

RIPPED FROM MARGARET KILLJOY'S SUBSTACK

“It’s Time to Build Resilient Communities” and “Anarchism and its Misunderstanders”



ANKLEBITER DISTRO

www.xanklebiterdistrox.noblogs.org

IT'S TIME TO BUILD RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

The month that I wrote this, it was potentially the hottest month in human history. By the time you read this, you will have seen hotter. The month that I wrote this, there were fires and floods, there was mass suicides by whales. The month that I wrote this, asphalt melted and power grids buckled, crops died and covid surged. The month I wrote this, the Antarctic winter didn't see the ice return for the first time in recorded history. Yet the month I wrote this was likely safer and more stable than the month you're reading it.

The month that I wrote this, someone started their first foray into gardening, a bit late into the season but not too late to learn. The month that I wrote this, new community food banks were stocked with the early harvest from community gardens. The month that I wrote this, someone met their neighbors, someone stopped waiting to tell their partner that they love them, someone took care of the elderly, someone rerouted medicine production to a new facility in response to natural disaster. The month that I wrote this, I'm sure that someone, somewhere, started planning a direct action against those who profit off of the destruction of our climate. Maybe that action will be a flash in the pan, maybe it will be the spark that changes everything.

The month that I wrote this, I hope, an awful lot of people woke up to the facts that our climate is getting worse, our existing systems are showing their cracks, and that no one from the top is coming to save us – that those of us at the bottom are going to, as always, need to build the solutions ourselves.

I don't have all of the solutions. I only have one to propose, which will only ever be a part of the patchwork of solutions that we might use.

What I have to offer is that it is time for us to make our decisions about what to do with our lives based on the extreme nature of the risks we face. It's time to make decisions that prioritize facing our problems collectively. It is time to build resilient communities.

As always, the secret is to really begin. You make a plan, you envision the steps necessary to complete the plan, and you begin to enact the plan. Along the way, you make modifications to your plan. It does not matter if the plan is perfect. Trying to make the plan perfect is just an elaborate form of self-sabotage to keep you from ever starting anything.

A strategy that is being tried is always more likely to succeed than a strategy that stays hypothetical.

When I was 21, I lived in a squatted tenement building in the South Bronx. An older squatter had – probably to his later regret – let dozens of us young anarchists move in to help organize a protest in the city. The five-story building was always falling apart. One day, one of us younger folks noticed one of the steps was broken, so she decided to be helpful and made a sign: “step is broken.” Later that day, the older squatter fixed the step, all the while mumbling “these fucking anarchists. You don't put a sign on it. You do the fucking thing.”

that question will be able to get together and answer it.” I don’t mean this as a vague platitude, I mean it concretely. When workers control a factory, for example, rather than the stockholders, efficiency is increased, pay is increased, working conditions improve, and hours are shorter. In an anarchist society, the people who know how to make and distribute medicine will be able to meet and discuss how to produce better medicine more efficiently and there would not be the monetary barrier between a patient and her meds, nor the national barrier between a researcher and her peers.

When we say “we don’t know what an anarchist society would be like because we are not yet in one,” we are not being vague or evasive. We are saying that societies ought to be constructed by the people in them. Anarchism is a set of tools and principles with which to construct societies that value freedom and cooperation. We actually *do* have examples of what those societies can look like, but where we are at now, and where we will be in the future, is not revolutionary Catalonia, Ukraine during the Russian Civil War, or Korean Manchuria. We should not expect to reach the same answers as they did, even if we apply similar problem-solving methods to our problems.

We draw from history—not just from the history of self-styled anarchists like those examples above, but the lived experiences of people who are from cultures that are not traditionally state societies or capitalist. We draw from history to write our present, and to prepare to collectively write our future.

We had all sorts of excuses. Not the least of which being a distinct lack of masonry skills. But they were excuses – we could have taught ourselves, or asked him to show us. His critique of us became our new motto: “do the fucking thing.”

I don’t know the right way to prepare. I don’t even know the right way to convince people that they ought to prepare. I do know the wrong way to prepare, which is not trying.

So here’s a guess about what to do:

It’s time for friends to get together and soberly look at the problems facing this world. To look at how we can act with agency to fight the worst excesses of climate change and how we can act with agency to weather the impacts that are already here and are coming.

