

Anarchy for the R.I.

ANARCHISM: The philosophy of a new social order based on liberty unrestricted by man-made law; the theory that all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary.

— Emma Goldman (1917)

For most Americans, "anarchy" is a dirty word. CNN periodically warns of how Iraq, Haiti, Ivory Coast, and any number of other troubled places totter "on the brink of anarchy." Anarchists, invariably violent, are the ones who disrupt gatherings of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization. Here in Rhode Island, Governor Donald L. Carcieri's ill-fated 2004 "Act Relating to Homeland Security," which prohibited affiliation "with any organization teaching and advocating disbelief in or opposition to organized government," outlawed "advocating anarchy." Although the bill was withdrawn after condemnation from civil libertarians, it indicates the general hostility toward anarchism.

Anarchy, however, need not mean chaos, disorder, and violence. According to David Grenier, 31, an anarchist and wedding photographer in Providence, "An anarchist society would be based on freedom, equality, and mutual aid or solidarity." Alexander Zimmerman, a 30-year-old librarian at the Fox Point branch of the Providence Public Library, asserts, "Anarchy is not about no rules — it's about no rulers. It is freedom from domination and freedom for responsibility."

This egalitarian ethos is the appeal for many anarchists. "I've connected over time to working in groups that are non-hierarchical and cooperative," says SueEllen Kroll, 28, a program officer with the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities. She stresses the participatory nature of organizations run on anarchist principles. Anarchy, in this sense, is not a breakdown of order, but the absence of coercive authority, whether it be public (the state and its attendant police forces, jails, and armies), or private (the incredible power of capital and transnational corporations) from dictating the terms of day-to-day life for most people.

Whether Providence is a hotbed of anarchism is open to debate, but there is definitely a vibrant local scene that finds support in a number of quarters, particularly in the arts. AS220, the downtown Providence nonprofit gallery and performance space, is run on anarchist principles. Kroll contends that Providence is more hospitable to grassroots anarchist initiatives than other places she has lived, including Denver, Boston, and Worcester, Massachusetts. She cites Providence's small size and diverse population as key. Rhode Islanders are more likely to know their politicians and local business owners than residents of most places, and the influx of newcomers — whether students or immigrants — prevents stasis. "This recipe is ripe for a 'do-it-yourself' mentality," Kroll says, "and when people organize, there is a good chance, comparatively speaking, of making a difference."

Paul Buhle, a professor at Brown University and the author of numerous books on left-wing politics and social movements in the US, believes there is a greater interest in anarchism among young Americans than at any time since 1920. Buhle, who is editor (with Nicole Schulman) of the recently released *Wobblies! A Graphic History* (Verso, 2005), attributes this to bitter

dissatisfaction with the Bush administration. Moreover, he says, "The overwhelming power of the state in our own society prompts anarchist responses."

There are a number of movements with anarchist tendencies, including eco-warriors, prisoners' rights advocates, Wobblies, Critical Massers, international justice supporters, peace groups, and feminist and anti-racism activists, among others. Not all of these groups collaborate, or even know what the other is doing, and despite some shared beliefs, it's unlikely you could get them in a room together. Meanwhile, anarchist and related movements are rarely mentioned, much less discussed seriously by the major news organs, in a culture where the preoccupation with "red" and "blue" states narrows the range of debate.

The very term "anarchist" can be problematic, even for those who identify as such. Beatrice McGeoch, 29, a teacher and advisor at the Met School in Providence, says that while anarchist principles and ideals influence her, she is more interested in what people are actually doing to promote social justice than if the label "anarchist" is applied to their actions. "I've met people who are totally irresponsible who call themselves anarchists and that pisses me off," she says. Anarchism in its pure sense proposes a society in which each individual is a decision maker and active creator of the type of world in which he or she would like to live. A purely anarchic society would have no "government" in the way we have one now, i.e., massive state institutions staffed by bureaucrats and directed by nominally elected officials deciding on behalf of the masses. Not surprisingly, critics dismiss the practicality of such theoretical and revolutionary thinking.

