



Anarchist Gatherings 1986-2017

Lesley Wood

York University
ljwood@yorku.ca

Abstract

Anarchists gather as well as protest, form organizations, projects and networks. These events build strategy, create shared identities, and create new and stronger networks between activists working on different issues in different places. In the 1980s, continent-wide anarchist gatherings emerged as spaces of counterculture and prefiguration when anarchist movements were weak. As the movement grew and the political landscape changed, the form, content and function of gatherings switched to a focus on strategy and organizing, and later to networking and exchange. Analyzing the programs and documents of anarchist gatherings in the US and Canada since 1986, this paper maps two main shifts. First, gatherings changed from being single, continent-wide events that shifted from city to city, to being multiple, local and (often) annual. Second, they moved from an emphasis on identity caucusing and skill building to one of networking and exchange. Influenced by the relational sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and Charles Tilly, the paper ties these changes to the social and political context, interactions in the social movement field (including waves of protest) and dynamics within anarchist movements. The paper concludes by arguing that such events offer insight into changing social movements, and activist strategy, and identity.

Keywords

Anarchism; prefiguration; events; social movements; abeyance; protest

Introduction

Birds of a feather, anarchists gather together. But they do so in different ways and for different reasons. Like other activists, anarchists gather in protest, and hold meetings to decide on strategy, policy and tactics. They do so at Congresses, conferences, federations, private and public meetings. In the 1980s in Canada and the US, when the movement was weaker, there began to be gatherings of a



different kind. These gatherings were not decision-making events, but were spaces for prefiguration and popular education, the open exchange of ideas, and publications, for skill building, for learning about various issues and campaigns, for socializing and for experimenting in and building new types of relationships. Since that time, anarchists have held gatherings, but as time has passed, they have taken different forms, played different roles, and had different types of content.

Social movement research has spent little time on such ‘movement building’ events, given as they fall outside of the visible protesting activity or the organizational questions associated with the field. But such events can be ‘eventful’ in that they can transform movement networks, identities and practices (Sewell, W. H., 1996; della Porta, D. 2008, Wood et al, 2017). These convergences bring different tendencies, generations, and local traditions together, and facilitate diffusion, solidarity, learning, strategizing and networking. Each of these processes can then affect the shape, trajectory and capacity of movements. This is perhaps, particularly the case for North American anarchism, with its strong dual emphases on prefiguration and protest. By mapping the dialectical relationship between the changing context; and the form, content and function of these gatherings, one can better understand the changes within North American anarchism. When the movement was weak or in abeyance, these events functioned as sources of meaning, ritual and relationship building. In periods of acceleration, they offered spaces for strategic thinking and capacity building (Taylor 1989). Understanding the dynamic relationship between event and movement has both strategic implications for activists and analytical implications for social movement researchers.

Activist praxis is never simply rational action, nor is it a mere reaction to material conditions. It is a result of tradition, learning, experimentation and struggle within constrained contexts. These are themselves shaped by relational ties. which can be understood as influential at three scales. The first is the influence of the larger social and political context (regime) on social relations and thus on the anarchist movement; second, the effect of relations of control, collaboration, and competition amongst movements in a particular time and place by the anarchist movement, and third, interactions and understandings within the anarchist movement affect its form, content and practices. How do we best understand these multiple layers of interaction and influence that surround social movements? My approach draws on Charles Tilly’s (2006) relationally rooted understanding of learned movement practice (repertoire) and Pierre Bourdieu’s explanations of social praxis as a result of interactions amongst habitus, field and capital. While the former seeks specifically to explain collective action, the latter allows us to understand both interpretation and action.

