

How Anarchist Culture Sustains a Movement

Book review

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2015

a review of

Underground Passages: Anarchist Resistance Culture 1848–2011 by Jesse Cohn. AK Press, 2014, 421 pp., ak-press.org, \$22.95

In *Underground Passages*, Jesse Cohn begins with the apt metaphor of anarchist resistance culture as a tunnel: it is “a way of living in transit through” this world. Resistance culture is “not mainly defined by its end; it is a middle, a means.” Anarchist cultural production is a way of making sense of the world, a figurative place inhabited temporarily in the time between the present and the future of anarchy.

The wonderfully written introduction asserts that anarchist resistance culture is a way for anarchists to “prefigure a world of freedom and equality” even as they live in a place fundamentally hostile to our vision. In other words, “anarchists practice culture as a means of mental and moral survival in a world from which they are fundamentally alienated.”

Anarchist art and cultural production aim to “as much as possible, embody the idea in the act, the principle in practice, the end in the means.” Moreover, with anarchists often being in a state of migration and exile, shared cultural forms can create a sense of stability where it was otherwise lacking. Anarchist resistance culture created (and continues to create) a “counterpublic” that fosters community while also providing a form of outreach that entices others towards anarchism.

Cohn, an associate professor of English at Purdue University North Central in Indiana, organizes the book by genre of cultural production, with chapters exploring anarchist literature, poetry, drama, song, film, and other forms. He insightfully analyzes these, drawing out commonalities that exist across national and genre borders.

Experimentation in different genres has been a key way anarchists have spread their ideas; yet all too often historians look to newspapers rather than cultural production. The author also shows how anarchists have often maintained a critical stance towards the very genres they were working in. For example, demanding active and skeptical readers and questioning the division between spectator and performer that exists in drama.

As much of Cohn’s exploration is oriented towards the early 1900s, there’s considerably more about anarchist resistance culture then than about the present. Still, he does bring some of the discussion into the present, taking up the films of Submedia, the writings of CrimethInc, and the genre of anarchist “riot porn.”

While Cohn makes an effort to introduce each work or creator as they are discussed, the striking number of works examined in the text’s 395 pages is a bit overwhelming.

The more prior knowledge readers bring to the text, the more they will get out of it. Those widely read in anarchist literary forms will likely enjoy the discussions more than those with less familiarity. For example, there is a particularly enjoyable discussion of the aesthetics of anarchist newspapers.

The book is well researched and well documented, and there are many points for further exploration. It was especially exciting to see how many non-English sources were consulted.

Ultimately, Cohn's exploration is written with an eye towards the future—it asserts a specific interest in what can be learned from the past. Throughout much of *Underground Passages*, the rich expressions of revolt that emerged when anarchism was the strongest are examined.

At those times, resistance culture was intimately connected to anarchist movements and organizations, as with, for example, the CNT and FAI in Spain in the 1930s. At those historic moments anarchist resistance culture was more outward looking. It had a visible presence in the form of newspapers, lectures, events, and more.

But Cohn asserts that in other periods during which anarchism was less visible, such as during the 1890s era of “propaganda of the deed,” or during the period following the Spanish civil war and the defeat of the Revolution in 1939, anarchist resistance culture was more inwardly focused.

Politically, it focused more on internal debates and conflicts, while its cultural forms spoke “the language of a bohemia that has lived on the margins of public life.” Cohn sees this both historically, with anarchism's relationship to avant-garde movements, and more recently, with affinities to punk rock.

While the author's characterization of the punk subculture as being mainly white and self-limiting is valid, this has largely become an anarchist truism. Thus the discussion on the limits of punk seems almost passé, as punk has become less political since the late 1990s.

Cohn blames contemporary trends in anarchist thinking such as primitivism and insurrectionary anarchy on the individualistic orientation of punk rock, claiming that it gives many anarchists a preference for “the erratic, individual eruption of desire and aggression.”

He never considers that the growth of these expressions might be related to a changing political context (more people finding themselves in increasingly precarious working situations) that would render some of the older forms of anarchism less relevant.

Instead, he argues that a contemporary anarchist resistance culture could begin to reassert the radical possibility of something different and that anarchism could offer an enticing alternative—just as it had in the past by focusing on a larger audience. He mentions anarchists' ability to re-appropriate popular genres as an alternative to the inward focus of subcultures.

Reflecting his preference for collectively oriented and mass anarchism, Cohn argues that these “resistance cultures are bound to flourish best wherever they meet real and deeply felt needs.” The discussion ends up being the usual subcultural-versus-mainstream orientation debate that never really seems to go anywhere.

Underground Passages presents the anarchist cultural history of its chosen period in a discerning manner. The scope of the work ensures that for nearly all students of anarchist history, there is something to be learned. It's an excellent starting point for continued research and for conversation.

In the tradition of the anarchist resistance culture studied here, this book demands further active reading and engagement, not simply passive consumption.

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.

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