Still, the utility of anarchist-inspired thinking can be seen in how the bogus arrest of local housing activist Camilo Viveiros, who was accused of assaulting then-police chief John Timoney during the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia in 2000, galvanized local activists. The Love and Resistance collective was born from this event, sparking fund-raising and letter-writing campaigns on Viveiros's behalf that continued until he and two fellow activists were acquitted of all charges in April 2004. Organizing around Viveiros's trial spawned the anarchist newspaper the Nor'easter, produced by McGeough, Kroll, and others, which had a nine-issue run in 2002-03. Love and Resistance also supported the work of cycling activists Critical Mass, as well as Books through Bars, Food not Bombs, and Recycle-A-Bike.

For people like Mike Araujo, 34, a stage carpenter at Trinity Repertory and committed anarcho-syndicalist, his beliefs mean, "You don't support the state." Although adherents need to be pretty selective in their fights, he advocates opposition to laws that oppress and divide people (citing, for example, bans on gay marriage and remaining prohibitions against interracial marriage in some states).

Whether anarchism can be practiced beyond workplaces, small communes, and volunteer organizations remains open to question. The function of even a small city like Providence demands a certain amount of centralization and coordination, not to mention money. It's hard to imagine developing interstates, post offices, and water treatment plants with an anarchist bent in mind. Some anarchists say this is precisely the point: our society is so massive, specialized, and rationalized that it's impossible for citizens to have any real input into how things are run; they have no choice but to cede authority to the state and mega-corporations. The solution, they

suggest, would be radically scaling back to small self-sufficient communities. Araujo notes how blackouts a few years back in New York City were marked by "tremendous cooperation." In citing this as a model of what an anarchist society might resemble, he adds, "To a lot of people that would be both a nightmare and a dream."

*I know we've always been taught to rely
Upon those in authority
But you never know until you try
How things just might be
If we came together so strongly
— "Walls Come Tumbling Down" (1985), Paul Weller*

Anarchism has a long history, particularly in Europe, and counts among its leading proponents the German Max Stirner (1806-1856), the Frenchman Pierre-Joseph "Property is Theft" Proudon (1809-1865), and the Russians Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876) and Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921). One of the best-known US anarchists was Emma Goldman, dubbed "Red Emma" by the press. The Russian-born Goldman, who moved to Rochester, New York, in 1886 at age 17, became a revolutionary after the 1887 hanging of four anarchists in Chicago. The men were charged and convicted of conspiracy after a bomb exploded at a rally in Haymarket Square. The Haymarket gathering was a response to the previous day, when police killed two workers at a march in support of the eight-hour workday. While there was no evidence that the anarchists had planted the Haymarket bomb, they were accused of inciting the mob violence that led to the death of a police officer, and executed. For many radicals, the Haymarket episode demonstrated the willingness of the state to use its coercive power on behalf of capital, at the expense of workers.

Goldman, a ceaseless organizer, agitator, and barnstorming orator committed to revolution, labor, anti-war activism, and advancing the status of women, spent a year in prison for inciting a riot. Her husband, Alexander Berkman, was also jailed, in his case for attempting to assassinate Henry Clay Frick, president of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Steel Corporation. In the 1908 essay "What I Believe," Goldman indicts government: "The State is necessary only to maintain or protect property and monopoly. It has proven efficient in that function only. As a promoter of individual liberty, human well-being and social harmony, which alone constitute real order, government stands condemned by all the great men of the world."

A more contemporary advocate of anarchism is Noam Chomsky. The MIT linguistics professor objects to the coercive nature of the US state, and in particular, its willingness to do the bidding of multinational companies. Chomsky notes that state power is deployed not only domestically, but also through international economic organizations such as the IMF and World Bank. He further argues that the US media is complicit in this repression, and is guilty of legitimizing an order that effectively disinforms and disempowers the American people.

Anarchism isn't so different from what Marx suggested in the Communist Manifesto. Not surprisingly, anarchism and communism are often linked, as exemplified by the North Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communist (NEFAC) an umbrella group with support in Canada and the US. Anarchists, however, part company with those communists, Marxists, and socialists who endorse, as did Lenin, the famous "dictatorship of the proletariat" in which a cadre of

revolutionaries assumes power on behalf of the masses during a transitional period, eventually giving way (in theory) to a more egalitarian arrangement. The experience in the Soviet Union and elsewhere has demonstrated that once in power, such an elite is likely to consolidate its authority, rather than allow for greater freedom.