Tilly explains changes to social movements by looking both at the relationships between authorities and movements, and the relationships between ordinary people. He shows how the rise of the liberal democratic state, and capitalism, corresponded with changes in the form of social movements. This empirical approach helps to explain why and how protest changes across time and space. While it studies the patterns of protest, it can be adapted to examine the less visible work of movements as they meet, play and learn. To understand the logic behind changing movement practice, Tilly’s method can be complemented by that of Pierre Bourdieu (1992/2000). Bourdieu examines practice in order to understand how patterns in understanding and logic are shaped by various and ongoing struggles in the social world (field), which are themselves shaped by struggles around meaning and understanding (habitus). He shows us how action is a result of struggles between actors over different types of capital – including economic, social, political and cultural.

We know that the changes in social and political context shape the struggles amongst social movements in particular times and places. Each movement also learns from, competes with and collaborates with other movements (Mische 2002; Krinsky 2008), in what McCarthy and Zald (1977) described as the ‘social movement sector’. Nick Crossley (2003) uses Bourdieu’s framework to show how different actors operate and struggle within such a sector, or field of social movements. Following

this insight, in order to understand why and how anarchist gatherings have changed, one should look at changing anarchist understandings (*habitus*) and practices, and struggles within the broader field of movements. Activist *habitus* is “structured through their involvement in protest and activism; it is a structured structure. At the same time, however, it is this same *habitus* which leads the activist to continue in activism.” It is thus a structuring structure (*ibid*). There is constant interplay between *habitus* and the field. What is valued by activists in a particular time and place is a product of these dynamics – which are themselves shaped by waves of protest. We know that the upswing of waves of protest are associated with experimentation, and an opening up of identity and strategy (Tarrow 2011). The decline of waves of protest, in contrast, is associated with abeyance structures, when movements take fewer risks, and prioritize cultural reproduction, and practices that sustain the identity of existing members (Taylor 1989). Anarchist gatherings, as rich examples of the social life of movements, reflect such fluctuations.

Late Twentieth Century Anarchism

Anarchism became visible as a tendency within the crowded field of left-wing European contention in the late 19th century. At that time of accelerating capitalism and modernization, debates raged within socialist movements over the importance of forming political parties and gaining state power. Anarchists argued that seizing the state would lead the movement to reproduce oppressive, state-like dynamics. Anarchist ideas, practices and organizations spread internationally with European immigration, through migrating radicals, and through anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements. In Canada and the US, like elsewhere, they formed organizations, institutions and publications. The history of the movement is written elsewhere, but suffice it to say that over the past 200 years, anarchists have worked to emphasize the ‘means’ of struggle, attempting to prefigure and construct ethical relationships in their movement life, and as they confronted the state and other authorities. As the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or the Wobblies) explained they were, “forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old,” which was stated in the preamble to the 1908 IWW constitution (Kauffman 2016, pp. 57). In the late 1960s, the dual strategy of building and fighting remained central to anarchist strategy. That wave of protest declined in the 1970s and 1980s, when, like other movements anarchists began to prioritize countercultural, prefigurative institution building, partly as a rejection of authoritarian, sexist, racist and vanguardist approaches to organizing (Cornell 2016; Martin 2015).

Compared with the late 1960s and early 1970s, the 1980s was a period when movements were directed towards developing counterculture, internal relationships and alternative practices. Movements were fractured by critique and factionalism. Movements turned inwards. This characterization of periods where movement activity focuses on internal dynamics dovetails with Dixon’s (2014) observation that when anarchists worry that they may sacrifice their ‘core beliefs and values in order to win,’ they may put more energy to the development of counter-cultures and counter-institutions, than towards thinking about how to affect the larger world (Shotwell 2016, Dixon 2014).

L.A. Kauffman (2016, 64) argues that during this period, “Participating in actions organized with the prefigurative model was a way to build a new world in the moment, whatever concrete impact your action had”. The means were prioritized over the ends within anarchist movements (Dixon 2014, 41). While state power was clearly identified as the central problem, was not seen as the target of claims. Instead, the move is to reject its authority altogether, and build the capacity to replace it. While this approach builds on anarchism of the past, it was deeply influenced by “the values-based actions of radical pacifists of the 1950s, the direct action and participatory democracy of [the US civil rights movement organization] Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the confrontational

ethos of the New Left, and the transformative ideas and organizing practices of the women's and gay liberation movements.”

