

This is what Anarchy Looks Like

Defending our politics and defining our vision against bashing, baiting, and backlash

Sunfrog (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith)

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The forces of capital have once again called upon their storm troopers and talking heads to physically and symbolically crush the growing, global anti-capitalist movement. In the United States, building from the tragic embarrassment of September 11 and overreacting to political defeats like Cancun and the Battle of Seattle, the State has intensified its sustained 150-year-old campaign to defile the public reputation of anarchists.

Last November, this reached frenzied levels in the days preceding the anti-FTAA protest as journalists, politicians, and Miami police engaged in what one writer called “an orgy of anarchist-bashing.”

Last November in Miami represents tyranny’s latest epiphany in using the word “anarchist” to demonize, criminalize, and marginalize an entire movement. By trying to divide the global justice movement into further factions of good protesters (such as union leaders and rock stars who believe in symbolic protest) and anarchists (anyone who does direct action, advocates anti-authoritarian ideals, dresses a certain way, or brandishes a certain device coded as dangerous), the-propagandists of repression intend to stifle an impressive revolutionary milieu for the new century. The disinformation inherent in the Miami-style strategy already has a track record for intimidating protesters and the public alike. In February 2002, anticipating protests against the World Economic Forum in New York City, a journalist for the liberal Village Voice joined the fear flurry. Writer Richard Esposito described anarchists as “jet-setting troublemakers” intending “to infiltrate law-abiding activists, with the goal of damaging property, hindering access to the meetings, and garnering media attention for their anti-globalization agenda.” In contrast to such chaotic cosmopolitans, the cops were depicted as a “disciplined, experienced, blue-collar division of uniformed police.” Esposito sums up his dramatic view of the stark contrast between the law and us: “Cops see these brick throwers and car burners as almost Al Qaeda-like, down to their transnational wandering, their leaders’ wealthy backgrounds, and their fundamentalist message.”

Using counter-terrorism and political extremism as blanket excuses, police behave brutally, judges make examples of individuals associated with radical ideas, and government spies accelerate their surveillance of all forms of activism, especially the anti-war, anti-occupation movements. The FBI made its intentions clear in a memo circulated last Fall; the agency makes no apology in naming its perceived enemy at these mass events: the anarchists.

At the same time, the US Secret Service has intensified the demarcation of “no protest zones” anywhere the Emperor from Texas rears his head. Currently, a North Carolina peace activist is fighting a legal battle for holding a “no blood for oil” sign on the wrong side of the street. The charge? “Threatening the life of the president.” A century ago, anarchists did threaten the life of the president; however, what motivates the State to bring these kinds of charges against garden-variety peace activists today?

The current climate of repression is not an anomalous aspect of the Ashcroft-Ridge era of homeland containment. The intensification of libel against advocates of undiluted liberty did not begin when the ink dried on the PATRIOT Act; indeed, the domestic war against dissent has experienced one heyday after another for more than a century. We’d be guilty of our own version of the exceptionalist, historical myopia clouding the minds of the neo-

con prophets if we saw our persecution as unique. History shows that the Bush regime is simply fulfilling its duties as States always have.

For much of the last century, political repression was the *modus operandi*. Domestic intelligence was known for its dragnets during the entire five-decade tenure of the notorious J. Edgar Hoover, who began running the FBI in 1924 at a time when the post-World War Red Scare was still in full swing.

The four decades leading up to Hoover's ascension to top cop were the time of the great anti-anarchist crusades, a period marked by Emma Goldman's deportation to Russia, the persecution and heroism of the Haymarket martyrs, the assassination of President William McKinley and subsequent execution of Leon Czolgosz, the judicial murder of Joe Hill and Sacco and Vanzetti, and the systematic dismantling of the IWW. Even during the now-romanticized (by many liberals) Bill Clinton years, domestic intelligence lumped anarchists, animal rights activists, and eco-liberationists together with right-wing militias, klansmen, and cultish sects.

Indeed, it would be truly exceptional to discover a time in North American history since the 19th century when anarchists and other revolutionaries were not the target of baseless accusations in the media and barbaric attacks in the streets.

Appearing before Congress in May 2001, FBI director Louis Freeh declared, "Anarchists and extremist socialist groups—many of which, such as the Workers' World Party, Reclaim the Streets, and Carnival Against Capitalism—have an international presence and, at times, also represent a potential threat in the United States. For example, anarchists, operating individually and in groups, caused much of the damage during the 1999 World Trade Organization ministerial meeting in Seattle."