Anarchism has often been linked with syndicalism, which is essentially the ownership and management of industry by the workers. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), better known as the "Wobblies," is an organization devoted to such a goal. The IWW favors industrial unions over specific trade unions, and ultimately sees salvation in the formation of "One Big Union" uniting all workers. After enjoying a heyday in the early 20th-century, however, the Wobblies are a pale imitation of their former selves, remaining more of an aspiration for idealistic elements of the labor movement. With the percentage of US union membership having steadily dropped in recent decades, it's clear that labor faces some broader challenges.

Anarchism, in my view, is an expression of the idea that the burden of proof is always on those who argue that authority and domination are necessary. They have to demonstrate, with powerful argument, that that conclusion is correct. If they cannot, then the institutions they defend should be considered illegitimate. How one should react to illegitimate authority depends on circumstances and conditions: there are no formulas.
— Noam Chomsky (1996)

Mike Araujo met me one afternoon at the Cable Car Cinema. He'd just finished a shift at Trinity Rep and looked the part of a Wobbly, wearing black overalls and a knit cap with a small brim. An autodidact, Araujo dropped out of high school; his interest in anarchism grew out of the progressive politics both in his home and the neighborhood in which he grew up. " 'Free Huey' stickers were on every fridge," he says of the time he spent as a boy in a close-knit family in the Bronx's Co-op City in the 1970s.

Most of the anarchists in Rhode Island seem to come from middle and upper-middle class backgrounds, but Araujo is proudly working class. Of Cape Verdean and Irish descent, he is the son of George Araujo, a Fox Point lightweight boxing contender in the late 1940s and early 1950s. These days, he lives with his wife on the West Side; his mother lives in the same building (his father died in 1997), and his sister two blocks away.

As a 15-year-old, Araujo says, a Providence police officer accused him of picking flowers from a downtown planter and then beat him, charging him with resisting arrest when he denied doing it. His complaint to the police department went nowhere, cementing Araujo's sense that the state can act with impunity, more or less, toward its citizens. His race and class consciousness, which he says are bound with his beliefs in anarchist ideals, were further stirred by seeing how his father, for many years a janitor at Brown University, was assigned dirty and dangerous work while white colleagues got easier shifts. When it comes to his job at Trinity, "I love building shit," Araujo says, but ultimately he advocates breaking down the compartmentalization of contemporary work. He sees salvation in organizing along class lines, with immigrant communities and African-Americans as keys in opposing the current order.

Although David Grenier and Chris Bull might not be as classically militant as Araujo — nor are they products of the working class — they do share some of Araujo's ideas about labor. Grenier grew up in Attleboro and spent much of his twenties pursuing a degree in anthropology and bouncing around from Salem, Massachusetts, to Ireland, Tucson, Pittsburgh, and Seattle before coming to Providence in 2002. A football fan and onetime Rush devotee, Grenier is married and lives in the Washington Park section of Providence. Grenier argues that the employer-employee relationship is essentially exploitative, and he has no desire to be on either side: "Saying, 'Well, if it was me, I'd be a nice boss,' misses the point entirely." When Grenier returned to Providence, he went into the photography business with a longtime friend, but only on the condition that it be a cooperative. Their business does principally wedding photography, a seemingly unlikely enterprise, although Grenier stresses, "I'm not anti-consumerist."

Chris Bull has a similar take on employment — he prefers to do it himself. Bull's business, Circle A Cycles, produces hand-made frames in a Carpenter Street mill building on Providence's West Side, and he sells them to hardcore biking enthusiasts and people in the anarchist community. Bull, 35, is from Carlisle, Massachusetts, a leafy suburb northwest of Boston. He would like Circle A to become a cooperative, but because of the learning curve involved, currently operates it as a sole proprietorship with several interns. Prior to coming to Providence four years ago, Bull lived in Worcester for eight years where he worked for a bike frame maker. Bull and his partner, SueEllen Kroll, recently bought a house in South Providence. Going into business for himself and living nearby has allowed him to bike nearly everywhere, something he believes is positive environmentally, but also vital to community involvement.