Movements in the 1980s placed a great deal of weight on the ethical importance of ‘living your politics’. As Uri Gordon (2008) notes, prefiguration is a core component of the political culture of anarchism. *Prefigurative activities* are often understood by organizers and participants as opportunities, as experiments in building different ways of doing things. These may include how decisions are made; how material resources are obtained; how people treat one another; how conflict is managed; what is discussed and how it is discussed. Francesca Polletta (2001, 196) writes about how anarcho-feminists in the anti-nuclear movement in the early 1980s taught other participants “an array of rituals that they used to build an internal movement culture.’ These included monthly gatherings where activists shared meals, partied together, sleeping in shared spaces, and expressing non-sexual affection and free form dancing. These activities, she argues, were intended to ‘build relationships that could reach across ideological differences.” As Crossley (2003) notes, in such radical, prefigurative movements, reflexivity becomes politicized and amplified, directing attention towards the means, as well as the ends. Anarchist discussions of process, decision-making, learning and relationship building became central to the movement.

These discussions were often tied to some form of popular education or free school. This had a long history. Early twentieth century efforts like the Francisco Ferrer Center built on the idea that schools established by church and state reproduced class relations and authoritarian values. Instead, anarchist ‘modern schools’ would stimulate curiosity and promote ‘libertarian and cooperative values that could help bring a new society into being (Cornell 2016, pp. 46). The emphasis on ‘free schools’, deschooling and alternative education accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s, with anarchist or anarchist inspired educational projects operating in dozens of cities and rural areas (Haworth 2012, Hern 2003, Suissa 2010, Springer et al., 2016). Most accounts of such experiments argue that they are not simply about ‘alternatives’ but are intended to allow the building of strong people, and movements that can counter state power ethically and sustainably (Polletta 2002, Dixon 2014; Graeber 2010). This logic shaped the emergence of anarchist gatherings in the 1980s.¹

Anarchist Gatherings

Anarchists had gathered before the 1980s. The tradition had emerged partly from a formal meeting. The Congress of the First International of the International Working Man’s Association ended in a split between the “Collectivists” with Mikhail Bakunin and James Guillaume, and the Communists with Karl Marx. The collectivists or anarchists then held a Congress in Switzerland in 1872, attended by delegates from Italy, Spain, Belgium, the United States, France and Switzerland (Graham 2015, The Collective 2016). Anarcho-communist Congresses occurred regularly until 1877. Most of the gatherings of anarchists since that time, including the anarcho-syndicalist International Workers Association (1922-), the Anarchist International Conference (1958-); the International of Anarchist Federations (1968-) and most recently the European Anarkismo Coordination (2010-) are meetings where delegates make decisions around on positions, campaigns and alliances. These events are usually held in Europe, with some Canadian and US participation. Such events attract particular tendencies within anarchism. Until the 1980s, there were few multi-tendency anarchist events. According to Andy Cornell’s (2011b) research on 20th century anarchism, other than some educational workshops and

¹ During the 1980s, some anarchists from the 1960s movements also professionalized and institutionalized, with some developing organizations and some organizing large, permitted demonstrations against nuclear war, apartheid in South Africa, for the environment, lesbian and gay rights, and women’s rights.

summer camps, the closest thing to an anarchist gathering was a couple of days at intentional communities associated with anarchist education. The first occurred in Stelton Colony, New Jersey in the mid-1920s, and the second one at the Mohegon colony in the 1930s. There was also a gathering in Black River Falls Wisconsin in September 1969, when anarchists who had been involved in the Students for a Democratic Society attempted to create a nation-wide anarchist organization. However, the process faltered, as Louise Crowley of Madison complained, “The essential process of getting acquainted of beginning to understand each others’ varied emphases and styles of revolutionary work, consumed nearly all the time allowed us” (Cornell 2011b, pp. 273).

