

CrimethInc's Overflowing Cup of Anarchist Elixir

A Review/Essay

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reviewed in this article:

Expect Resistance: a field manual, CrimethInc., \$8, CrimethInc.com

Rolling Thunder: an anarchist journal of dangerous living; P.O. Box 494, Chapel Hill NC 27514; rollingthunder — at — CrimethInc — dot — com

Why is the CrimethInc. Ex-Workers Collective (CWC) the crew that the workerists love to hate? The rigidly anti-lifestyle critique leveled at these so-called “arrogant middle-class kids” has become so commonplace that it’s as much a caricature of itself as it is an unsophisticated slag at these prolific publishers of beautifully-crafted anarchist propaganda.

When the “ex-workers” aren’t publishing gorgeous, gritty books and journals, they are “acting independently in cells to create a more joyous and free world”—a task that for CWC involves putting on successful grass roots events to subvert capitalism like the community-wide potlatches called “Really, Really Free Markets” or organizing with other anti-authoritarians to converge in defiance of the Democratic and Republican conventions later this summer.

Visionary cooperation and vigilant contestation

Overtly anarchist and always adamant, CWC mixes praxis with poetry in ways that draw from the best examples of our collective history of fighting the power through visionary cooperation and vigilant contestation.

When surveying the contents of their journal *Rolling Thunder* (RTC, a periodical so polished that one might confuse it for a coffee-table book (except that many of the full-color photos are of what has been called “riot porn”), we get to travel from the resistance in Oaxaca, Mexico to that in South Central LA, from the practical anarchy of squats in Europe and the mid-west of the U.S. to the solidarity work of a prisoner support group. Readers can learn from 19th century anarchist icons like Lucy Parsons or Pierre Joseph Proudhon or study commentaries on the tension between ideas about—and examples of—victory and defeat in the current anarchist context.

Sure, the journal brews an elixir laced with stimulating shots of Nietzsche and lets us sip from the lemonade springs at the Big Rock Candy Mountain, but nowhere to be found is the evidence that the writers are eternally stuck in a self-centered, lifestyle sludge. I didn’t see a single article on why “Food Not Bombs” alone could supplant a critique of capital or romantic narratives on refusing to bathe after deconstructing the contents of a Whole Foods dumpster. While some zines may have a regular column on hopping trains or sewing patches, it’s not RT.

A force for anarchy

Perhaps the practicum on urban spelunking or the “activity page” with stencil designs fit the genre of action the workerist naysayers are talking about when they accuse CWC of middle-class lifestylism. The frigid analysis of diatribes like “Rethinking CrimethInc.” (widely regurgitated on Indymedia sites) may have applied late last century when CWC emerged as a force for anarchy, but CWC publications have evolved rather impressively over the years, and *Rolling Thunder* proves that.

When the detractors detract, do they really think they are bringing us any closer to revolution by promoting an anti-youth, anti-subculture bias? Sadly, the very practices CWC takes the most heat for from other radicals are related to the practical rituals of the gift economy that have been the glue of human community for generations.

What most often gets dubbed lifestylism is just living life to its fullest—an anarchist impulse that stems from Emma Goldman and many others. Militant workers in the 1960s, for instance, would often join their middle-class brothers and sisters dancing wildly to psychedelic music at a rock and roll venue, high on weed, after fighting the boss a few hours earlier at the job site.

Frankly, aren’t music, dancing, poetry, lust, and communally prepared and shared food merely facets of any functioning social enclave? Haven’t workers of the world always fought for their right to party? (And, for radicals who prefer the chemically-enhanced aspects of “lifestylism,” it’s worth noting that CWC has always advocated sobriety.)

Another flip and frequent charge against CWC concerns its debt to Situationism. In the anarchist scene during the late 1980s, Situationism proper and the post-situ perspectives of its North American kin held huge sway. Books like Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem’s *The Revolution of Everyday Life* were considered must-reads.

Considering that the youth are not reading Vaneigem, CWC books and ‘zines function as gateway drugs into the politics of everyday life. Who cares that many CWC texts emulate the Situationist style? Isn’t this form of borrowing, bending, and outright plagiarizing a tested, trusted tactic for anarchist proselytizing?

Far from perfect, some CWC works include conflation and cliché, and some of their far-flung analyses of current struggles like a recent piece entitled “Green Scared?” suffer from some ludicrous overstatements. But occasional missteps cannot undermine the spirit of the project, and seeing the way CWC publications have evolved suggests an emphasis on utility and even humility—especially when the collective authors discuss things from historical perspectives.

Fierce manifesto and a marvelous fantasy

Perhaps the most ambitious CWC manifesto yet emerged this past spring in the form of *Expect Resistance: a field manual* (ER). When I first perused the book’s format, the innovative anti-structure intimidated me; later, it intoxicated me.

