Punk & Anarchy

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a review of

Ethics, Politics, and Anarcho Punk Identifications: Punk and Anarchy in Philadelphia by Edward Anthony Avery-Natale. Lexington Books, 2016, 235 pp.

Like many anarchists who came of age in the 1990s, my first exposure to anarchism came through the punk scene. A friend gave me a cassette tape full of classic punk bands as part of an effort to satisfy my ever expanding interest in punk.

Among the music was the entirety of the English anarchist punk band Crass' 1981 album, "Penis Envy" I was blown away by its deconstruction of gender and assault on patriarchy.

As a result, I explored other bands and through the overlapping circles of punk and anarchism and after a series of serendipitous encounters (reading about anarchist organizations in album inserts, hearing about protests at shows, learning about political prisoners through punk zines, picking up anarchist newspapers at shows, etc.), I eventually became involved in the larger anarchist milieu in the United States.

Reflecting back on those years and having conversations with many friends about these topics, my story isn't particularly unique, some variation of it happened for many in my generation. Punk—for whatever its flaws are—was a gateway through which many people were exposed to anarchist ideas.

Therefore, I was eager to read Ethics, Politics, and Anarcho-Punk Identification, in hopes that it would offer new insights into the role of punk within anarchism.

It is focused on one city, Philadelphia, but because punk is a global DIY movement, the discussion is relevant to the history of punk as a whole. The focus was particularly interesting as Philadelphia had a robust anarcho-punk community in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While I have never been to that city, word of what was happening there circulated through the largely pre-internet punk networks of touring bands, zines, and train riding travelers, which made me even more excited about Avery-Natale's book.

The text does a good job of giving an overview of the scene in Philadelphia. The author uses their own experiences as an anarchist and punk to ground their analysis which is in turn based on numerous interviews with long-term participants in the scene.

Everyone interviewed identifies as both anarchist and punk. The author tries to explain the basics of how the subculture works, but nonetheless, it's an analysis that would probably make the most sense to those who are familiar with the DIY scene.

Avery-Natale is primarily concerned with questions of identification and how anarcho-punks self-identify. It's an interesting discussion, focusing on how one reconciles being an anarchist in a non-anarchist world and how on a smaller scale, one reconciles being an anarchist in a predominately non-anarchist punk scene.

They spend a lot of time dissecting the term "anarcho-punk" and articulate the idea of dueling identities that alternate between being united and opposed to each other. Central to this discussion is the question of what exactly anarchism means to anarcho-punks.

The book presents the idea of anarchism as somewhat of an ethical compass or benchmark that one aspires towards, based on both what the interviewees say and the author's analysis. Based on the interviews, the politics of the scene are represented as being skeptical of the possibility of an anarchist future and reformist in nature.

Many interviewees quoted express support for various government social welfare programs and argue that the process of reforming the state is an acceptable alternative to revolution. The author gives weight to this line of thinking by leaning heavily on the work of Simon Critchley, an academic theorist who is likely more familiar to those within the university than participants in the anarchist milieu.

They fit right in with the stable of post-Marxist theorists also cited such as Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek. The occasional anarchist is referenced, but most are of the classical variety. Noam Chomsky is one of the few contemporary anarchists mentioned.

Much of the discussion in the book is framed through the lens of sociological analysis. Stepping back and evaluating things through an academic perspective can lend a certain amount of depth that can be helpful, but at times, it can also be limiting.

The author says they wrote the book in part as a way to "give back" to the anarcho-punk community, but it's hard to imagine that the text will have appeal beyond a narrow audience. It is full of relatively specialized academic language and theorists are routinely name dropped. While they do make attempts at times to explain briefly the concepts being invoked, it's likely the more familiar one is ahead of time with those theorists, the more meaningful those comparisons will be.

Even with some familiarity, the discussion occasionally seems strikingly devoid of the passion which characterizes anarcho-punk. Moreover, many with experience in the scene would justifiably bristle at the fact that the book has an $89.99 cover price.

Overall, this title ends up being only nominally interesting. Its discussion is too convoluted and seems more concerned with adhering to the norms of academia than making a contribution to either the punk or anarchist milieus.

The book frequently references the rightward drift of the punk scene over the past decade and the lessening of an anarchist presence within punk, as well as a stronger "anti-PC" vibe. Punk, as the author points out, is simultaneously local and global and the trend points towards a waning connection between radical politics and punk.

In light of that, this text seems even more irrelevant. Perhaps someone else will write one that properly captures the connection between anarchism and punk and the ways in which it inspired so many people into political activity.

Properly written and argued, it is a book that could have a lot to offer—unfortunately Ethics, Politics, and Anarcho-Punk Identifications is far from being such a title.

Ruhe is an anarchist who still finds inspiration in punk.

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