If you have access to any kind of social center (or a living room, or Zoom, whatever), get people together to have structured conversations about what can go wrong and how to deal with it. To figure out who in the community has skills that they are willing to teach – or if the community is able to bring in outsiders to teach the skills people want. Figure out what kind of collective infrastructure can be built.

Ask each other questions like:

- **What disasters is your area prone to, currently or with climate projections?** How can your community respond most effectively to those disasters? Is there a plan for people to meet up and discuss next steps in case of disaster? Can that plan be written down and available to everyone?
- **How can water be stored, treated, and distributed?** Can rainwater be caught? Can plastic containers be washed and treated water stored in them for later distribution? How can the existing infrastructure be made more resilient?
- **How can both individuals and the community find something close to food sovereignty or at least keep enough food stored to make it through disruptions in the supply chain?** Can dried foods be stored in a location accessible to everyone in the community, or can food be processed (canned, dehydrated, salted, pickled, freeze-dried) and distributed so that people have their own stockpiles at home?
- **How can people communicate if existing infrastructure becomes inaccessible?** Does anyone have an amateur radio license? Can people learn to use various radios? Can a mesh network be built to provide a small-scale internet for a community? Do neighbors have loud whistles to signal for help and can you develop a code for how to communicate in that way?
- **What medical skills are available or can be gained?** Can the community center be used as a makeshift trauma center in case of a disaster? Is someone available to teach the basics of trauma first aid, such as a stop-the-bleed class? Can first aid kits be assembled and distributed at workshops that teach participants how to use the kit’s contents?
- **Who has specific needs, and how can the community address them?** Do spaces need more physical accessibility, or are there certain individuals more likely to need rescue or medical attention? How will you store that information and make it available to everyone?

- **What can you do to foster community?** Can you have community meals weekly so that people come together and eat? Can you throw shows, or hold public workshops? Who is competent at conflict resolution and mediation? Are more people interested in learning those skills?
- **How will your community network with other communities?** Are there multiple organizations or groups that can federate together to create a larger, bottom-up structure to coordinate needs and plans?
- **How will your community protect those who are acting to defend the climate?** Most of what people can do to build resilient communities is lawful and not in-and-of-itself dangerous, but many of the ways that people choose to confront climate change are not. How can you develop a security culture in which the only people who learn about specific direct actions are those performing those direct actions?
- **How will your community defend itself?** Many communities – particularly LGBTQ+ communities, communities of color, and followers of minority religions – are currently facing direct and violent threats. Certainly, it is better to build alliances than walls and it's best to avoid the tendency to hoard and defend resources against all outsiders. But there are people who are not looking to work across cultural lines and are instead looking for ways to oppress people. Can you develop community defense skills and make common cause with other groups for mutual protection?

This work is serious and it is life-saving. That doesn't mean it can't be joyful. Coming together to learn together – or even individually nerding out and researching – is enjoyable. **It is agency, not hope, that is the antidote to despair.** Acting with agency during times of crisis is one of the primary ways to reduce PTSD. Preparing for crisis can, if done right, actually reduce the anxiety of that crisis.

More so, resiliency is not a binary thing. A community isn't either resilient or doomed. It's a process. The goal of resiliency provides a direction to walk rather than a destination.

I don't see top-down solutions to climate change coming, but I do see disaster coming. It's something we can face, when we work together. It also doesn't mean that it needs to be small scale.

Bottom-up structures often start small-scale but they don't have to stay that way. The skills we learn – community building, conflict resolution, networking – leave us in a position to grow. People often despair at how we might run the large-scale infrastructure that currently meets our needs without the top-down structures that run it. I don't despair about that. I believe in us. Not that we can just magically wake up and do it – organizing complex systems is a specialized skill, after all – but that we can learn how. That there already *are* people who know how to run complex systems, and that we can learn from them, and include them in our communities and conversations.

A self-defense class can become a community gym. A community gym can become one part of a social center. A social center can become a node in a network to distribute goods where they

I bristle at the sorts of questions like “how would medication be manufactured and distributed in anarchism?” These questions can be asked in good faith, and if they are, they deserve an answer. But usually the undertone of the question is “it would not be, and therefore by advocating for anarchism you're advocating against life-saving medicine.”

Most of the askers wouldn't be able to describe to you how medication is manufactured and distributed in our current system, or how it was in Soviet Russia. It's not the kind of specialized knowledge that the average person has. The cheeky answer that occurs to me first is of course “well it doesn't work very well now either, now does it?”