Of those groups, Reclaim the Streets (RTS) is best known for its guerrilla dance parties. While Freeh's statement suggests ludicrous ignorance of the RTS tactics and message, we cannot deny his serious assertion that even dancing, when coupled with the disruption of commerce and seizure of public space, should be branded as terrorist. His remarks did not go unnoticed in the radical milieu and PB Floyd's "Is Dancing Terrorism?" provided an eloquent and relevant response in *Slingshot*. (Easily available online by googling the author and title.)

This official denigration disseminates a cloud of fear designed to contaminate the culture of protest. At worst, anarchist-baiting and activist-bashing divide radicals from their natural allies in the struggle for justice. This tactic demonizes anarchism for the general public, forces us to renounce direct action, and splits the ranks of opposition. Experts at deception, the public relations manipulators working for police precincts and privatized security firms invert the logic of our resistance to authority. They deny us our politics and utopian dreams. The current rhetoric discourages rebellion with its striking historical resemblance to the anti-anarchism of a century ago. While much fear of "dirty immigrant anarchists" has been replaced with condescending condemnations of "spoiled rich kid anarchists with multiple piercings and facial tattoos," the official disgust serves the same aims of inverting truth and upending dissent. In the 19th century, opinion editors at the *Washington Post* preached, "Anarchy is tyrant. This is not freedom, it is subjugation of the most intolerable kind. It is the assertion of authority over the enlightened, progressive, liberal American citizen by a horde of foreigners, representing almost the lowest stratum found in humanity's formulation." If anarchists hope to participate in popular movements to transform society, they cannot ignore such eerie precedents in the manufacture of public opinion. The same twisted logic that made the anarchist an authoritarian, then turns a Bush or a Sharon into a peacemaker today. Unfortunately, if the media's grip on the public imagination can portray a preppy, tepid, bourgeois doctor like Howard Dean as a ranting, radical freak, then it's chilling to consider what sadistic punditcrats might do with the real radicals and freaks like us.

But our adversaries do not stop with smear campaigns. The recent strategy of attack includes passing strident anti-anarchist statutes, sometimes embedded in laws intended to fight terrorism and protect the homeland. For example, a proposed Rhode Island Homeland Security Bill recently attempted this. Anarchist activist David Grenier explained at InfoShop.org: "It's an 18 page document, and right on the first page, before talking about weapons of mass destruction or poisoning the water system or anything else that a rational person might consider 'terrorism,' it says 'any person who shall teach or advocate anarchy' will go to prison for ten years." Thankfully, this blatantly autocratic law was defeated, but similar legislation can be expected, and laws this audaciously tyrannical continue the crackdown that hounded our predecessors a century ago.

In 1902, New York passed the calculated and brash "Criminal Anarchy Law" that made it a felony to advocate the "doctrine that organized government should be overthrown."

During the same period, President Theodore Roosevelt declared, “When compared with the suppression of anarchy every other question sinks into insignificance. The anarchist is the enemy of humanity, the enemy of all mankind, and his is a deeper degree of criminality than any other. No immigrant is allowed to come to our shores if he is an anarchist; and no paper published here or abroad should be permitted circulation in this country if it propagates anarchist opinions.”

Does this stark battle cry resemble in any way the current president’s absolutist war rhetoric? A xenophobic bias helped Roosevelt pass an anti-immigrant law embedded with an anti-anarchist bias and implied recognition of an international movement that would topple all governments.

During this period, New Jersey criminalized the display of red and black flags. Later, at least seven states passed “criminal syndicalism” laws targeting the radical unionism of the IWW. In addition to today’s dangerous laws like the USA PATRIOT Act, local communities often pass ridiculously arbitrary anti-protester ordinances in advance of anti-capitalist convergences coming to a particular city. For such laws to successfully stifle protests, the courts will test them by scapegoating and singling out certain protesters and making them into prisoners and examples.

An injury to one is an injury to all

Test cases for the state’s success in stigmatizing dissent and frightening future rebels can be seen in the situation of our political prisoners. Against the backdrop of the PATRIOT Act, the recent attacks on African-American anarchist Sherman Austin should give us pause. Thankfully, even the liberal media has been generous in documenting the draconian hit on Austin, currently doing time for his revolutionary website Raisethefist.com. But no matter the widespread sympathy he’s earned from civil libertarians, the facts from his case should heighten concern and solidarity in all of us. The judge defended the severity of Austin’s sentencing as a way to teach a lesson to those prepared to confront authority. According to Austin, the judge “wanted to set an example for, in his words, future ‘revolutionaries.’” (See FE #362, Fall 2003)

As bad as Austin’s sentence is, the terms of his probation are similarly ominous. “One of them,” he says, “is that I can’t associate with any group or persons who advocate violence or political or social or economic change. Basically, I can’t associate myself with anarchists. It actually says that on the pre-sentencing report, that I can’t associate myself with anarchists or anarchist associations.”

