

Anti-Anarchism

The Denigration of Anarchism in High Art Fiction

Jim Feast

We are all familiar with the ruthless stereotyping and blatant falsification of anarchism in the mass media employing out-dated, long exploded cliches such as that anarchists are solely interested in destruction, fueled by an infantile rage.

It was these stereotypes that were used, for example, in the 1880s to convict the Haymarket martyrs for a bombing they didn't commit, and have been used repeatedly in U.S. literature to defame the most earnest opponents of capitalism and the state.

So, it is hardly news that the American mass media continues to present distorted, dreamed-up ideas of anarchism, usually using anarchy as a term to denote chaos and mayhem in a situation. This fits in with the government's efforts to demonize those defending the environment with sabotage as eco-terrorists.

Even an admittedly ludicrous Hollywood movie, the 2011 "Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows," gets with the program by showing nefarious anarchists blackmailing a poor slob into detonating a bomb. What readers may not know, however, is that elite novelists—not creators of potboilers, such as Tom Clancy or J.K. Rowling—but winners of the National Book Award and other prestigious plums are also tar-brushing anarchism with all the ignorance of the toadies at Fox News.

The qualifier "elite" is employed because American literature has always been split between writers who dealt with that group and others who focused on the working class. About 1900, for instance, while Jack London and Theodore Dreiser described the underclass, Henry James and Edith Wharton focused on the upper crust. But note this critical point. Both of the last-named authors were acidly critical of their class.

As example, take the first chapter of James's *The Wings of the Dove*. The genteel, but impoverished Kate Croy has been offered a position as companion to a wealthy woman. The last job requirement, which she is now fulfilling, is that she pay off her shabby father, with money supplied by her employer, so that he will never see her again. Cold cash replaces any familial sentiment.

Wharton's portrait of the rich in *The House of Mirth* is even more devastating. In the first scene, Lily Bart, another genteel, but poor young woman is seen leaving a man's flat after making an innocent visit. She is seen; her reputation is be smirched; her marriage prospects lost. She sinks by degrees till by the end she is working in a hat factory, at which point she commits suicide.

Throughout our literary history, elite writers, from Fitzgerald in the 1920s to John Cheever and Mary McCarthy in the 1960s, did not spare the lash when depicting their wealthy subjects. Then, neoliberalism came along, and the corporate control of culture became much stricter.

What happened for the novel was that while those depicting the lower class, from Carolyn Chute to Toni Morrison to Russell Banks to Alan Kaufman, still produced writings of honesty and merit, elite writing, put under a tight rein by its corporate masters, collapsed.

Two routes lay open for the writers of this school, both servile. You could work inside a bubble where you right-focused on the doings of the elite, puffed up to world historical significance. Here are writers such as Jonathan

Franzen, whose book, *Freedom*, depicts the struggles of elite environmentalists. Members of other classes have walk-on parts as paper-thin caricatures. Richard Ford has a slightly roomier bubble. In two novels of his *Bascombe* trilogy, the narrator works as a real estate salesman, who is, as he sees it, helping people find their dreams. In the elite circles solely depicted in the book, this may well be true.

The second group, those who are most ready with anarchist stereotypes, might be labeled slummers. These authors titillate readers by describing elite characters in exotic scenes where they contact stereotyped caricatures of, say, drug dealers or anarchists. Let's look at two recent examples of the latter.

Of the two writers, Don DeLillo seems less blameworthy in that in the early 1970s, before the neoliberal big freeze, he turned out some anti-establishment novels. That was then. In DeLillo's 2003 *Cosmopolis*, young billionaire Eric Packer cruises across Manhattan in his luxury limo, finding progress slow, not only because of heavy traffic but because—in Times Square no less—marauding anarchists disrupt the streets.

"Masked figures roamed the area on the tops of cars, tossing smoke bombs at the cops." Calling these protesters theatrical is putting it mildly. One parachutes down. "Chute and man were striped in anarchist red-and-black and his penis was exposed, likewise logotyped."