But the original question itself shows a misunderstanding of anarchism (which is, again, an understandable misunderstanding). Anarchism does not generally argue against the manufacture and distribution of medicine. It is not “corporations” that make medicine, not “governments” that develop international standards for safety. It is people who do both of those things. People embedded within organizational structures.

Someone asked me recently what we would do about the power grid. It feels like such a good example that it actually becomes a sort of metaphor for anarchism. People tend to conceptualize the power grid as a centralized source of electricity sent out to where it needs to go. There is some truth to that. Then there's off-grid life, where power has to be generated and stored locally. When I lived off-grid, relying on solar, it became very clear just how inefficient that system is. Power is only generated when the sun is out, so I have to store it in batteries that are not only expensive to buy, but they're ecologically destructive to produce.

Wouldn't it be better, then, to have a grid? That isn't necessarily centralization. Where I live now, I have solar again. This time, it's grid-tied solar. I produce electricity on my roof that goes into the grid for other people to use. When the sun isn't out, I draw from the grid. The grid can be—and to an extent already is—a distributed system rather than a centralized one. Of course, I also find it valuable to have backup systems for when the grid isn't available, and micro-grids serving individual areas are a good redundancy or even main source of power, depending on the specific needs of a community.

People think of government as the grid and anarchism as the off-grid cabin. This is the crux of the misunderstanding. Anarchists seek to distribute power, in every sense of the word, not just to localize it. This isn't to say an off-grid cabin (again, the metaphorical one) is counter to anarchism, but it's not how most people would choose to live. Anarchism is presenting a mesh of overlapping, distributed systems. Some of those systems, in order to share, require certain standards (I can't put DC electricity into the grid, for example). Not everywhere needs to be solar, not everything needs to be wind-powered. Diverse systems can work together to shore up each other's weaknesses. Overall, we could probably do with an awful lot less reliance on electrical power, but most of us see the utility in keeping it around.

Anarchism is capable of presenting answers to questions about supply chains and manufacturing, but those answers are also not, quite, what anarchism is. **Anarchism is not a set of answers. It's a set of tools with which to find answers.** The answer to “how would anarchist society handle the following,” is “we will organize in such a way that those who are most capable of answering

was specifically developed to oppose capitalism. Anticapitalism is at least as central to anarchist theory and practice as anti-statism is.

This isn't to say I advocate for tight definitions and bounds on anarchism. We fight for, as the Zapatistas would put it (who are not anarchists but with whom we have engaged in mutual discussion, support, and respect for decades) "a world in which many worlds are possible."

Anarchism is a scary word for very kind people. We picked an aggressive name. It has always been a bit of a provocation. When that guy I don't like very much, Proudhon, declared himself an anarchist in 1840, it was a bit like saying "I am a terrorist." At least based on the connotations of the word anarchist at the time. But he also meant it directly and clearly, saying "as man seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy." (The reason I don't like him very much is that when he said "man," he literally meant men and was excluding women. Other anarchists immediately and rightly took him to task about his misogyny.)

I can't really blame people for misunderstanding anarchism. Whenever people on both sides argue "no, anarchy means this" or "no, anarchy means that," I want to just shout "did you know that words have more than one meaning depending on context and who is saying them?" It's perfectly understandable for people to view anarchism as advocacy for anarchy, defined most commonly by society as "an absence of government and order" or whatever. This is not a historically defensible definition of anarchism, as a political position, but it's perfectly understandable for people to assume it must be based on what they've learned growing up.

Anarchists have tried to address this problem in numerous ways. One is rebranding. The other word for anarchist with the most widespread adoption is probably "libertarian socialist." There's an appeal to this; it's specific. We are socialists—that is, we believe that the means of production should be distributed fairly. We also are the opposite of authoritarian socialists, which makes us libertarian. The problem is, to half of the US, "libertarian" means "capitalist" and to the other half, "socialist" means "authoritarian." So it doesn't really compute. (Early on, people used "socialism" and "anarchism" interchangeably, because authoritarian socialism is by and large a later development. We started adding "libertarian" to set ourselves apart from those we disagreed with about authority.)