Associating with anarchists, writing letters to anarchist ‘zines, and reading anarchist literature has also created problems for political prisoners like Jeff “Free” Luers and Rob los Ricos, anarchist writer arrested in Oregon for allegedly attacking a cop during an anti-capitalist insurrection. These comrades are designated by the Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC) as belonging to a “Security Threat Group” because of their anarchist beliefs. Writing about the unfreedom facing Free, his jailers issued the following statement: “Inmate Luers has a history of involvement and is an influential member of the radical ecology/animal environmental groups; he is recognized worldwide for his beliefs, actions and sacrifices. Inmate Luers is writing statements that is [sic] recruiting and advising others how to be effective while involved in what is called direct action, which means one acts to cause major damage to property and possibly injury to others. Inmate Luers was convicted for his radical anarchist activities and his conviction was condemned worldwide. Many will review inmate Luers’ written advice and some may act out from his advice. This type of activity is a direct threat to the safety of the public and causes serious concerns for the security, safety and orderly operations of all ODOC facilities and employees.”

Given the recent intensification in profiling anarchists, we all should be concerned about the pending trial of community activist Camilo Viveiros, charged with attacking the notorious John Timoney, police chief of Philadelphia during the Republican National Convention of 2000. We don’t need our severe discomfort with Timoney to harness our sympathy for Camilo and his years of preparation for a potentially devastating sentence. As Camilo’s supporters insist on his innocence and remind us of his inspiring involvement in nonviolent community activism, we need not create a separate category for his predicament. For example, even though we know Free was found guilty of torching SUVs in Oregon, we need not enforce a stratification of solidarity for innocent victims and insurrectionary saboteurs.

This is a time when political prisoners everywhere need our solidarity and defendants in political trials need our support. The debates between green and red anarchists or between revolutionaries and lifestylists were fun for a moment, but we need to occasionally transcend staggering sectarianism and offer aid and comfort to our comrades, remembering who our common enemy is.

Disputes within anarchism are ubiquitous not unique, so let's not expect a united front or anything like that. But we can carefully insist on our common purpose when dealing with the totality, when up against verbal lynchings that virtually leave us without recourse or support. Acts of violence—beyond justified property damage and self-defense—are rare in our political struggle, so let's resist the notion that revolutionary anarchists are by definition ultra-violent, doing the cops work for them by separating ourselves into sickening categories.

More than a century ago, newspapers sought to distinguish the eccentric, genius, utopian, philosophical, arm-chair anarchist from the malicious, immigrant, insane, lowlife, barbarian anarchist. While the poetry of our 19th century suppression would make proud any punk hobos of the Evasion nation, the antique journalists calling us vagabonds, tramps, lunatics, desperadoes, monsters, snakes, fugitives, and ruffians intended to ruin us—not romanticize us. Dividing ourselves into increasingly specialized factions based on the smallest discrepancies in our critiques only reinforces this good anarchist/bad anarchist game. We know that the genius and the fugitive are often the same comrade and need not waste blood or ink explaining, apologizing for, or defending the nuanced differences amongst us. The security threats we're worried about do not come from other anarchists; the real threats warm the chairs in Washington.

This is what anarchy looks like

To the majority of people, anarchy means violence and disorder, chaos and confusion. While some of us might find favor in the discordian, metaphysical appeal of chaos, this refers to anarchy more in the spiritual than social sense. As an ideal, anarchy has always meant cooperation, mutual aid, equality, autonomy, and freedom from all forms of hierarchy and domination. Historically, we have promoted anarchy not through random acts but inspirational propaganda and principled direct action.

Anarchism means (to paraphrase Utah Phillips quoting Ammon Hennacy) “we don't need cops to tell us what to do.” Anarchism is hardly anathema to the intuitive, anti-authoritarian spirit alive in everybody. Anarchists can take credit for extending the popularity of the libertarian tradition, encouraging the general distrust of bureaucracy, and respecting the “live and let live” ethics of others.

We can go as far back as the Boston Tea Party to remind our critics of the historic legacy of property damage and direct action. Every civil rights struggle since abolition has benefited from the vision and action of anti-statists. Anarchist manifestoes by Henry David Thoreau remain required reading in public schools today because the spirit of civil disobedience and revolutionary direct action were integral to every inch of social change accomplished since the Civil War.

The “soul force” tactics and revolutionary spiritualism endorsed by Martin Luther King, maligned as too liberal by some, share significant philosophical space with the grassroots religious anarchism of Catholic Worker Dorothy Day. King's prophetic rejection of both capitalism and communism for a vision of community that is neither is, in fact, an anarchist ideal.

