

From Tolstoy to Pussy Riot

Teaching the History of Anarchism at the University of Michigan

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In the fall of 2019, I taught a course at the University of Michigan: “Art and Anarchism: from Tolstoy to Pussy Riot.” The curriculum at the Ann Arbor, Michigan college concentrated on Russian anarchists, historic and contemporary, and was designed to be as accessible as possible even for those students with little knowledge of art, or Russia, or history, let alone anarchism.

The course offered creative options for every assignment, stressing that genuine interest was more important than completing the readings. Discussion was facilitated with the assumption that a portion of the students had not prepared for class, and we needed to read a few specific passages from a text so that everyone could follow along.

Students gave feedback on my mini-lectures about historical context and connections to present-day events. They liked the slides of photographs and timelines. They appreciated the stories about the lives of real and fictional revolutionaries. We discussed the big questions: What is revolution and is it possible? How do you make change in the world? What are the issues facing your generation?

My hope was that, as an “easy A” course, it would make space for students to connect their interests to the topic. I was not disappointed. They explored the international Esperanto language historically advocated by many anarchists, anarchism in Argentina and Mexico, anarchist education, anarchist software, and other relevant topics. They created stunning final projects including zines (on anarchist comics, reproductive justice, etc.), a performance art event, a talk show, and original musical compositions.

The first half of the course was almost entirely devoted to Russian radical history, trying to understand Bakunin’s and Kropotkin’s ideas in their historical context. We considered social movements that influenced them, such as the 1871 Paris Commune and German social democracy at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, as well as nationalist independence movements.

We read about the many organizations and individuals involved in the Russian revolutionary movement from the 1860s to 1917 inspired by Bakunin’s and Kropotkin’s philosophies. This part of the class used my in-progress book about Russian anarchism and its influence on the arts. The second half of the syllabus branched out, following the Russian and Yiddish speaking anarchist emigres to the United States, and then looking at anarchist and anarchist-influenced radical movements in other parts of the world. Students learned about the ongoing discussions and sometimes fierce debates anarchists had with other radicals.

Ann Arbor, Michigan, where the university is located, is home to the Joseph A. Labadie Collection, an archive that brings researchers like me from all over the world. It features materials on anarchism, anti-war and pacifist movements, atheism and free thought, civil liberties and civil rights, ecology, labor and workers’ rights, feminism, LGBTQ movements, prisons and prisoners, the New Left, the Spanish Revolution and Civil War, and youth and student protest.

Archive Curator Julie Herrada provided the class with posters, letters, photographs, and personal effects from social movements. The students were able to visit the collection’s exhibits before Covid and view drawings of the

events of the Paris Commune, the IWW songbook, photos of 1968 world-wide student protests, anarchist bookfair posters, and even Emma Goldman's passport.

To provide the same depth in the non-Russian anarchist part of the syllabus, which was not my expertise, we relied on guest speakers. Margaret Killjoy, whose sci-fi story "The Fortunate Death of Jonathan Sandelson" we read in class, skyped in and talked about anarchism, trans identity, and music.

Daniel Kahn, a Klezmer musician, visited the class and played Yiddish anarchist songs, as well as ones from Wobbly folksinger and storyteller Utah Phillips and Ani DiFranco.

The fresh, irreverent perspective of local anarchists who are involved in organizing for prison abolition, labor protections, and rent strikes during the COVID-19 emergency also became part of my teaching.

A punk panel of anarchists visited to talk about the contemporary anarchist community in the Detroit-Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti area. They discussed DIY-DIT culture, the Trumbullplex communal living and performance space in Detroit, and organizing against fascism. Via Skype, scholar and Maoli activist Kehaulani Kauanui spoke about indigenous rights and anarchism.

The students absolutely loved these events which exposed them to today's fascinating, diverse and vibrant social justice movements. Teaching the course caused me to reflect on how little many young people know about anarchism, but offered valuable insights about their willingness to learn.

By the end of the term, many of the students developed research questions within or adjacent to the topic of anarchism. They conducted research without the stresses of a term paper, creating annotated bibliographies of critical/historical literature addressing the research questions. This was another way of encouraging historical inquiry. Two students continued to work with me in an independent study course that further explored the topic. Several still keep in touch.

Overall, this was a valuable experience in connecting local and recent events to the global history of social movements, allowing students to be creative with research questions and assignments, and challenging and questioning our ideas as a group, based on dialogue with a little-understood political philosophy.

Ania Aizman is writing a book on anarchism in Russian culture based on archival research and oral histories with artists, writers, and activists to find missing links between the 19th century anarchist movements, Soviet underground cultures, and contemporary collectives.

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