I'm not interested in rebranding, though. I just believe in outreach. Maybe I'm too caught up in how the word anarchism and how the black flag and the black and red flag set a fire under me when I was 19, a fire that hasn't gone out yet. But every political label is misunderstood and misappropriated and has been probably forever. In 19th century Europe, "republican" meant "anti-king" and bordered on socialist and anarchist. In the 19th century United States, "republican" meant "anti-slavery and willing to start a war over the issue." These days, "republican" means "watches too much Fox News."

need to go and stage disaster relief. A network can become a mutual aid society. A mutual aid society can become, well, a society. A resilient society.

This isn't to suggest that we ignore existing infrastructure and build all our new systems from scratch. Rather, it is to suggest that we build redundancy into and alternatives to existing infrastructure, and that we ideally build towards a better society to control that infrastructure. Conversations about rainwater harvesting need not conflict with conversations about how to harden municipal water supplies.

Our individualized, atomized society does not position many of us well to handle catastrophe, because it makes us think we have to face catastrophe alone. I've lost count of the number of people who don't prioritize preparedness because they presume themselves ill-equipped to do so – too poor to build a bunker; not enough space to store six months of food; too reliant on medication and other supply-chain-complex support to imagine surviving without society; too socially isolated to maintain a consistent friend group, let alone manage a complex community focused on survival. Most of us fall into one of these categories or another. It is only the atomization of modern society that has us believing we will need to do these tasks on our own (even the task of building community).

During World War II, the people of London sheltered in the Underground, the subway tunnels beneath the city, during air raids launched by the Nazis from occupied France. This method of sheltering didn't start as a governmental program. It started because some leftists decided they didn't want to die and they didn't want to wait for anyone to save them. A socialist Spanish Civil War volunteer named JBS Haldane (most famous as the inventor of the "primordial soup" theory of the origin of life on earth) studied and presented information about how bombs work and advocated for sheltering deep underground. Phil Piratin, a Jewish communist who had previously been part of the grassroots campaign that stopped English fascist organizing at the famous Battle of Cable Street, was part of a group of people that broke into the basement of a hotel to survive the bombing and later pressured the city into opening the tunnels.

Even solutions to problems that rely on existing social infrastructure are only put into place when people, from the bottom up, force the issue. Nothing seems possible until people make it possible by means of direct action – then it seems inevitable.

Our existing system has a tendency to blame climate change on individuals without much power – you used incandescent light bulbs instead of LEDs, so it is your fault the waters are rising. We've caught on to that particular bit of misdirection – there *are* individuals who can be blamed for climate change, but they are the heads of the institutions such as major corporations and governments that are profiting from the warming earth. We've caught on to that like, but our existing system tells us two more lies we have to come to terms with: it tells us that it is our individual responsibility to survive climate change and it tells us up to our existing leaders and economic system to solve these problems.

Basically, it says: “Look, you drove a pickup truck instead of an electric car, so now everyone is going to die, but we’ve got it handled and are working on solutions, and it’s up to you to make sure that you’re prepared to survive and crises that crop up before we get this whole thing sorted. Keep calm and carry on.”

Everything the system is telling us, then, is a lie.

Well, keeping calm is valuable. But not if it means keeping our heads in the sand.

“Community resilience” is something of a jargon phrase that’s bandied about a lot by people who mean very different things by it, but the core idea of a resilient community is a community of people who are able to collectively face and withstand adversity. It is essentially the non-individualistic counter to the nonsensical ideas that are put forward by so many doomsday preppers.

Community resilience is, in the end, better for the individuals involved. It is healthier to be part of a healthy ecosystem of people than it is to fend for oneself or only one’s own family. Whether your motives are community-minded or selfish, community resilience is a better plan than raw individualism.

Resilient communities are by necessity not structured from the top down but from the bottom up. Again and again, people are learning that decentralized and distributed decision making is more efficient and more resilient.

During most of the first few years of the recent pandemic, I worked for an organization that financially and organizationally sponsored worker cooperatives. Many of our clients were restaurants and other public-facing businesses – exactly the kinds of businesses hardest hit by a respiratory pandemic. While cafes and diners around the country closed their doors for good, we didn’t see a single one of our clients go out of business from 2020-2021. Why? It’s not because their customers were more loyal or more foolhardy. The collective workplaces survived because horizontal decision making is not only more just, it is also more responsive to change. Since the workers themselves were the owners, they were able to decide amongst themselves how to scale back their operations and how to pivot (a piece of business jargon, “pivot,” but still important) in the face of diminished business.