Perhaps every morning workers in the US should thank anarchists for limiting their misery to just eight-hours, making workplaces less dangerous, and eliminating child labor. Not only did the struggle to save workers from absolute slavery depend on the heroic acts of anarchists, every significant movement to ameliorate misery—from decriminalizing contraception, marijuana, and homosexuality to stopping nuclear war and environmental destruction—has included anarchists and anarchist ideals.

What else do open-minded people everywhere take for granted that was created by anarchists?

Cooperative models for child-rearing and unschooling; housing, grocery, and agriculture co-ops; barter, mutual aid, and labor exchanges; horizontal structures for interpersonal communication, affinity groups, and consensus decision-making; the entire DIY movement in healthcare, music, and fashion.

The daily papers make a habit of reciting the reactionary definition of anarchy; just recently, I saw this one, “West Bank residents say anarchy rising”; last summer, the Pentagon hired supercop John Timoney to help “curb anarchy” in recently re-colonized Iraq. (I guess they thought he might teach them to do to insurgents over there what he does to us here!) After a century of insult and injury, some of our allies have defected from anarchy, claiming we can never undo the international defamation campaign and citing the same rigid ideological constraints that prepared authoritarian communism for history’s compost pile.

But others remain steadfast, speaking defiantly in the face of great travail, like our martyrs and heroes of previous generations. On trial as much for avowed aspirations as alleged actions, condemned Haymarket rebel August Spies reminded an Illinois court in 1886, “Anarchism, this terrible ism, deduces that under a cooperative organization of society, under economic equality and individual independence, the political state will pass into barbaric antiquity. We will be free where there are no longer masters and servants, where there will no longer be any use for the policemen and militia. Anarchism does not mean bloodshed, does not mean robbery, arson, etc. These monstrosities are, on the contrary, the characteristic features of capitalism. Anarchism means peace and tranquility to all. Anarchism means the abolition of causes which produce work and crime.”

But can we only quote antiquated anarchists? Why do we need mentors to make a world without masters? What does anarchy look like today?

It looks like worker self-management and families of choice not coercion. It looks like dumpster-diving day-old produce to feed a thousand protesters from a communal kitchen. It looks like cooperative record labels and infoshops, cafes and communes, fragile romances and fertile rebellions. It looks like flowers blooming in reclaimed urban space and squatters making artwork out of renovated buildings. Anarchy looks like reorganizing society to resemble our dreams rather than being forced to live one more day in our nightmares.

To us, anarchy looks like the intoxicated narratives that define books like the *Temporary Autonomous Zone*, forecasting the future as convivial festival, communal meal, and erotic affinity group. Anarchy looks like pamphlets like Crimethinc’s *Fighting for Our Lives*, asking for nothing less than everything: “Accepting no constraints from without, we countenanced none within ourselves, either, and found that the world opened before us like the petals of a rose.”

The pejorative perception of anarchism can be countered by public statements and in the creation of models: autonomous villages, festivals, and community centers. But we can no longer rely on modest attempts to model a collectively managed life to stave off the distorted, ignorant assaults against us. We need to engage in what one tireless anti-corporate activist calls “political self-defense,” thus engaging in grassroots, public interaction with neighbors, community groups, and co-workers.

Anarchists need to take risks and engage in deeper acts and pacts of solidarity with other anti-authoritarian radicals who may not identify as anarchist. As the global justice movement grows, we foster alliances with other activists. If our historic mission to free the world of wars and bosses is to survive and thrive through another period of intense contestation with the State and Capital, then we must consider the millions of allies who might be part of an international revolution that can win.

Anarchism is not a threat because anarchists do property damage at large protests and convergences. Anarchism is not a threat because some people are spooked by giant parades that feature puppets, stilt-walkers, clowns, labor organizers, marching bands, radical cheerleaders, drag queens, raging grannies, tattooed crusties, deejays, hippies, pagans, and pirates. Anarchism is not a threat because of our numbers, our influence in the media, our financial resources, or anything that could be called an ordinary political challenge.

Anarchism threatens presidents, polluters, bankers, popes, generals, cops, CEOs, and stockbrokers because it reminds them that their power and privilege are temporary and illusory. It exposes the utter bankruptcy of war,

capitalism, and the State without qualification or apology. It is the only ethical, visionary, and uncorrupt political philosophy, yet it asks no pledge, promise, or practical allegiance.

Anarchism is a threat because it reminds individuals that they can live for their desires and prosper without money or property. Anarchism remains a threat because it tells the truth.

— Sunfrog, the end of winter 2004, Pumpkin Hollow

FE Note: Sunfrog prepared this as a response to the crackdown, a gift for the movement, and a rant to present at Spring and Summer convergences, like the 9th Annual Bay Area Anarchist Bookfair in San Francisco. The “we,” “us,” and “ours” are of course rhetorical, not trying to represent other anarchists or even other members of the FE Collective.

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