One issue that divides anarchists is voting. Some anarchists oppose the US political system, believing it features representatives who have little or no connection to the citizenry, except during infrequent elections, and who are beholden to contributors and powerful interests. This school of thought sees voting as an endorsement of the status quo. As Araujo says, "You're abdicating your independent power by voting." Grenier takes a more pragmatic approach. "I vote, because not voting isn't going to stop the system from existing," he says. Last year, Grenier was even moved at the behest of friends in Pittsburgh to campaign on behalf of the Democrats in Pennsylvania.

Bull says he, too, will vote, particularly at the local level, but maintains, "The most important thing about voting — or not — is not to mistake it for meaningful political action." The debate, in fact, may be a false one, says Bull: "We all need to be more politically engaged and active; voting, or not voting, can be one part of that, but there needs to be a lot more." Similarly, Alexander Zimmerman says he is galled when the "minions of 'democracy' pushers" cite the patriotic duty of voting. "It's this holier than thou because I voted attitude that makes me fume," he says. "They could have done nothing helpful for their neighborhood, workplace, or environment for years and suddenly they reek of righteousness because they handed over their power to a representative."

Anarchists view the reelection of George W. Bush, a depressing thing for liberals, quite differently. To start with, anarchists look upon the Bush Republicans as a particularly noxious version of the strong state, but not fundamentally different from the Democrats. Some anarchists think the Republicans' militarism, crackdown on civil liberties, and naked favoring of corporate

interests will call into question the entire basis of the state, offering ample organizing opportunities to radical critics. Zimmerman and some others fear, however, that opposition to Bush and company won't go nearly far enough, ultimately resulting just in a superficial switch in leadership.

As people and anarchists we all look forward and work toward an end to the tyranny of politicians, the everyday fascism of bosses, the irrational hierarchies of class, race and gender and the coercion of prisons, hell and poverty.
— *Love and Resistance collective, Providence, 2001.*

Voting aside, a greater dilemma for anarchists is the limited penetration of their ideals and practices into the larger mainstream of society. Do the actions and beliefs of a relatively few individuals and collectives make a difference, or are anarchists merely a fringe group with appeal to a narrow band of fellow travelers? This is a tricky question for anarchists, since they are not going to "run" candidates, buy TV spots, or sponsor focus groups to broaden their "base." Such actions are inimical to the DIY essence of anarchism.

Some anarchists, of course, reach out in more confrontational ways, taking part in demonstrations at meetings of such organizations as the WTO and World Bank. These protests, as well as peace rallies, social justice marches, and the phenomena of "culture jamming" — essentially subverting and craftily sabotaging advertising and mass media — attempt to promote change in the larger society. These disparate campaigns probably do little to promote anarchist sympathies in the general public, although they may cause some to question just what the IMF actually does, and if "liberation" is the correct word to describe the US invasion of Iraq.

For her part, SueEllen Kroll believes the word is getting out. "I see this idea of 'American individualism,' the premise of our capitalist, market-based economy, being called into question a lot now, even in the mainstream with corporate greed being exposed in scandals like Enron and WorldCom," she says. "Even my mom is bashing Halliburton, whereas a couple of years ago she wouldn't even know who they were."

Anarchists generally favor direct local action in effecting change. The hope is that grassroots efforts, which can be linked to progressive action on a regional, national, and even international basis, will create a domino effect. The old adage, "Think Globally, Act Locally," definitely applies. Local anarchists accept that the "revolution" will not be here tomorrow, or even the next day, but most have developed their own strategies for promoting their vision of a more just society. For Kroll, it comes down to organizing the Rhode Island Human Rights Film Festival, as a way of highlighting issues of global justice; she's also coordinating an anarchist book fair in connection with AS220's 20th birthday celebration in July. Chris Bull uses his passion for bicycles on behalf of Recycle-A-Bike, which works directly to increase bike riding and ownership, particularly among low-income youth. Mike Araujo, who is lying low these days after working on behalf of an anarchist community center in Austin, Texas, and serving as a Providence IWW delegate, supports the Anarchist Black Cross Network, which advocates for prisoners' rights. David Grenier lends his support to organizations, including Jobs for Justice and Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE), a Providence activist group whose mission is "to organize low-income families in communities of color to win economic, social and political

justice." DARE has also received wide support from a number of other Providence anarchists, including Kroll, Beatrice McGeoch, and Mimi Budnick.