Resilient communities are by necessity ones in which power is dispersed. Disaster destroys infrastructure – that’s kind of its thing – and if that infrastructure isn’t built to reroute around damage, then it will not function.

Not everyone has much in the way of community. This alienation from one another is baked into capitalism and needs to be overcome – not only has capitalism created climate change, it’s also ordered society in such a way that confronting or surviving climate change is particularly complicated.

central organizer by a long shot.) The question I could have asked that man in response would be “why did you show up at a protest intended to disrupt society enough to stop a war and expect no one to do anything disruptive?”

But again, we’re only known for the tip of the iceberg.

The first anarchist I met was in my boy scout troop. At least, I think he was an anarchist. He was the cool older punk guy, maybe 17 years old. He lived in his mom’s basement, which is cool when you’re 17, and he had Black Flag CDs and Guns & Roses shirts. There was a pool table in that basement with a bed sheet over it that covered an inordinate amount of car stereos. These were, presumably, stolen.

I had no idea that anarchism was a political ideology. I don’t know if this 17-year-old did either. I had that “the government is gone, good luck” understanding of anarchism. I was 13, so that version of anarchism appealed to me. I asked him the big important question about anarchism: “when you draw a circle-A, do the lines break out of the circle or no?”

He gave me the correct answer.

“It doesn’t matter.”

I didn’t stay interested in anarchism throughout most of my teens, because—as I saw it—I was too rational to gravitate towards extremes. I settled on a lackluster appreciation for social democracy and the Green party, but it didn’t set a fire under me.

Nothing political did until, at 19, in 2002, I met anarchists. I met the black-clad protestors who were dead set on putting their bodies on the line to stop the neoliberal agenda that was stripping the developing world of resources and leaving bodies in its wake. The protestors had a coherent political ideology and a coherent political method. It appealed to me. I haven’t looked back.

I’m not here to convince the reader to become an anarchist, however. I’m here to say that fundamentally, most discussions between anarchists and non-anarchists involve both parties talking about two different and unrelated ideas. Most, but not all, people critical of anarchism are not arguing against the political ideology that I or millions before me have espoused. They aren’t arguing against a free association of cooperative, autonomous groups who federate with one another in order to build an antiracist, antipatriarchal society based on mutual aid and mutual respect. They’re arguing against “no rules.”

Some of those arguments are in good faith. Others are not.

Anarchism is an umbrella term for an assortment of specific and identifiable ideological positions. That is to say, anarchism is not a vague thing. It’s a complex thing, it’s an organic thing, and it’s an ideology against ideology, but it is still a specific and identifiable thing. When I say, for example, “anarchist capitalists are not anarchists” I mean to say that capitalism is entirely outside the bounds of what has been identified historically as anarchism as a coherent movement. Anarchism, as part of the larger umbrella of socialism (another misunderstood word),

And since so many of us anarchists were queer, and likely so many of us were sex workers (the deepest buried of all histories), we're harder still to find. Magnus Hirschfeld, the pioneering social scientist who explored LGBT issues in Weimar Germany (who later had to flee the Nazis who burned his research), he wasn't an anarchist, but he had this to say about us: "In the ranks of a relatively small party, the anarchist, it seemed to me as if proportionately more homosexuals and effeminate are found than in others." He meant that as a compliment and we'll take it as one.

The burial of our history has more effects than I know how to count. One effect is how often we reinvent the wheel—learning the hard way over and over again which allies we can trust and which intend to murder us, learning the hard way over and over again the strengths and weaknesses of collective decision making, learning the hard way over and over again what is involved in organizing revolutionary activity at scale.

Another effect, the main one I want to talk about right now, is that people just don't know about us. They don't know what we're about. They hear the name "anarchist" and they will come to certain conclusions, based on what they've told or what they've personally considered about "a society without government." If we're lucky, it'll be based on what they've seen of us. Or rather, what they've seen that they *know* was us.

The tip of the anarchist iceberg is different in different times and places, but it's always just the tip. For a long time, the public knew us by our assassins, who brought heads of state to early graves. Other times, the public saw us just as rabble rousers, looking to stir people up for the sake of it. More recently, we were most known for the black bloc, for rioting at protests. Sometimes, we're known for our mutual aid projects—and among other protest organizations and the progressive left, we're sometimes known for our skill as organizers and facilitators and medics.