In 1980, the First International Symposium on Anarchism was held at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. This was not an anarchist event, funded by a range of actors including the German and French governments, the college, and the National Foundation of the Arts and Humanities was spearheaded by Lewis and Clark professor Pietro Ferrua. The organizing body included those on and off campus, many of whom were apparently “not avowed anarchists, although clearly either sympathetic to, or interested in anarchism” (Rd 1980). The most popular panel featured science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin, and writers Barbara Garson and Barbara Drake, and attracted 400-500 mostly local attendees. Other popular sessions included a roundtable on anarchism and feminism, and one on anarchism and religion. The conference report cited here notes that some participants were not ‘attentive and respectful listeners.’ There was also a full program of film, poetry, dance and music, attracting 80-100 participants from outside Portland, including some from Europe and Mexico (ibid).

Anarchists did not organize any sort of multi-tendency, national or continental gatherings in the US or Canada until 1986, the 100th anniversary of the Haymarket Affair of Chicago. The events of Haymarket had been a high point of 19th century anarchism, when anarchists organized thousands for the eight hour work day, and worker power, faced police brutality that killed workers and were blamed for an explosion that killed seven police officers and at least four civilians. Eight anarchists were convicted of conspiracy, and four were hanged. The centenary commemoration of the events inspired an anarchist gathering which was large and inclusive, combining skill building workshops, information sharing sessions on various campaigns, networking activities, a protest, cultural events, and the exchange of books, art and other materials. This model of a ‘continental gathering’ occurred again in 1987, 1988 and 1989.

Chicago was again the site where the second set of gatherings began in 1996. “Active Resistance” coincided with, and challenged the Democratic National Convention (DNC). Unlike the earlier gatherings, this event was structured to facilitate the development of three strategic areas - community organizing, alternative economic institutions, and building revolutionary movements. This model was replicated in 1998 in Toronto.

The same year as Active Resistance emerged, so too did a third model – the Anarchist Book Fair. Modelled on anarchist book fairs in the UK (occurring since 1983); the 1996 Bay Area Book Fair was a site for the distribution and exchange of anarchist publications, alongside a small number of workshops, panels and cultural events. Since that time, book fairs have been held in 60 cities internationally – at least 14 cities in Canada, and 16 cities in the US. The number of annual book fairs peaked around 2010, and in 2017 there were four in Canada, and nine in the US.

These three forms of gathering were not the only type. In 2003, Detroit hosted a continental gathering of Anarchist People of Color. There are also campaign-related events, the anarchist dominated Earth First! Rendez-vous’, and anarchist organized direct action training weekends. In 1997, social ecologist-influenced anarchist intellectuals began the annual scholarly event “Renewing the Anarchist Tradition” in Vermont. These stopped in 2007, with the conferences of the North American Anarchist Studies Network (NAASN) becoming a space for more theoretical discussion. While the

NAASN events are continental, and annual, each of these events is narrower in focus and participation than the three forms examined here.

The programs of the gatherings, Active Resistance, and the Bookfairs reflect the times and places of their emergence. Each was shaped by struggles in the broader social and political fields, the social movement field and struggles within the anarchist movement. When anarchist gatherings emerged in the 1980s, the movements were in abeyance, and they prioritized the building of identity, community, culture and networks. As anarchism grew and gained influence on the broader left, the gatherings were places for strategic development, and most recently, as movements became more networked, both on and offline, the gatherings have become one of many places to coalesce, and exchange and promote particular ideas and resources.

1986

In 1986, the Cold War between the capitalist west and the socialist eastern blocs rumbled on. Neoliberal politicians slashed and burned the welfare state. Ronald Reagan promoted Star Wars missile defense systems, the Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney pushed free trade agreements and Margaret Thatcher whipped up nationalist fervour in the Falklands. Left wing movements were riven by fierce internecine debates. In this context, many anarchists focused on subcultural ‘scenes’ of punk rock, alternative media, free schools, communal living and social experimentation than they were actively organizing campaigns around particular targets. Nonetheless, when authorities in Chicago and socialist and communist activists formed the Haymarket Centennial Committee and announced their plans to commemorate the events of Haymarket, anarchists from *Impossible Books* and various others called a meeting. They were determined to organize an anarchist event to mark the date (Anarchist History nerd brigade 1989).