They are protesting globalization, but not to worry, as Packer explains, "These are not the grave-diggers [of capitalism]. These people are fantasy generated by the market. They don't exist outside the market." In other words, these anarchists have no connection to the grassroots, but only exist, are allowed to exist, as a media distraction.

But is this confusing fictional depictions with real world anarchists? But, let's look at Rachel Kushner's 2013 *The Flamethrowers*, which deals with an actual anarchist formation of the 1960s, New York City's Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers (MFs), presenting them—using, one would guess, what's called poetic license—so that all the good work the group did is lost while a host of bad things, none of which they actually did, are ascribed to them.

The now-obscure MFs are described thoroughly and insightfully by John McMillan in the book *Resistance* and by Malay Kaluga in *Jews: A People's History of the Lower East Side*, as well as in a memoir by Osha Neumann, one of the MF's founders. The MFs were ragtag, obstreperous, macho radicals who were noisily anti-state and anti-private property, this last epitomized by their setting up a free store on the Lower East Side.

They also engaged in rambunctious guerrilla theater. During a garbage strike when, strangely enough, only upper class areas still had waste removal, the MFs loaded a truck with refuse from the Lower East Side and dumped it at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in swank mid-town Manhattan.

Perhaps their most notorious act occurred in 1969 at St. Marks Church on the Lower East Side, normally an alternative reading space. Incensed by the appearance of Kenneth Koch, a mainstream poet, Detroit revolutionary surrealist, Alan Van Newkirk, ran toward the podium firing a pistol (filled with blanks, but unknown to the audience), yelling, "Death to bourgeois poets," while poet Andrei Codrescu threw copies of Van Newkirk's radical street sheet, *Guerrilla*, with a headline announcing, "Poetry is Revolution!" into the audience

Kushner describes the Lincoln Center prank and the free store, but where she differs from all the historic accounts is that her Motherfuckers always carry real guns. In her novel, their crime spree rivals that of Bonnie and Clyde. They "robbed a Chemical Bank on Seventh Avenue," one wearing "nothing but a ski mask and a black satin bikini." Then, they held up two other banks. Luckily for them, Kushner notes, "Banks were robbed daily," so no one paid much attention. This sounds a trifle far-fetched, but then again, none of this ever happened.

More disturbing than outright fabrications involving actual people are cases in which real events are turned from positive happenings into violent confrontations. Here's how author Kaluga describes a concert at the Fillmore East by Detroit's seminal rock band, the MC5: With the group onstage, "the theater was overcome with a throbbing jubilee mixed with irreverence. The MC5 played their hit, 'Kick Out the Jams, Motherfuckers.' The Motherfuckers followed suit, giving speeches." The night was chaotic and the MC5 "got nervous and made a quick getaway." However, Kushner, in *The Flamethrowers*, gives a different version of the MFs reaction to a band. The MFs "beat up a rock band from Detroit called the Stooges. Beat the shit out of them for not being tough enough."

The MFs confronted Bill Graham, owner of the Fillmore, demanding there be free community nights and more political activities at the club. Graham agreed to a performance of the Living Theater's "Paradise Now." After the show, the audience took over the theater until Graham agreed to debate lead MFer Ben Morea on the future of the club. At the debate, Graham agreed to a weekly free community night which went on for a month until the police threatened to close the venue if the pot smoke-filled free nights were allowed to continue.

Kushner rewrites this history in an abbreviated form. The MFers “knifed a concert promoter on Second Avenue. The promoter was refusing to let them use his club for community events.”

Still, after all this, an objector might argue, “These are works of fiction. You can’t judge them as you would an historical account.” True. However, isn’t it disconcerting that such works of high culture uniformly retail the same long-exploded lies about a social movement—lies that are quite useful to the ruling class—as are presented by the most scurrilous, rightwing pretzel heads?

Perhaps, then, taking a phrase from Coleridge, we can say these novels, like most written by the elite that touch on this topic, are works of fiction, but not of the imagination.

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