

A Möbius Strip of Anarchy

The Big Easy

Stephen Duplantier

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a review of

Anarchy in the Big Easy: A History of Revolt, Rebellion, & Resurgence by Max Cafard. Illustrated by Vulpes. PM Press
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The Big Easy is the Isle of Orleans, an archipelago of a long and narrow, always unsure island in a surregional stream. The Isle is a meandering Möbius half-twist in a topologically peculiar place connecting the inside and outside. If you start on one side and move along the strip, you will eventually reach the other side, which is supposed to be land but may not be, without crossing an edge. It goes by “Big Easy.”

In French, Max translates it as *La Grande Indulgente*. There are more words to describe indulgence: it is also yielding, desiring, transgressing, pleasing, forgiving, merciful, leniency, and permissive. And, what would the Mississippi River be without its excesses and crevasses, or breaks in the levee. The Isle of Orleans is also the type site of an astonishing anarchist geography.

Max Cafard and Vulpes in a succinct text and with the spare black-line graphic style of a comix book, *Anarchy in the Big Easy: A History of Revolt, Rebellion and Resurgence*, presents a mostly unknown litany of anarchist vignettes connected to this unusually storied isle. Cafard and Vulpes explore both the deep past and current events as well as short-term political changes.

5,000 Years of Anarchy

The Mississippi drains 32 U.S. states and part of Canada and, in the process, is continually deconstructing most of North America and somewhat hilariously, seems intent on trying to put it into the Gulf of Mexico—a most surregional carnivalesque endeavor! The first two ancient protagonists in this long story are a 5000-year-old egalitarian mystery culture, the builders of the Watson Brake mounds upriver on the Isle, and the younger 3000-year-old and solidly egalitarian Poverty Point people.

We know little about Watson Brake and its easy indulgences. But we do know that the Poverty Point people were quite enthusiastic about building a huge earthen mound with the outstretched wings of an enormous flying bird. The people completed this important whimsy of their own free will and with rapid, yet unforced labor. They likely completed their project in three joyous months.

These were the archetypal easy ancients of the Big Easy. We might add that they were tolerant, permissive, accommodating, forgiving, and generous as their peaceable archaeological record reveals. They were, in a way, the first Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, a New Orleans institution to this day.

Next came the importation of Black captives to the Isle. The arriving Africans immediately began meeting under the cover of night to make plans to outsmart and destroy their captors. The captured Africans joined forces with the native tribes near Bayou St. John to plot their escape strategies and to overcome their captors. The resistance by

the always rebellious Africans against their colonial slavery overlords never stopped and included armed revolution and countless guerrilla actions.

The anarchist geographer, Elisée Reclus, was an eyewitness to the Africans' plight when he worked on the Isle in Louisiana in the mid-19th century. Those years were the worst of the peak horrors of the slave trade and the cruelty against Black people. Reclus' writings and texts about racism and slavery contributed to informing and persuading a politically and socially awakening Europe. A bit later, another European intellectual, Joseph Déjacque, developed anarcho-communist feminist antiracist ideas during his time in the city, envisioning a cosmic, utopian "Humanisphere" project.

By now, we are in the late 19th century and within the era of anarcho-syndicalist trade unions and the labor movement's awakening activism. Massive strikes uniting races, ethnicities, and classes were bellwethers of change.

Crossing into the 20th century, Creolized New Orleans folk in the complexity-driven Big Easy archipelago powered the 20th-century African Creole diaspora's cultural resurgence in jazz, blues, and expressive culture. This cultural explosion changed global music and is still the primary fount of style and expressiveness.

Another half-twist of the Möbius band shows the racist and early fascist violence of the federal, state, and police forces and their aggression against African diaspora communitarian struggles. These were also part of the violence of segregated river flooding decisions and the engineered cruelties of pre- and post-Katrina hurricane catastrophes.

In our time, *Anarchy in the Big Easy* tells about the extraordinary revanchist recapturings of their lives and fortunes by anarchists and community members in devastated neighborhoods in the post-Katrina days. The communitarian anarchists spontaneously solved problems that the state and organized bureaucracy, with their blundering and dangerous incompetence, simply could not. There are yet even more episodes in this anarchist comix that I have not mentioned.

Anarchogenesis

In the body, the biological side of the epiphany of this general system principle I call anarchogenesis is the process of angiogenesis (growing new small blood vessels to go around a blockage in a blood vessel.) Anarchogenesis can be applied analogously and with sufficient practical correspondence to the physical facts of flow, as well as to the dynamics of rivers meandering and breaking through on their own to relieve pressure.

Anarchogenesis extends to the artificial levees built to constrain flow, to the strikes and work stoppages of workers that force management to break through their exploitative practices and discover other solutions. The process helps describe the energetic communitarian anarchists who, like a delta forming at the mouth of the powerful Mississippi, expand into a thousand channels of action and know-how, and come up with solutions that have stumped incompetent officials.

However, a blockage on a production line provoked by a strike may be just the opportunity that aggrieved workers in a union need to persuade management. A natural river levee can break open and splay out onto the land, nourishing streams and rivulets and preventing even more catastrophic breaks. In addition to smaller rivulets bypassing the levee, the process might begin to create another meander curve in the river's flow. Such an action is a desirable revolutionary gambit.

Unwanted levee breaks that are both deadly and disruptive, such as the work of the archvillain Katrina, can be turned by smart and practical anarchists into opportunities for a thousand homegrown and effective solutions that a state or corporate bureaucracy cannot solve. Whether a crevasse is a necessary break in an energetic flowing river system or an unasked-for crevasse which disrupts a community, the anarchogenetic drive spreads out in generous loving "deltas of Venus" birthing a 1000 flow patterns.

The physics of all these actions is explained by Belgian physical chemist Ilya Prigogine as *order out of chaos*. Prigogine views the Mississippi Delta as a vast dissipative structure of flows of unbalanced energy gradients. Such a scenario generates order through irreversible processes: chaos enables adaptation and shapes paths and solutions to community problems which evolve to maximize the spread of a blockage. In short, an unbalanced system becomes a source of order driven by self-organization and complexity.

The Mississippi River is flowing water, but also the movement of water's kinetic energy with plenty of mud and silt along for the ride. It all is carried to the Gulf and deposited as a delta. The delta's lateral fanning-out shape emerges from the interplay of channels splitting up and creating fractal-like patterns. Order arises from the chaos, resulting in fluctuating dispersal shapes. Prigogine's theory states that such systems maintain an overall order because they are open to energy and matter flows, not despite them.

Multiple channels are explored, and community work and organization are spread out into different channel bifurcations. Some are unstable and don't work, so shifting around leads to more functional and optimized dispersal of energy, intention and work. The system continually tests multiple unstable configurations, such as changing distributaries, until it settles into a state that optimizes sediment dispersal and energy dissipation.

Chaos serves as the stabilizing force in a river or community, challenging typical criticisms of anarchy. Chaos and anarchy are precisely the things that stabilize. If an instability or a break arises, spontaneous order from the failing levees or faltering societies can self-organize critically and indulgently, which is to say easily, in feedback loops of mercy and forbearance, clemency and absolution.

Broken levees and unkept promises revascularize the flows that precede new river and social channels of permanent indulgence. There is a thirst and craving to forgive and care.

Chaos creates order when it cravenly desires, meanders and dissipates extravagantly. Anarchy is big and easy.

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