The reflections of participants are compiled in *Haymarket Remembered: An Anarchist Convention*. One report by a member of the IWW illustrates the competing goals, identities, forms and strategies considered for the event.

It was a disjointed meeting that suffered badly from its lack of organization--a problem that was to continue, albeit not in quite so extreme a fashion--and structure. Chicago anarchists wanted a mass anarchist manifestation--where demonstrations would show that the movement was still alive, and where there would be many opportunities for folks to get together and talk/socialize. Fifth Estate argued for an orgiastic celebration of life--I was never quite sure what they meant, but it seemed to revolve around guerrilla street theater. Some people argued for an anarchist conference. A few of us Wobs were present, and we argued for a series of events including demonstrations, cultural events, etc. and a Revolutionary Labor Conference drawing in unions and workers' groups from around the world that stand in the tradition of Haymarket to discuss ways of rekindling a mass revolutionary labor movement including fighting for the four hour day.

Eventually, the meeting wound down without any real consensus, except that people generally supported the concept of doing something in Chicago to mark the Haymarket centennial, and that *Impossible Books* was to coordinate discussions. It was also clear that most people found the labor conference, the idea of shorter hours, and the working class in general quite boring, but that we Wobs were going to try to pursue it independently (ibid).

What is also striking in these reflections is the amount of attention paid to the question about *who* would be allowed to participate in the organizing of the event. These debates show how participants differentiated between ‘anarchists’ vs. ‘others’. These expressions of identity include both a story of strategy, (How ‘we’ do things), and of ethics (who is an ethical anti-authoritarian, and who is

not) (Polletta 1998; Selbin 2010). An excerpt from the Haymarket '86 Bulletin: #1 November 1985 Conference Summary reads;

Two proposals were then submitted for discussion. The Atlanta collective brought a resolution stating that although the attendance at the gathering should be left open to all, the planning and organization would be done by anarchists. It expressed their concern that committed Marxist-Leninists, Maoists, Trots, Stalinists, and other authoritarian organizations not be allowed to take control of the events. This resolution specifically named the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), and the discussion centered on peoples' negative experiences with this organization and what appears to be one of their national "secular" front groups, No Business As Usual (NBAU). There was unanimous agreement that all planning and organization be restricted specifically to anarchists, while attendance be left open to all.

In the end, the event attracted 300-500 people from 28 different collectives in Canada and the US (Johnson and Worthington 1986). Participants were largely young and overwhelmingly white (personal communication with participant). In addition to cultural events, a literature table and a protest, there were a dozen or so workshops. The topics largely focused on the prefigurative dimensions of the movement, including technology, punk rock, gender politics, raising children, pornography, ecology, and one entitled "Building the anarchist movement." One participant named Kathy described her experience:

There were probably in the neighborhood of 300 or so anarchists there, although the total number could be higher, as people were constantly coming and going. It was a pretty diverse group in age, background and expectations. There were many young people, in their late teens and early 20s, also many in their late 20s, 30s and 40s, and a few who were older. Almost everyone was an activist in their community. ... the vast majority were experienced anarchist activists coming out of the anti-nuclear, anti-intervention, feminist, anti-apartheid, peacepunk and other contemporary movements. And most had a clear understanding of why they call themselves anarchists... (Anarchist history nerd brigade 1989)

The Chicago Tribune (May 3, 1986) described it as "the most significant anarchist event held in America in years." The article listed "independent anarchists, collective anarchists, Christian anarchists, pagan anarchists, communist anarchists, anarcho-feminists and even capitalist anarchists", as participating in four days of activities and in the concluding protest (Johnson and Worthington 1986). There were no explicit collective decisions made about the future of the movement, but it established a model that combined DIY skill training, with information sharing on campaigns and issues, and discussions of movement dynamics. The event strengthened ties within a network of anarchists, established a newsletter and activists in these networks organized a series of similar and ever-larger subsequent gatherings in Minneapolis (1987) with 250, Toronto (1988) with 800, and San Francisco (1989) with 1500 (Crass 2013, 33).

