

Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy, edited by Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, Luis Fernandez, II, Anthony J. Nocella, II, and Deric Shannon.

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BOOK REVIEW

Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy, edited by Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, Luis Fernandez, II, Anthony J. Nocella, II, and Deric Shannon. New York: Routledge, 2009. Pp. 336.

In the wake of the mass mobilizations against the WTO in Seattle in 1999, there has been a resurgence in interest in anarchism as a theory and practice, in both academic study and activist circles. However, anarchism is still widely misunderstood and misrepresented in mainstream culture as violent and chaotic. To address some of these problematic conceptions, Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, Luis A. Fernandez, Anthony J. Nocella, II, and Deric Shannon have given us *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy*.

This compilation focuses primarily on anarchism in academia, where it is increasingly present in research and classes ranging from philosophy and education to anthropology and political science. Despite its growing influence on students and professors, the editors claim “there has been no comprehensive anarchist reader for classes, community scholars, and activist collectives that reflects this emerging and growing trend” (p. 1). This collection is intended to fill this gap and “highlight the diversity of contemporary thought around anarchism, indicating the relationship between anarchist theory, critical pedagogy, and political praxis” (p. 2).

As anyone familiar with anarchist politics could imagine, compiling a book on Anarchist Studies could be a contentious undertaking. For one, defining anarchism, particularly in an introductory manner, can be quite complicated. Since the 1960s, anarchism has been greatly influenced by many other radical social and political

perspectives, such as queer, critical race, feminist, radical environmental, and animal liberation theories. As a result, “there are as many varieties of anarchism as there are anarchists” (p. 2). Furthermore, a single, totalizing theory of anarchism would be counter to the very idea of anarchism and its fundamental criticism of coercion and the imposition of authority; in the words of contributor William T. Armaline, defining anarchism “would be a claim to power—the power to define the world and future of others without their participation and consent” (p. 137). As a starting point, the editors offer a basic sketch of anarchism as an anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist body of theory and practice based on 1) the rejection of hierarchy and vanguardism and 2) the promotion of decentralization, autonomy, and freedom (p. 3).

The book’s twenty-eight essays are divided into five sections: Theory, Methodologies, Pedagogy, Praxis, and The Future. Together, they present anarchism as a multiplicity of ever-evolving tendencies, ideas, and practices that are sometimes in conversation with one another and sometimes in conflict. From theoretical proposals and discussions of new research methodologies to personal reflections from activist-academics and examples of popular anarchist pedagogy, the book offers a sampling of some of the dominant theories and debates of 21st-century anarchism.

Another potential point of controversy derives from the strained relationship of anarchism to the academy. As an institution that is at its core hierarchical—and that actively creates and maintains hierarchy—academia is fundamentally at odds with anarchism. As David Graeber puts it, “to act like an anarchist would be academic suicide” (p. 107). Stephen Shukaitis warns against the creation of a field of “anarchist studies” that constructs anarchism as a fixed, static object to observe from afar; the end result, he cautions, could be that the work done by anarchist academics is “turned against themselves and re-incorporated into the workings of state and capital...creating the image of subversion while raking in tuition fees” (p. 167). Instead, he understands anarchism as a process, as a means, and, thus, suggests that the role of anarchism in academia (or of academia in anarchism) is to provide space and resources for “the elaboration of ideas and knowledges useful to further developing anarchist politics...approached from a way that is deeply connected to questions posed by social movements and struggles” (p. 169).

This idea that anarchist studies should serve interests and communities outside of academia is clearly echoed throughout this collection, and many of the essays included communicate the authors’ broader social and political commitments. All share the desire to further anarchist theory and practices, which distinguishes *Contemporary Anarchist Studies* from other academic writing that attempts to maintain a professional distance from the subjects under consideration. Moreover,

many contributors challenge the very idea of scientific objectivity, arguing that it is a foundational aspect of oppressive power structures that impose a false sense of absolutism and “Truth” (p. 162).

In addition to this shared desire, this book is full of proposals for how to strengthen anarchism as a viable and effective system of libratory thought. Suggestions range from integrating more serious considerations of race (Olson), economics (Buck), or animal liberation (Best) into current theory and praxis to viewing anarchism in terms of recent French philosophy (May), post-structural thinking (Kuhn), and nature (Jones). Others go beyond theoretical considerations and put forth concrete, prescriptive ways to create anarchist institutions and, ultimately, a more anarchist society, prescriptions based on the authors’ experiences as activists. In “Addressing Violence Against Women,” for example, Emily Gaarder uses her background in a community-based restorative justice group to explore ways to prevent—and respond to—violence against women without relying on the state, a pivotal challenge for anarchists. She briefly outlines practical steps anarchists can take to address gendered violence in a manner that “embraces both the call for women’s safety *and* the call for the dissolution of state-sanctioned systems of law and punishment” (p. 54).

For most contributors to the book—who all have a background in academia—the struggles from which they draw their lessons and suggestions are based in the classroom. Multiple essays characterize traditional schooling models in the United States—in both public schools and universities—as reproducing the oppressive, hierarchical social relationships necessary for the advancement of capitalism. It is, therefore, as William Armaline writes, “a matter of strategy for us to consider pedagogy in any attempt to remake our communities in a way that reflects our mutual desires and needs” (p. 140).

Armaline asserts that a pedagogy steeped in anarchism—one that consciously minimizes power imbalances between teachers and students—can have libratory potential and allow for the “active deconstruction of oppressive elements of society and the creation of situated knowledge and grassroots community” (p. 137). Abraham DeLeon and Kurt Love similarly advocate a rethinking of social studies and “hard” science in secondary schools that questions the primacy of the state, objectivity, and historical discourses that naturalize capitalism, patriarchy, Eurocentrism, and other imposed systems of domination. Both essays suggest ways teachers can challenge these entrenched ideas in the classroom.

