

Anarchist Conference in Connecticut Draws 300 from Around the Country

Paul J. Comeau

Anarchist activists and academics from around the country gathered at Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford, CT November 21st and 22nd for the inaugural conference of the North American Anarchist Studies Network. The schedule pamphlet released by the organizing collective described the vision for both the conference and the network: “this network, and the conference, is a space for the development of ‘anarchist studies,’ broadly construed, and is meant as a space both for professional as well as grassroots scholars of anarchism.” The response to the collective’s call for papers was in a word, “overwhelming,” with over thirty individual papers, three workshops, and seven panels, crammed into two days. Three hundred people turned out to take part in the two-day event.

The conference kicked off with a compelling talk from Barry Pateman, anarchist historian and Associate Editor of the *Emma Goldman Papers*, who challenged the audience to understand and appreciate history for what it was, and not to use it to justify their own actions in the present. “At least the best thing we can do is to be brutally honest about the truth of our own ideas and our own practices,” Pateman said. Though he called on all present to think critically and criticized the “cherry-picking” of history to defend contemporary anarchist positions, Pateman’s overall message was a very positive one:

I’m rather hopeful that eventually my research will be irrelevant. I have this great belief one day, that all anarchists will disappear, certainly I hope all activists disappear very quickly, and in fact people [will] just take over and we become an anarchist society by people who have probably never read a word of Proudhon, Stirner, or Kropotkin in their lives.

Pateman’s message set the tone for the entire weekend of papers, panels, and workshops. After Pateman’s introductory talk, paper presentations, panels, and workshops happened simultaneously throughout the two days in three separate spaces in the cultural center building. The panels covered such topics as “Anarchism and Philosophy,” “Queering Anarchism,” and “What is Anarchist Studies?” and paper presentations featured topics on anarchist archeology, narratives of entrance into Anarcho-punk, and other topics. A diverse array of other interesting and compelling panels, presentations, and workshops happened throughout the conference.

In a nice break from the mostly serious discussions of the panels, workshops, and presentations, Saturday night featured a performance of Howard Zinn’s “Emma,” his play based on the life of Emma Goldman. A local ad hoc radical theater troupe produced the play, and despite few of the actors having had any previous acting experience, they put on an excellent performance.

Sixteen organizations and publications were present tabling throughout the venue location for the weekend of the conference. They included *Fifth Estate*, *Anarchy! Journal*, the Transformative Studies Institute, Workers Solidarity Alliance, the Institute for Anarchist Studies, and others. Many of the tabling organizations and publications gave out free or reduced priced copies of their publications, including *Fifth Estate*, which gave out close to two hundred free copies of assorted back issues.

The weekend wrapped up with an ad hoc assembly to discuss the shape and forward direction of the NAASN, including making the conference an annual event, and the formation of an online group to continue discussions beyond the weekend.

For more information about the conference or the NAASN, check out the conference website and the discussion group:

<http://naasn.wordpress.com/>

<http://groups.google.com/group/naasn> (requires registration)



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