By the time of the next gathering in Minneapolis, an infrastructure of communication had developed. These gatherings built networks and allowed for the sharing of experience (Day, nd). Many activists also saw these gatherings as providing transformative spaces of unstructured experimentation. This ideal is reflected in the widely read piece by Peter Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakim Bey) called –

“Temporary Autonomous Zones”². In 1991 he wrote about the power of “creating temporary spaces that elude formal structures of control...as a way to ‘release one’s mind from the controlling mechanisms that have been imposed upon it.’” These events were needed, it is understood, in order to inspire the non-hierarchical social relationships of a different world. This logic celebrates autonomous, ‘free’ and spontaneous activity (differentiating itself from vanguardist approaches). The Toronto Survival Gathering program (1988) reads, “We hope that there will be as much going on that hasn’t been planned as what has been. We all have the responsibility to ourselves and others to make this a truly inspiring and exciting place to be.” One European observer of that event noted with surprise; ‘Instead of conference tables and microphones there was an informal structure of workshops which enabled comrades, even in such great number, to find a dimension in which they could participate directly (Weir 1988).’ Indeed at the 1988 gathering, there were 63 workshops over two days on subjects from technology to feminism to national liberation and the Middle East. Weir notes that ‘few could be under the illusion that something specific could come from the workshops themselves’. While she marveled at the enthusiastic participation, and level of activity she was critical of what she saw as “a lack of a revolutionary projectuality, an analysis and methodology.”

As a result of these events, and the changing context, the anarchist movement in the US and Canada was gaining strength. As it travelled, and snowballed in size, the model from Chicago evolved, shaped by the decisions of organizers, the local contexts, and changes in the broader movement and society. Despite a lack of ‘revolutionary projectuality’, each of these events spawned new projects and subsequent events – keeping the emphasis on “building the new in the shell of the old.” Criticisms of the events as reproducing sexist and racist dynamics led organizers to be more intentional about the program for the 1989 gathering in San Francisco. For that event, two full days would be committed to workshops on anti-sexism, and anti-racism. The rest of the week would be shared between the themes of anarchy/theory, current events, environment/civilization, ourselves, skills, and workers struggles.

The largest of the gatherings, the *Without Borders Conference and Festival* was held for five days in July 1989 in San Francisco. Its program explained that the past few gatherings had had a goal of ‘establishing an ongoing network of North American anarchists’. It continued ‘the work and play of weaving a North American network/movement has continued.’ While there was increasing attention paid to organizing campaigns, the definition of anarchism emphasizes prefiguration. It reads,

“Anarchism, the belief and practice that people are capable of directing and living their lives without the imposition of external authority, is one of the greatest visions of humanity. With its emphasis on people acting responsibly, practicing individual and collective direct action, fighting injustice, and creating a freer society, it shines the brightest light in the tunnel of contemporary daily life, which constantly threatens to entomb the world. Vive l’anarchie!’ (Without Borders Guidebook 1989)

That program included 113 workshops, 16 network meetings, 9 event planning sessions, plus opportunities for “spontaneous events” (ibid). There were a large and similar numbers of identity caucuses (anarchist Christians, people of colour anarchists, disabled anarchists, queer anarchists), and DIY skill building workshops (street theatre, movement security, squatting, etc). Each day began with a general assembly, to meet and share ideas and to eat brunch. The event ended with an attempted squat action in Berkeley and many arrests. While many participants appreciated the scale of the event, the

² Lamborn Wilson has been roundly criticized for his celebration of adult-child sexual relationships. For more information see <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/robert-p-helms-leaving-out-the-ugly-part-on-hakim-bey>

organizers ended up in debt and exhausted. The subsequent event planned for Mexico City was cancelled.