Grenier says his time in Seattle taught him that organizing is hard work and not always very productive, unless significant time and resources are devoted to it. "I got frustrated with trying to build a revolution from scratch," he says. As such, Grenier says, even if he may not share all of an organization's aims, he will contribute his time if he thinks it is working toward positive goals: "That's why I end up doing stuff that might seem contradictory, like going to city council meetings."

Spreading the word remains difficult for those in the anarchist movement, as they often tend to be young, and it can be difficult for them to break out of the narrow circles in which they sometimes travel. Kroll laments the lack of "demographic diversity" among anarchists, something that Araujo finds particularly troubling. He suggests past battles are quickly forgotten, and that young anarchists would do well to read their history and try to work with older veterans of previous struggles. There is also the matter of the anarchist personality. While the anarchists interviewed for this story were uniformly thoughtful, anarchists are not always the most stable people. Kroll notes that alcoholism and addiction, which have done in many a collective, are completely contrary to cooperation and mutual aid. Anarchists are also often seekers and dreamers who move frequently; this transience can make organizing self-sustaining cooperative institutions difficult.

Anarchists assumed a higher national profile following the first major WTO protest in Seattle in 1999, but such demonstrations may have peaked in terms of their effectiveness. As previously reported in the Phoenix (see "Free speech and assembly on the line," News, May 14, 2004), law enforcement organizations have responded with increasingly sophisticated tactics to blunt the effectiveness of big demonstrations. As a result, there is real debate within the anarchist movement as to whether resources used in "protest-hopping" might be better spent working on local issues.

As it stands, change might come from a growing domestic crisis, financial and otherwise, that affects the middle class. "I see crisis as the breeding ground for radical political thought, like America in the '20s," says Kroll. "It's exciting to be approaching this crossroad, yet also terrifying hanging on waiting to see how bad things can get." Concerning the current administration and the Iraq war, Brown's Paul Buhle suggests that we are a critical moment. "Every crisis in US society since WWII has been due to global over-reach, Vietnam to Iran, and to some extent other places. Those crises were handled successfully by drowning them in blood. This one seems different and a bigger crisis than anything since Vietnam."

Ultimately, however, the biggest hurdle for anarchists to surmount may be the passivity of most people. It's not just how the state will bring troops out into the street to stifle dissent (although it will), but that a majority of the populace is content to enjoy its creature comforts, letting government, large institutions, and major corporations exercise their significant influence. Noting the importance of education in social change, librarian Alexander Zimmerman also suggests that people can break through ennui and alienation by taking a stand. "This begins by getting off our asses, turning off the television, and taking action," he says. Organizing, whether

focused on abolishing prisons or creating a community garden, is infectious. "People are radicalized by witnessing others passionately fighting for freedom and dignity in their lives," Zimmerman says.

Certainly, the isolation, alienation and atomization of people from one another is a great barrier to achieving anarchist goals. Asked how I could engage in self-governance and institution-building with my fellow Cranstonians, when I don't even know the people who live next door, Chris Bull says, "Talking to your neighbors is huge — that's the start of community."

Zimmerman had a similar response, suggesting that despite the great power of the Internet as a decentralized tool for communication and education, "What is it really if I can communicate with a comrade in South Africa, or use instant messaging to organize sudden protests, if I don't know the people in my neighborhood?"

Will we ever live in an anarchist society? It doesn't appear likely, even if the philosophy of anarchism will continue to propel small subcultures in Rhode Island and around the country. The popular image of bomb-tossing radicals notwithstanding, little blasts of anarchy are continually breaking out without necessarily being given that name. Community gardens, farmers' collectives, babysitting co-ops, some tenant associations, and cooperative networks of artists, musicians, and writers embody anarchist ideals. And resistance to big government and corporate power is not dead, as can be seen by the reaction to the Patriot Act, the war in Iraq, and the backlash against such companies as Wal-Mart, McDonald's, and Microsoft. An anarchist society? Probably not. But little anarchisms, here and there? Definitely.

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