

AK Press & Anarchist Publishing

Interview: Why We Do It

Various Authors

AK Press is a worker-run anarchist collective that publishes and distributes radical books as well as visual and audio media. The collective was established in 1990 and is now run by seven people in five cities and two countries. They currently publish around twenty books each year.

Four collective members, who have been involved from 12 to 28 years, posed questions to themselves about anarchist publishing to take a look at their project.

They are Alexis in Edinburgh, Scotland, Charles in Berkeley, Calif., Suzanne in Baltimore, and Zach in Chico, Calif. where the AK Press distribution warehouse is located.

What is anarchist publishing?

Alexis: It's being part of a long tradition which has always tried to look both backward to the development of the core ideas of anarchism (the classics of our history) and look forward to see how those principles relate to current and future struggles, hopefully giving people tools to build our movements and navigate towards fundamental social change.

Suzanne: Part of what we do is publishing specifically anarchist books, but equally important is how our politics inform our day-to-day operation. Nobody at AK Press is an owner or manager or boss. We all make decisions together, we all pay ourselves the same, and we have an equal say in the running of the business.

Charles: Not that that guarantees anything. There are plenty of non-anarchist collectives out there. White supremacist creeps could organize collectively, on a small scale. But it's still a necessary aspect. It's a question of form plus political content.

Alexis: I'd go with the combination of being anarchists ourselves, organizing ourselves in line with those principles, and publishing (mostly) anarchist material. All three things come together to make an anarchist publisher. There's a coherence to the whole that you don't find when mainstream publishers take on anarchist work that they think they can make money from.

How do we do it?

Suzanne: We never sleep. No, but really, we have a small-but solid collective and an incredible network of authors, editors, translators, designers, bookstores, tablers, and, of course, enthusiastic readers.

Alexis: It's a collaborative effort. Working with archives like the Kate Sharpley Library, relying on the expertise of anarchist translators or the academics who dig through historical material. It's definitely not all us.

Charles: We spend most of our waking hours doing this. Part of the political project means that you have to be very dedicated. It takes consistent, daily effort to get to a point of, you hope, affecting the wider culture.

Why do we do it?

Zach: Like Malatesta wrote, “Every blow given to the institutions of private property and to the government, every exaltation of the conscience of man, every disruption of the present conditions, every lie unmasked, every part of human activity taken away from the control of the authority, every augmentation of the spirit of solidarity and initiative, is a step towards Anarchy.”

Charles: It’s easy to lose sight of the “why” when you’re caught up in the day-to-day, so you have to stop and assess. Sure, you’re doing it “for the revolution,” but what does that mean if you’re not thinking strategically about how to get from A to B? Who are you trying to reach? With what messages? Why? How do you best do that?

Zach: There’s a balance you maintain between being in tune with the contemporary anarchist scene and standing back to see where more attention is needed. We follow the nuances of anarchism in real time: Who is engaged? What ideas are important to them? How can we add to that conversation?

Then, there are times we try to nudge people in new directions: How are people stuck politically and what can help get us moving again? And, importantly, we want to grow—find new readers, increase engagement with anarchist ideas, provide entry points for those looking for alternatives to capitalist democracy or less-than-libertarian socialisms.

Strengths? Weaknesses? Hopes?

Suzanne: Over the years, we’ve evolved as a project—like splitting into more specialized departments and becoming more geographically dispersed. I like that we’re able to change the way we do things to better meet the demands of our work and create the collective we want to have.

Alexis: I’ve been thinking about how group dynamics work, and how fragile they can be, but how vital they are to a long-term project. It’s always been the case that most everybody gives more than their basic hours. It means we are really invested in AK, we have a strong sense of ownership.

There’s something complicated that must happen with trust, good faith/bad faith actions, and probably a few other things.

Suzanne: Where would we like to head? Smashing the state! Meanwhile, I’d just like to publish and distribute as many books as possible, reach as many people as possible, and continue to become more sustainable as a project.

Alexis: Yes, being sustainable. It’s already amazing that it’s become what it is, especially given some significant hurdles. I’d like to see us become/remain a strong part of a healthy and diverse anarchist publishing scene, because the movement is very much better served by a multiplicity than a monolith.

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