

Recipes for Disaster

an anarchist cookbook

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2005

a review of

Recipes For Disaster, CrimethInc. Ex-Workers' Collective, Olympia WA 624 pages \$12.00. Available from the Barn: see page 98

It seemed that every time we dropped by Bound Together Books in San Francisco, the same situation unfolded. Some teenager getting the punk rock starter kit together (first mohawk, chain wallet, and Doc Marten's bought with the parents' credit card) would show up looking for *The Anarchist Cookbook*. The counterperson, with a weary sigh, would place on the counter a worn copy of the dubious classic and open to a dog-eared page. "See this bomb recipe?" she/he would say. "You'll blow yourself up if you do what this book says. That's not what anarchism is about." The kid would leave clutching a couple of cheap pamphlets on Kropotkin, never to be seen again.

The Anarchist Cookbook was a good idea in theory, but one tainted by its "back page of *Rolling Stone*" history and rumors of COINTELPRO disinformation within. It's an act of unrivaledchutzpah to bring the idea of an anarchist cookbook back now, at a time when the anarchist movement is growing beyond its recent association with juvenile rebellion. The allure of such a manual can't be denied, but it needed to be tempered with some critical thinking. The CrimethInc. collective has done precisely that with its new book, *Recipes For Disaster*, an alphabetized compendium of revolutionary strategies and tactics gathered from far and wide.

What makes the cookbook such a great format is its orientation towards action and away from rhetoric. Which is why it's a pleasant surprise to see this book emerge from the CrimethInc. collective crew. You may have heard the joke: "How many CrimethInc.ers does it take to screw in a light bulb?" Answer: "It was dawn: the possibilities were limitless...It was sunset when we scaled the rooftop..." In other words, these folks tend towards the abstract and the self-mythologizing, even while they're talking up direct action and the death of theory. Although the collective is sprawling and open (in fact they encourage appropriation not only of their name and logo, but also of individual pseudonyms, describing themselves as "a decentralized underground") this remains the distinct CrimethInc aesthetic.

Of course, this is a book about action, the direct kind, as opposed to, say, voting. "The opposite of direct action is representation," they say. "[Direct action] most properly describes actions that cut out the middleman entirely to solve problems without mediation." At a time when the spectacle has reached a new and previously unimagined level of ubiquity, under a capitalism whose necessary frontier is the colonization of the imagination, CrimethInc concern themselves precisely with discovering and creating unmediated experience. This brings us to illegalism-as-self-help, but also to topics you wouldn't expect out of a book like this: non-monogamous relationships, DIY gynecology...

The book nicely balances tactics for empire-smashing with ones for community-building. In *Recipes*, CrimethInc expands our understanding of direct action to include the festal (with sections on festivals, parties, and

performances). While it tends to earn them raspberries from anarcho-purists of both syndicalist and primitivist tendencies, these kids think that smashing the state has a certain allure. As such, there's some classic CrimethInc. material here: "Wild speculations, whispered rumors, secret invitations, passionate crusades, epic triumphs, surprises, suspense, drama, adventure: these are the stuff of revolutions, and without them it is not possible to break the deadlock between fear and desire." It's debatable that whether we need anarchism to be made fashionable and romantic ("glamarchism," anyone?), but it's what this collective does best.

We might say that this is "the bible of direct action," except that religious manuals don't often remind you that the authors are fallible, and that you should experiment on your own. For all the collective brilliance that's on display here, there's also a great deal of humility, humility sorely absent in most anarchist discourse. Although there's no entry on the topic, CrimethInc.'s previously articulated notion of "folk science" underlies all the material here: an aesthetic of tinkering, of taking the methods of science out of the hands of ivory-tower professionals.

The alphabetic arrangement of recipes creates a cheeky collage of topics. But it can also hamper cover-to-cover reading, with some of the lengthier and drier sections like "Antifascist Action" front and center. With a wide array of topics, written by many different authors, both individual and collective, there is plenty to criticize here. Some sections are poorly written; many are written assuming that the reader shares the lifestyle choices of the author(s). If you aren't young, punk, or a dumpster-diver, you might feel left out. At its best, though, the book invites us all to share the best of those worlds, to poke our noses into a dumpster or two ourselves and possibly be surprised by what we find.

Perhaps the section on mental health most characterizes the marvelous things about CrimethInc. It's written clearly and frankly, free of confusing jargon or unexplained theory. It's shot through with a commitment to taking mental health out of the hands of institutional authorities and back to the community, a commitment to voluntary association and mutual aid. It addresses an often taboo subject. And most importantly, it creates a space for human frailty, free from macho posturing and the Spartan pretensions of invulnerability that often plague radical movements.

Recipes for Disaster really comes into its own when it sticks to practical techniques. These ideas, which go well beyond the usual run of stencil graffiti and window breaking, should appeal to even the most jaded. Sure, you've altered some billboards, but do you know how to convert a VHS tape into a giant graffiti marker? If counter-spectacle's your thing, we'll bet you haven't made a giant inflatable teddy bear yet.

The section on asphalt mosaics is of particular interest. The technique (melting linoleum into asphalt at intersections to leave a vivid, long-lasting message) is sure to be unfamiliar to most readers and will catch eyes made weary by more common techniques. It's reverse-engineered from the work of an anonymous outsider artist who's been leaving baffling messages ("Toynbee ideas in Kubrick 2001 resurrect dead on planet Jupiter") around the country for decades. Outsider art—a wealth of idiosyncratic techniques, many of them ripe for adaptation to radical purposes—has been too frequently overlooked. Its appearance here is a testament to the value of CrimethInc.'s eclectic, undogmatic approach.

Recent years have seen an explosion of lone inventors and nonprofits creating sustainable technologies for developing countries. Often these can be built at home with indigenous materials, bypassing high-impact industrial production entirely. These techniques can be brought back to the developed world by and for those who choose to live outside the mainstream of consumption of manufactured goods. As with outsider art, CrimethInc. is mining a rich vein; they include a section on the rocket stove, a small, efficient cookstove (first used in Guatemala in the 1980s) that can be built with tin cans and burns scrap wood.

In a certain sense, the section on unemployment is at the heart of the book. In many ways, this continues the "Work" section in CrimethInc.'s last encyclopedic tome, *Days of War, Nights of Love*. It points to many of the other topics. Personal liberation, the authors suggest, is always the first step, the one that makes everything else possible. They offer dozens of strategies, small and large, for living without wages. While some of those strategies are parasitic (the basis of one of the most-heard critiques of CrimethInc.) many are concerned with reduced consumption, self-sufficiency, and mutual aid.

Of course, some of the techniques here will be intimately familiar to long-time activists. But for those just becoming engaged, it will be invaluable. It's entirely likely that this book will become a classic to replace the original "anarchist cookbook," and we're overcome with glee as we contemplate these ideas in the hands of mischief-makers

everywhere. We can't think of a better gift for a bright, unruly teenager. The folks at Bound Together must be breathing a sigh of relief.

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