The CWC web site provides an indispensable description of what ER actually intends, and I needed its explanation to expunge confusion. For example, any reader needs to understand the text’s innovative structure as “three books” within one, “each of which may be read as a complete work unto itself.” Basically, one book resembles *Days of War, Nights of Love* and includes “improved versions of ... [CWC] material from 2000 to 2004.” The other book (distinguished by its red ink) appears to be an anarchist novel about “the adventures and tribulations that inevitably ensue when people pursuing their dreams enter into conflict with the world as it is.” The third book, then, is the combination of all of the above.

After digesting the official blurb as one might read driving directions downloaded before a long trip, I finally began the adventure of reading ER cover-to-cover, taking notes along the way. I hated (and then loved), loved (and then hated) the book. At last, I appreciated ER and admired the people who made it.

Unfortunately, the title misleads; the phrase “expect resistance” was a CWC bumpersticker before it was a book and cannot convey the many flavors of prose within. Tacking on the “field manual” tag only makes matters worse

because this book is a fierce manifesto and a marvelous fantasy; not a field manual of any kind—not even for “the field where all manuals are useless,” as it claims.

ER’s experimental structure is finely polished and ferociously pursued. The “red letter” memoir/novel—“neither a true story nor a work of fiction”; “a chronicle of things that are going to happen”—employs multiple narrators and weaves in and out of overlapping scenarios in the manner of a Robert Altman film.

Three primary characters are temporary comrades whose tales depict the details the best and worst of activist cultures and projects. Whether narrating a direct action, a prisoner’s desperation, or the differences between cheating and polyamory, the story lines invoke the emotional geography that has always made the anarchist scene an intensely intoxicating and insidiously infuriating world to inhabit. Narrators Marshall, Pablo, and Samia each felt real enough to fall in and out of love with on multiple occasions.

A quasi-biblical illuminated manuscript

At times, the race, gender, and class politics seem so savvy as to border on a defensive political correctness perhaps used to stave off another wave of the “arrogant middle-class white kids” backlash. Since the black ink sections are vintage CWC in terms of epic proportion, insistent proclamation, and impeccable production, when the memoir/novel slipped out of showing and into shouting, it left this reader frustrated.

At the end, *ER* leaves an overwhelming impression of a quasi-biblical illuminated manuscript to be studied and quoted, chapter and verse, by its inspired converts. The inner frontcover-flap claims that the book will do nothing less than invert the creation myth, reverse God’s judgment, and give apples to snakes, thus invoking the “release of nature from the yoke of human will.”

With *Recipes for Disaster*, CWC rewrote *The Anarchist Cookbook*; with *ER*, it’s more like they uncovered the future scrolls of an anarchist bible. (the pages with red words reminded me of the movement of “red letter Christians” who privilege the alleged words of Jesus over the rest of their “field manual.”) Even if *ER* is just a sacred text of science fiction, it’s a highly readable, enlightened, and insightful 350 page epistle. Nothing lacks in either beauty or message on all counts.

Even at its most excessive, CWC writing represents writers all too attuned to the partial power of rhetoric. Discussing the perimeters of theory, *ER* owns up to its own blind-spots in a particularly acute footnote: “Ideology creeps quickly into any language, languages that seek to oppose it no less. If you want to experience passion and liberty, the last thing you want to do is make up slogans about them.” Of course, this is hilarious—because like everything CWC has ever done—*ER* is a cup that overflows with clever and pithy made-up slogans about passion and liberty on almost every page!

The collective author continues: “This footnote itself is a pernicious little thing, just more abstractions about abstractions—put the book down, stop conceptualizing, get out there and live, whatever that means!”

Even though CWC has changed since the early days when the *Inside Front* punk magazine or the tabloid *Harbinger* were first published, *ER* contains enough energy to turn on the dazzling lights of previous CWC manifestations.

Since the older CWC texts would breathe vigorous life back into “lifestyle anarchism” every time some indignant platformist tried to kill it, it’s a little sad to see *Rolling Thunder* stray so far from the absurd allure of CWC’s crustifarian roots and publish so many strong and serious texts including a new one by anarchist scholar David Graeber.

I found myself rereading the “One Million Years of Do-It-Yourself Culture!” section of *ER*, the passages struck me as incredibly refreshing—even though I doubt anyone in CWC would ever write them today. To end the review, here’s a snippet of that section, since this outrageous passage captures so much about what I’ve always loved and others have always loathed about CWC :

“For over 50,000 generations, our ancestors didn’t shave their legs or armpits or wear deodorant. They scavenged food like modern trash pickers do, traveled like hitchhikers riding rivers and hopping ocean

currents around the world, celebrated life with folk music made by their friends, passed down folk culture they devised.

“You can bet some of them had dreadlocks, some homemade tattoos’ and scarification, some patches proclaiming their allegiances. There used to be as many human beings in the world as there are punk rockers, now.”



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