The changes to the gathering were part of an accelerating and expanding anarchist movement. By 1990, the Soviet Union had collapsed, weakening the influence of many socialist and communist organizations on the left. Neoliberalism was on the rise, and government funding was cut to social democratic organizations and social programs. Military conflicts in Latin America spiralled up, HIV-AIDS was wreaking havoc and the Gulf War had begun. There was an uncertainty about what might happen at ‘the end of history.’ Anarchists played key roles in a range of struggles. Four years of annual gatherings had built denser ties amongst movements in different cities. The movement was relatively more coherent and influential. This corresponded with the development of many projects – one of the most significant one being the Love and Rage Network, and its associated publication – both of which emerged out of the 1989 gathering. This continental anarchist network was a vibrant formation that brought together various collectives and projects, including folks who had been part of various Trotskyist, and Leninist formations, who now identified as libertarian socialists and anarchists interested in coordinating and formally and organizing resistance. In 1991 it formalized as a network, and then in 1993, became a narrower but more defined Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation which worked to develop a shared political approach on anti-colonialism, race, feminism, and class (Crass 2013). This change was critiqued as centralizing and undemocratic and some anarchist collectives in Canada and the US abandoned the new formation.

In addition to the influences from other leftist traditions, learning was occurring within various direct action campaigns. In 1990 anarchists were involved in campaigns like Redwood Summer, which aimed to protect old growth forests in the Pacific Northwest, and where labour activists like Judy Bari strengthened the relationship between loggers and environmentalists by incorporating discussions of class and labour organizing techniques. Anarchists were also involved in supporting the Kanasetake/Oka Mohawk uprising of 1990, were involved in Anti-Racist Action groups, and mobilizing in support of the indigenous protests against 500 years of settler colonialism in 1992. Shaped by these anti-colonial and anti-racist mobilizations, there were accelerating discussions on the whiteness of the anarchist movement and the need to work with Black, Palestinian, indigenous and other nationalist movements, while fighting the state and capitalism. At the same time, anarchists were using disruptive and creative protest tactics with ACT UP and Queer Nation, doing ‘zaps’ that disrupted key sites of power, and challenging norms around gender and sexuality (Gould 2000, Kinsman 1987/1995, Shephard 2009). Then in 1994, the EZLN articulated a shared struggle of ‘one no, many yeses’ and it spread amongst these activists through the nascent Internet and through the Network of Anarchist Collectives, which linked infoshops, or radical spaces in different cities, including Chicago’s A-Zone (Iwasa 2015). That same year, anarchists from these spaces met in Antioch, and then in Detroit at a “Counter-Institutions” conference, and established the Network of Anarchist Collectives, and a newspaper (Dis)connection (Infoshop 2017). This network and the Chicago infoshop A-Zone, began discussions about a hosting different type of anarchist gathering, Active Resistance.

1996 and 1998 - Active Resistance

Emerging in a period of movement growth, Active Resistance was not intended to be only an open space for dialogue and skill building, but a place to “integrate diverse agendas”, and “create revolutionary infrastructure through mutual aid, cooperation and free association, as well as new forms of economic, political, cultural and interpersonal relations (Active Resistance program 1996).” While prefigurative experiments remained central, evaluating strategies for confronting authorities and the broader world were an increasing part of the agenda.