Others focus their attention on the university in particular, claiming that the creation of new methodologies infused with an anarchist perspective could lead to academic research that does not, as Luis Fernandez says, “reproduce colonizing effects or

help reproduce state practices” (p. 95). Jeff Ferrell goes a step further in his unrepentant attack of the accepted research ethic in his fields, criminology and sociology, which he sees as “an intellectual side water with little hope of effectively confronting contemporary injustice” (p. 78). As an alternative, he cites philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend, who wrote that “the only principle that does not inhibit progress is: anything goes” (p. 73). Therefore, to Ferrell, the way to break out of this intellectually deadening quicksand is to challenge all methodological orthodoxies, to put down the data sets and go back out into the field where researchers are vulnerable and outcomes unpredictable. In the end, this could produce research with some relevance outside of the academy.

The question of relevance surfaces repeatedly throughout the book. Several contributors (in particular Paul Routledge, Stevphen Shukaitis, David Graeber, and Deric Shannon) discuss the role—if any—of radical academics in social movements. These essays are some of the most compelling, as they offer pointed critiques of the academy that are directed toward other academics, as well as suggestions for how to resist institutionalization and maintain political commitments. This group of essays makes clear that beyond incorporating anarchist thinking into the classroom, researchers are increasingly considering their role in the larger society and, in doing so, attempting to transform the very nature of academic work. On this Routledge is direct: “‘relevance’ entails making certain political commitments to a moral and political philosophy of social justice, and research is directed both toward conforming to that commitment and toward helping to realize the values that lie at its root” (p. 82). He offers very concrete suggestions—grounded in his own experience with the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA)—for how to make this a reality.

In focusing explicitly on the need to direct research toward the world outside the classroom, Routledge echoes many of the ideas found in *Constituent Imaginations*, a recent collection edited by Shukaitis and Graeber that explores “methods through which social research creates new possibilities for political action” and “methods and strategies of how to most effectively use the space we find ourselves in to find higher positions of subversiveness in struggle” (2007 p. 31). Despite the obvious similarities between the two books, there is a key difference: *Constituent Imaginations* is more concerned with drawing examples from diverse histories than with any one theoretical tradition (i.e., anarchism).

While seemingly benign, this difference is of great importance in the case of anarchism. As Graeber puts it, anarchism is not the invention of a group of nineteenth-century European theorists (eg, Kropotkin, Bakunin, and Prodhoun, all of whom are cited repeatedly throughout this book); neither did these theorists claim to invent anarchism, but rather to describe what they saw in people around

them. To them, says Graeber, anarchism was “a kind of moral faith, a rejection of all forms of structural violence, inequality, or domination (anarchism literally means ‘without rulers’), and a belief that humans would be perfectly capable of getting on without them. In this sense, there have always been anarchists, and presumably, always will be” (p. 105).

A few authors in *Contemporary Anarchist Studies* do reaffirm this sentiment: in his admonition against the creation of “anarchist studies” departments, Shukaitis notes the tendency inherent in this line of thinking to understand anarchism as a word, a socio-political identity, rather than as an ethic or set of practices that could go by other names. The latter perspective, he claims, reveals “a much richer and more global tradition of social and political thought and organization that while not raising a black flag in the air is very useful for expanding the scope of human possibilities in a libratory direction” (p. 170). Conceiving of anarchism as a natural, rather than affected, tendency opens up the potential for much greater affinities across cultural, geographic, and historical lines.

Some scholars included in this book utilize the broader conception of anarchism described by Graeber and Shukaitis. During his time as a participant in the anti-corporate globalization movement in Barcelona, Jeffrey S. Juris observed a proliferation of anarchist ideas and practices; yet when he asked activists to describe their political identities, most avoided adopting a specific label and instead chose to borrow from various contemporary and historical perspectives, only one of which is anarchism. Juris sees this flexibility and inclusiveness as a major strength of these types of movements. In her section on combating gender violence (mentioned above), Emily Gaarder also points out that though restorative justice is in line with anarchist principles, the two are not explicitly associated and many of its practitioners would not identify as anarchists. Caroline K. Kaltefleiter inverts this process by reclaiming the Riot Grrl movement, arguing that what mainstream society came to represent as simply a music and fashion style was based on an anarchist politics. Through her discussion of girl zines and street activism, Kaltefleiter explains how Riot Grrl was—and still is—“a fluid sphere of resistance, source of empowerment, and viable agency for social change” (p. 226).

Still, these examples are all drawn from a relatively narrow range of cultures. Graeber, on the other hand, mentions his doctoral research in rural Madagascar where villages were largely self-governed and made decisions by consensus, two practices lauded by anarchist groups around the world. Nowhere else in the book are anarchism’s myriad debts to indigenous practices mentioned, which points to the more general issue of what perspectives are and are not included. Men’s voices dominate, both as authors and editors, a shortcoming all too common in anarchist

groups and projects. The introduction does acknowledge this imbalance, but there is little discussion of why or how to address it.

Though the relationship between anarchism and the university can be tenuous, *Contemporary Anarchist Studies* makes compelling arguments—both theoretical and practical—for ways radical academics can use their privileged positions to further social movements without sacrificing their political ideals. This book itself is a compelling example: the editors worked as a collective and made decisions by consensus, a process that, in their words, “mirrors anarchism itself” (p. 6). That the end result was published by Routledge, a respected academic press, is proof that anarchism is alive and growing in the academy.

References

Sjukaitis, S. and Graeber, D. eds (2007). *Constituent Imaginations: Militant Investigations and Collective Theorization*. Oakland: AK Press.