned out numerous good people in the

process with the group's hellhole of factional politics and endless meetings, and, in the end, it was the socialists who became genuine anarchists, and the anarchists who picked up the rotten mantle of Leninism.

If I had even a thought of reading *A New World*, it was dispelled by a review of it by Wayne Price—an L&R insider who has kept true to anarchist principles—in *The Northeastern Anarchist*. He notes editor San Filippo's dishonest rendering of the issues that roiled the group. Price reports that "there are twenty articles [in the book], two by supporters of the pro-anarchist faction...and eleven by our opponents, showing the lopsided nature of the editing."

As noted above, Gitlin's book and L&R are connected by similar notions of pretension and condescension. Gitlin's *Letters to a Young Activist* is unpalatable simply by its title. What could Prof. Gitlin's advice possibly be? Be a conservative drag on developing radical consciousness just when Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was developing an explicitly anti-capitalist perspective in the mid-1960s? Become a tenured professor? Fly an American flag after September 11? Support the long-planned attack on Afghanistan?

We need elders in a movement, but no more so than emerging youth. Gitlin could have done better to have written a book about advice from young radicals (something he desperately needs) who are at the core of today's peace and social justice movements, rather than suggesting they need to learn from him. I was around during the same period as Gitlin, but I have precious little to say to today's activists. They're doing a generally good job. I have a few things to share, but I wait until I'm asked before offering an opinion.

Both the Love and Rage writings and Gitlin share the Leninist tradition of small groups or single radical intellectuals speaking to and for the "masses." This contradicts the openness and sense of collective wisdom inherent in anti-authoritarian principles and is only the road to the traditional equation of active leaders and passive followers.

I'm going to go read *Tearing Down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy*, by Jeff Ferrell, that Sunfrog gave me for my last birthday. That looks good.

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