Overall, though, we're known for riots. Assassinations. Bombs. Destruction. Which have been a part of our history, but only part of it. This ties neatly into one of the largest problems we run across: people don't realize that anarchism is an umbrella term for a group of coherent and specific political and social theories and practices. They think it just means "the government is gone now, good luck." The most visible aspects of anarchism don't always inform anyone that we stand for anything else.

One time I gave a talk about anarchism and fiction in Portland, about ten years after that city had seen a militant series of anti-war protests against the second Iraq War. One person asked the question, basically, "why do you anarchists always show up and fuck up our protests?"

I had a more concrete answer than usual that day, because I'd been heavily involved in the organizing of the specific protests he was referring to. The answer to his question was, simply, that those protests had been organized by anarchists—or with heavy anarchist involvement—in the first place. Those who saw anarchists as "outsiders" to those protests clearly hadn't been involved in their organization. To be clear, most of the anarchist organizers weren't 20-year-olds wearing black masks, but most of us were in solidarity with the black bloc. (Well, I was a 20-year-old in a black mask during the time I helped organize those protests, but I wasn't a

Community is built around relationships between people. Community is just the complex interwoven web of relationships in a given group. Some communities are built around shared interests – religious, ideological, or subcultural – and other communities are built around geographic proximity. Both are good. Both are worth developing. Both will help more people survive adversity.

Communities are like gardens – they happen on their own, as seeds find soil, as rain and sun find plants, but they can thrive through planning and cultivation.

Interest-based communities usually revolve around some sort of social center, whether a religious building or an infoshop or a venue. Some advice for cultivating this kind of community: **prioritize inclusion over exclusion. Try not to be a gatekeeper, but instead an usher, helping new people find their role within the community.** Foster a sense of agency, both individually and as a community – that is, help people figure out what they can do, what work they can accomplish that plays to their strengths, while also making sure that the community itself is attempting to leave the world better than they found it.

To build interest-based communities, look to see if one already exists and join it. If it doesn't, start it. Throw shows, or host a book club, or potlucks, or movie nights, or model train exhibitions if you're into model trains or whatever. Open an infoshop – or if you're feeling ambitious (and this isn't time for half-measures) an entire community center that hosts multiple affiliated projects. Never engage cynically with community – don't join the model train club to convert them to your politics if you don't actually care about model trains.

Geographic communities used to be more common than they are, though there are still places where people know their neighbors. Community is strongest when it focuses on what unites people, and with no specific shared interests, cultivating geographic community can be hard. Particularly for people who are not always going to be accepted by most of their neighbors – where I live in rural Appalachia, there are not a lot of out LGBT people, for example. That doesn't mean there aren't people nearby with whom I have enough common cause to build community, it just means that I have to be more careful as I do it.

To build geographic community, talk to people. Introduce yourself. Check in with one another during extreme weather events or about local news – the shared interest you have with neighbors is your apartment building, cul-de-sac, or gravel road. Offer to help where you can, with whatever skills you have available. Bring your neighbors cookies, or beer, or whatever is appropriate. Of course, be careful not to overstep your bounds, but fostering relationships, whether close or not, with your immediate neighbors is useful. Even if all you learn is which neighbors can be trusted and which can't, it's worth finding out.

There's more to cultivating community than that, and I'm not an expert. I'm just someone who talks to experts. Conflict resolution and mediation skills are valuable. Direct communication matters. All solid relationships are built on a foundation of honesty.

Most people want to be alive and eat food every day and feel useful and have adequate health care and be some degree of happy, so no matter what your interest-based community is built on, resiliency can be part of it.

In times of crisis, like now, people are looking for answers. Some people offer very simple and horrendous answers, like “it’s the immigrants’ fault,” or “let’s all pull together behind a strong man, from the Right or the Left, and let daddy save us.” We can’t let those be the only answers proposed. We have to speak up and offer tools for collectively discovering our own answers.

It’s time to stop waiting. It’s time to start the hard conversations, to start the hard work. We owe it to ourselves and we owe it to each other. A storm is coming, but this is no time to panic. It’s no time to ignore the clouds on the horizon and the ever-closer rolling thunder. It’s time to get to work.

