

Riots, Revolt & the Black Bloc

Book review

Ruhe

2015

a review of

I Saw Fire: Reflections on Riots, Revolt and the Black Bloc by Doug Gilbert. Institute for Experimental Freedom, 2014, \$10. 204 pp. littleblackcart.com

I've often found myself frustrated by the lack of worthwhile media projects that accurately capture how anarchists struggle. Doug Gilbert's *I Saw Fire: Reflections on Riots, Revolt and the Black Bloc* is the kind of book that you can hand to people encountering anarchist resistance for the first time.

Gilbert, a California East Bay writer and photographer, informed by several years of participation in a variety of radical efforts, manages to explain what is so exciting about recent anarchist endeavors and why they are so much more seductive than outdated models of party and organization building. Most importantly, the book is written in an inviting way that isn't afraid to use humor and brutal honesty to make a point—a welcome departure from a lot of anarchist writing.

The book offers a thorough critique of much of the history of radical activism in this country, challenging both the actual history and the myths that are told about it. It opens with “Lies the Movement Told Me,” which offers an accessible indictment of history that the Left tells about how change happens.

Gilbert challenges the idea that only formalized groups (political parties, non-profits, unions, activist groups, etc.) can create change and that violence (“defined as any disruptive action coming outside of formalized groups”) is counter-productive. Two prominent examples invoked by Leftists in support of this idea, the labor movement of the 1930s and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, are examined, with the author arguing that formal organizations grew out of the struggles as a way of containing and limiting them.

Organizations limited the self-organized activity and disruption that gave rise to the struggles in the first place. Consequently, instead of the standard view that formal groups force the state to respond to the demands of the movement, Gilbert asserts that collective action “spurs the State to grant concessions as a way of containing unrest.”

The actions of formal organizations often collude with the state in that they receive various benefits—official recognition of their union perhaps—in exchange for helping to contain struggles. Thus, revolutionaries are forced to consider the question of how we navigate a terrain in which revolt is blocked not only by the state, but formal organizations as well.

This discussion doesn't simply exist in the realm of ideas or history, but is born out of experiences in struggle. Gilbert shares stories from innovative approaches to challenging Nazis and white supremacists in Arizona, from Occupy Oakland, the 2009 California student strikes, and even workplace unions (Gilbert works as a bus driver).

This is what really gives *I Saw Fire* its teeth. The efforts portrayed show exactly how the dynamics discussed play out in the real world. When random people join in the excitement of a riot and seemingly have an instinctive

reason for revolting, Leftist groups, whether they be non-profits, party building groups, or unions, step in to steer the struggle elsewhere.

When people seize property, whether at a university or in a public square, liberals are standing by to try to sidetrack the discussion towards the importance of “free speech” rather than the larger question of what a free society would look like.

In relation to the Occupy phenomenon, Gilbert argues that while Occupy was very important in many ways (for example, its emphasis on self-organization and unwillingness to make demands), it failed to break through the stranglehold of the Left which is why it ended as it did.

However, Gilbert is optimistic that Occupy did show that to some degree people know traditional tactics aren’t working and that self-organized activity will be the basis of new struggles.

The formal organizations of the Left make only brief appearances in the book, as examples of groups trying to limit anti-police rioting or student organizations trying to stop autonomous militant actions undertaken on campuses.

If the book has one drawback, it’s that the text itself might not be that exciting for readers that have been involved in the anarchist space for a longer amount of time. Much of the discussion may seem like old news, but at the same time, the book manages to weave a lot of threads together and presents them in new ways.

For example, anarchists would do well to consider the stories and analysis offered of organizing efforts in Arizona. Gilbert explains how anarchists have deliberately fostered new relationships that have resulted in innovative approaches to both theory and practice. Of particular note has been the connections made between indigenous and non-indigenous anarchists.

One result is the DO@ Bloc (Diné, O’odham, and anarchist) which has brought militant, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist politics into the debate over immigration.

Even the perennial debate about violence versus non-violence is given a new treatment, with a more sophisticated discussion and consideration of how it fits into larger conversations about containment and counter-insurgency.

It also refreshingly moves beyond the simple fetishization of the riot or the revolt as the penultimate moment in anarchist struggle, with Gilbert asserting that the relationships we form, especially with those outside of the anarchist space, are particularly important as we learn to talk to each other and experience new ways of relating. In sum, the work we do between moments of high conflict may be just as, if not more, important as those moments in the thick of it.

Still, the primary beneficiary of this book may be those newer to anarchist approaches. It’s a great introduction to recent anarchist history, presenting both the passion and the excitement of the riot, as well as the joy that comes in finding new ways of relating to each other.

Hopefully, it will encourage people to, as Gilbert puts it, “break down the door and walk through into the wide and frightening world of open revolt.”

Ruhe is an anarchist living in the occupied territory currently known as Michigan. They are involved with Sprout Distro (sproutdistro.com) and are interested in how anarchist ideas and approaches can be communicated to people beyond the narrow subculture.

fifth Estate

Ruhe
Riots, Revolt & the Black Bloc
Book review
2015

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/393-spring-2015/riots-revolt-the-black-bloc>
Fifth Estate #393, Spring 2015

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)