

Anarchy at the Left Forum!

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The 2007 Left Forum was held March 9–11 in New York City's historic Cooper Union, featuring 92 workshops, two plenaries, a film festival, two plays, and attended by 1,500 people. It is the largest annual North American gathering of left intellectuals and organizers (it used to be called the Socialist Scholars Conference until—surprise, surprise—a split occurred). One of the 80 panels was entitled, “Anarchism and the Left: An Uneasy Relationship?”

The panelists consisted of Peter Staudenmaier, David Graeber, Danielle Sered, and Peter Werbe, and was chaired by Jack Bratich. An interesting background note: the panel originally was titled, “Marxism/Anarchism: A Dialogue,” but the Marxists dropped out one by one until dialogue was impossible.

What would anarchists, left to their own devices, do? Plenty of people showed up to find out. Speaking to a standing room only crowd of 60 attendees, the panel addressed a wide range of themes regarding anarchism's historical and practical relationship to Marxism, socialism, and the left.

Fifth Estate's Peter Werbe started things off by arguing that the left project had its origins in the French bourgeois Revolution, and has never left the terrain of capital and the state. Instead, it attempts to complete the bourgeois revolutions of that era by advocating reforms based on their call of “Liberty, fraternity, equality,” but not inherently revolutionary.

Werbe said the left should be viewed as the left of capital, and that its main contribution has been to establish the capitalist mode of production in regions where private entrepreneurial forces weren't able to do so. Anarchism doesn't covet industrial armies and centralized banks (advocated in the *Communist Manifesto*), nor does it traffic in designs for seizure of the state, realizing that it's an inherently authoritarian institution. Werbe finished by stating that leftists have been taken in by so-called communist revolutions, while anarchism has consistently refused to be fooled by capitalism's disguises and buyoffs.

Activist and writer Peter Staudenmaier, long associated with Murray Bookchin's Institute for Social Ecology, continued to historicize the Left, but with a significantly different rationale. For Staudenmaier, the key is to detect and root out right wing elements within anarchism while reclaiming left common projects. The former includes those forces that refuse any social organizing.

David Graeber, activist and Yale anthropologist, opened his talk with the pronouncement that “anarchism never began,” an intriguing twist on the question of history. For Graeber, anarchism (small a) is not traceable to a specific group, movement, or body of writing attached to individual authors. Instead, anarchism is the relation between practices, attitudes, and visions that are opposed to authoritarian structures. In this way anarchism has been with us since time immemorial.

He went on to distinguish left and right ontologically: the right operates with a political ontology of violence while the left has a political ontology of imagination. Anarchism falls on the latter side, acting as more than the “conscience of the left” (as is often claimed), but as the immediate creation of alternatives, the realization of imagination in the present.

Danielle Sered, organizer, mediator, and teacher, provided some images and pragmatic examples of this realization. Sered began her presentation with the image of the chick pecking its way out of its eggshell, whose persis-

tence and willful determination is the condition of its survival and growth. She defined anarchism as practicing liberation, a daily way of living that concretely creates the imagined society in the here and now.

Sered cited the self-organizing and mutual aid work in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as a well-known example. She also mentioned the projects that she currently works with, including Rock Dove Radical Health Collective and a consensus training course (co-taught with Graeber). And, in good pragmatic fashion, she informed the audience about an online book exchange site (bookmooch.com).

The discussion after the presentations went on for well over an hour. Left Forum is always a mix of new and old: the ritualistic restatement of positions as well as analysis of contemporary phenomena. Both are necessary elements, as these gatherings allow people to renew their bonds, redefine their differences, and speak to newcomers who hear these debates with fresh ears. The anarchism panel was no exception, setting a precedent for similar ones in the future, whether they are named as such or not.

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Fifth Estate #375, Spring 2007

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