ANARCHISM AND ITS MISUNDERSTANDERS

This week I’ve been researching Mexican labor history, preparing for an episode of my podcast that includes Ricardo Flores Magón, probably the most influential Mexican anarchist. Since his organization predated most of the rest of the revolutionaries of the Mexican Revolution, his name and legacy have been recuperated heavily by the Mexican government. His anarchism, of course, has been largely left out of the conversation. It can’t be completely removed though, no matter how they try—the Magonistas (a name he hated) were anarchists and they weren’t subtle about it.

Thirty-five years before he came onto the scene, something else of note happened. First, in 1865, anarchist textile workers in Mexico City at two factories went on strike. This gets referred to as Mexico’s first strike (though we’ll talk about that). They were brutally repressed, with soldiers firing into the crowd. Second, years later, in Tlalnepantla (a city quite nearby, now part of the Mexico City metropolitan area), anarchist women from several factories went on strike and won, the first successful strike in Mexican history.

Every time someone claims something is the first strike, or the longest trial in a country’s history, or any other superlative like that, I’m skeptical, so usually I try to look it up. There was a silver miner strike in the city of Real de Monte in 1766. I suppose that was technically New Spain, not Mexico. The Real de Monte strike gets called the first labor strike in North American history. Lots of things get called the first thing.

But those textile workers *were* the birth of the modern Mexican labor movement, which predictably opened in a hail of gunfire from the government. It’s also not shocking to me that it was organized by anarchists. Around the same time, indigenous folks, anarchists, and indigenous anarchists started a wave of agrarian revolt that terrorized the landed elite and redistributed land to dispossessed peasants.

I read history books for a living, and my biases come through in the topics and books I pick (leaning towards anarchism, leaning towards direct action, leaning towards mutual aid, leaning towards anticolonial struggle, leaning towards feminism). I try to be aware of those biases, but I’m still left with the overwhelming realization that anarchists were everywhere in the second half of the 19th century, and in most countries, anarchist socialism (that is, a socialist movement that advocates against the creation of a new state, but instead to organize society horizontally) was the predominant form of socialism, often even outnumbering more reform-minded socialists, what we might call today democratic socialists.

The revolutionary Left was heavily anarchist or heavily anarchist influenced until the turn of the century, or in many countries, until the Russian Civil War that the Bolsheviks emerged victorious from. (I don’t have it in me to call it the Bolshevik revolution. It was a pluralistic revolution waged by multiple socialist tendencies that the Bolsheviks took over through the large-scale murder of their fellow revolutionaries. Yes I’m a salty old anarchist bitch. Yes, that still feels like the most accurate way to describe what happened.)

Yet you’d never know that anarchists have been everywhere and had their hands in everything if you read any mainstream history—whether that history is produced by a capitalist country or a state socialist country. Sure, some of our names live on—Ricardo Flores Magón, for example, as a revolutionary leader. And Spain, Ukraine, and Korea in particular are unable to entirely bury our memory. But every piece of culture and history from the past 150 years or so that I’ve looked into is full of anarchists. My other work is in fiction, and early on I realized that you’ve got Aldous Huxley, Ursula le Guin, Oscar Wilde, Michael Moorcock, Franz Kafka, Henry Miller, Anthony Burgess, Joe Haldeman. Household names (depending on the household). None of them famous for their affiliations with anarchism.

Anarchist refugees from Spain were among the fiercest partisans fighting in France, and it was anarchists in tanks with names like Durruti and Don Quixote who first rolled into Paris during the liberation from the Nazis in 1944.

Our history is buried.

Anarchism isn’t the only buried history, of course. I have to put in an incredible amount of effort to figure out what the women were doing in any given social struggle, because we were always there and our names are never written down. Even that first successful strike in Mexico, by anarchist textile workers? The women’s names aren’t recorded, but instead that of some man who was involved with organizing them. Luisa Quevedo was one of three anarchists who, in 1869, made their way to Chiapas in Mexico to give arms training to the peasants there, whose movement inspired the revolutionary leader Zapata and therefore the later Zapatistas who inspire so many today... yet she’s mentioned in history as the wife of another anarchist.

God forbid you want to find out how anyone in history related to queerness or sex work. Even among diehard revolutionaries, for a long time it was hard to get people to admit “yeah that guy liked fucking other dudes” or “this lady made her money the old-fashioned way.” Even though the first magazine for gay men in the world (there we go with “first” again) was published by a German anarchist named Adolph Brand.