Zines as Means for Change

Len Bracken

2025

a review of
War of Dreams: A Field Guide to DIY Psy-Ops by Jason Rodgers. PM Press, 2024

At the height of the zine movement in the 1990s, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands—what could be thought of as armies of people—would march off to their post office boxes every day to engage in an ongoing assault on mainstream culture using low-circulation publications as their weapons of choice.

For many of those who took part in this do-it-yourself (DIY) phenomenon, often creating their zines on photocopy machines, it was a life-changing experience. For those who came later, the zine movement should be seen as a precursor for the proliferation of views now expressed on the internet.

In *War of Dreams*, Jason Rodgers documents a nearly life-long dedication to grappling, mostly via zines, with radical and conspiracy subcultures. This wrangling has been in the form of the author's reviews, letters and leaflets, as well as in surrealist collage art. These works are collected in this 336-page book, along with new essays by the self-described "conspiracy realist" specializing in "elite-power analysis" and "occult reasoning."

The book includes numerous chapters related to zines: "Samizdat and Xerography: Why Zines Refuse to Die;" "Fighting Words: Zines and Conflictual Media; Zines Against Precarious Capitalism." Rodgers continues to have high hopes for the impact of zines to "make change based on resonance, invisibly," and to "make change at some future point, when least expected."

Rodgers is a longstanding contributor to the zine movement who moved to Albany in 2009 to collaborate with Suzy "Crowbar" Poe, publisher of the zine, *Popular Reality*. He stopped publishing his zine, *Psionic Plastic Joy*, in 2015 while "suffering from a sense of hopelessness about the world," but continues to create and distribute his exceptional xerox collages in the mail art network. At some point, he started to publish flyers that included "mean jokes" and "heavy polemics," mostly targeting radicals in Albany, as well as critical theory and surrealist stream of consciousness literature.

These texts reflect Rodgers, an avowed anomaly, yet also the anomalies of an era stretching back to the 1990s—that is, the individuals, groups, books and music found in the margins of American culture during this period.

Some readers may recall Ivan Stang and the Church of the SubGenius, *Factsheet Five*, the mega-review zine that ran from 1982 to 1998, and Loompanics Unlimited, the now defunct publisher of controversial books, such as Ragnar Redbeard's 1896 revolting *Might Is Right*, subject of a long review by Rodgers. Few will be aware of all the wild ideas and eccentric individuals under discussion in *War of Dreams*.

"I am interested in ideas that don't fit…," Rodgers states on the back cover. "It isn't important to reach the masses, instead we want a growing lunatic fringe, schizoid anarchs who are uncontrollable and irresistible."

It's impossible to say to what degree, over the past three decades, the social space occupied by people in the margins has grown, encroaching on the mainstream.

One could certainly argue there is seemingly more acceptance and inclusion of the "lunatic fringe" in mainstream discourse. One should anticipate, as Rodgers does in an essay on X-Files and The Lone Gunmen spinoff,

the objection that the fringe has been co-opted by the mainstream. This begs the question as to which side is actually growing, the fringe or the mainstream.

Unfortunately, these trends seem to have been accompanied by an increase in what is more conventionally thought of as people on the margins of society—those who are impoverished, ill, addicted or otherwise destitute. One can understand how those suffering from deprivation amid plenty might lapse into a capitalism-induced schizoid personality. But is that really desirable for an anarchist? It's hard to see how a schizoid's emotional detachment and social disinterest would be favorable for a long-term social transformation along anarchist lines.

There are instances when Rodgers does seem detached and lacking empathy. A leaflet in the author's Campaign to Play for Keeps, for example, blasts the meal-providing group Food Not Bombs as "Diarrhea for the People." It satirizes the mishandling of half-rotten produce by "junky traveler kids" in the context of internalizing guilt and checking privilege. "People are too full of shit. Food Not Bombs can help! One meal and the system is clear!"

As one would expect in a collection like this, where the author is taking critical stands and aiming for humor, there are hits and misses. The do-it-yourself approach allows Rodgers to take risks and target well-intentioned people whose practices the author questions, such as Food Not Bombs, which will likely offend some readers.

"This is what I love about zines and anti-media: they have the capability to actually change reality," Rodgers writes in the context of another polemic, one in which a zine detailing sexual abuse was used as a "weapon to wage war." Rodgers added, in a tone reminiscent of Robespierre: "It was a thrill to destroy the life of someone who really deserved it." The individual in question was thus prevented from creating an activist cult of personality around himself, moved away, and kept his head down lest Rodgers attack again.

While Rodgers draws on many lines of radical thought in launching attacks—the individualist anarchist and egoist Max Stirner, the utopian socialist Charles Fourier and the Frankfurt School's Walter Benjamin, to mention only a few—it is from a fundamental base of anti-work anarchism, referencing classic writers in this realm: Bob Black, Paul Lafargue and Raoul Vaneigem, among others.

"To create DIY creations should be a focusing of will, a direction of intent," Rodgers writes. "It might be part of a preparation for beginning to disentangle ourselves from the planetary work machine."

Rodgers' dispute with the Albany branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies), in which the author highlighted the contradiction between the group's opposition to work and its idealization of workers, is indicative of this fundamental anti-work outlook. One of the Wobblies who engaged in the clash later died of an overdose, Rodgers reports without qualms, reflecting his hard-hearted, Campaign to Play for Keeps approach.

Rodgers previously covered similar subterranean themes in his 2021 book, *Invisible Generation: Rants, Polemics, and Critical Theory Against the Planetary Work Machine*, also published by Autonomedia. Anarchists might want these books as references to people and events that took place in the fairly recent past that could have a bearing on their current practices.

Not many will have the discipline to continue printed zine creation and promote the outmoded zine trading system, as Rodgers does, given the allure of the internet.

This may not be the book for those looking for a more classical approach to anarchist practice, one based, for example, on workers' councils and cooperatives, pressing for radical reforms favoring the cooperative sector—reforms that could actually stick.

They will likely be put off by one of the last chapters in which Rodgers explores disparate means of escaping the current system, ranging from space to pirate fantasies. Others will enjoy the way the author synthesizes Hakim Bey, Henry David Thoreau, Josiah Warren, Samuel R. Delany, James C. Scott, Pierre Clastres, Ralph Borsodi, John Zerzan, Laurance Labadie, and Jacques Camatte in an essay that is both for and against escapism.

Len Bracken was an activist during the anti-globalization campaigns of the 1990s. He is the author of several books, including a biography of Guy Debord, an exposé on 9/11, and an erotic novel set in fall-of-the-wall Berlin. **lenbracken.com**

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