The distinctive element of the Active Resistance model was the ‘core’. Organizers asked all 750 participants commit themselves to one of four strategic “cores” each afternoon of the conference. These were: Cooperatives, collectives and alternative economics; Community organizing; Building Revolutionary Movements: Education and Development. A fourth core developed at the conference on the theme of Art and Revolution. The initial three cores or specializations were identified by the Network of Anarchist Collectives and organized in advance, with detailed plans on how to build towards a shared movement strategy. The introduction to the Community Organizing Core explains that it ‘is designed for anarchists and other anti-authoritarians to use organizing skills that can be used in a geographic or affinity-based community.’ Indeed, while some of the facilitators were from anarchist infoshops and free schools, others are affiliated with ACT-UP, and various non-anarchist tenant organizations. There is also explicit attention to race – with two workshops explicitly confronting white privilege in the anarchist scene, and a talk about race and anarchism by Lorenzo Komboa-Ervin, an anarchist, and former Black Panther. While Active Resistance was not a decision-making space, it is a clear shift away from subculture and prefiguration towards a shared strategy and an orientation toward movement building. Participant David Solnit, reflected “Contrasted with past continental anarchist gatherings—Toronto in 1988 and San Francisco the following year—our movement has become much more serious, experienced, relevant, clearheaded and widespread. AR planted the seeds and showed us our potential, but only energetic, effective organizing and careful community building where we live will nurture these seeds into thriving communities and a blossoming mass movement (Solnit 1996).” There was a plan to compile a written record of the discussions of the conference, and construct a ‘collective vision and direction for our movement.’ It was intended to ‘articulate the unspoken consensus of Active Resistance and our movement.’ However, whether due to police raids of the organizing spaces, exhaustion or internal dynamics, no such document was ever created.

There was also a daily free school in the late afternoon, including workshops like self-defence, bike messengering, natural building and construction techniques. Each morning was dedicated to sessions on issue-based organizing and activism – structured to initiate discussion in four areas – education, action, proposed campaigns/future outlook and function within a movement (ibid). The morning also had space for identity caucuses, although there was far less emphasis on this task than at the earlier set of conferences.

The event was influential. It elevated the work of various radical artist-activists into a continental Art and Revolution network, and inspired the formation of the Indymedia network – both institutions that provided key infrastructure for the global justice movement. In 1998 a group of Toronto activists, (including this author) attempted to replicate Active Resistance. The event was striking in its ‘small a’ anarchism. David Graeber (2010) describes this “As a form of practice, an ethical system that rejects the seizure of state power, and, to the extent possible, any appeal to or entanglement in institutions of state power, and that relies instead on classical anarchist principles of self-organization, voluntary association, direct action, and mutual aid” (Graeber 2010). The centrality of a “form of practice”, with an ethical system as the center of an ideology, rather than a particular issue, campaign or identity helps to explain why the mission statement of Toronto’s Active Resistance downplays anarchism. It describing the event as “A revolutionary left, anti-capitalist gathering and convention uniting theory with practice,” and continues by explaining how the gathering will “provide a forum for community and workplace organizers to discuss strategy, and for the exchange of ideas and knowledge.” It continues, “AR will provide space and time for workshops, general assembly, and strategy sessions to build revolutionary movements. AR is working for the creation of autonomous spaces. AR is an anarchist event using anti-authoritarian and democratic process.”

The development of the mission statement involved fierce debates about the use of the term anarchism. There was a reluctance to use the term, due in part to the associations of what ‘anarchist’ identity signalled. In the end, the term was included as a goal and a process.

AR will work to transform society and ourselves by confronting capitalism, imperialism, colonization, patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, state-violence, and all forms of domination and exploitation by being critical of all systems, institutions, and technologies; based on tactics of resistance and direct action.

AR is working towards an anarchist society which is anti-authoritarian and self-governed, in which people organize themselves from the bottom up on an egalitarian basis; decisions made by those effected by them [sic]; direct democratic control of workplaces, schools, neighbourhoods, towns, and bioregions, with coordination between different groups as needed; a world where people have power over their own lives, bodies and sexuality, where we cherish and live in balance with the earth; where we work and live together cooperatively to nourish community, autonomy and mutual aid (Active Resistance 1998).

Six hundred people attended the conference from across Canada and the US. The format imitated Chicago in its use of cores, a free school, music, art plenary sessions and a protest. At a moment of increasing online connection, like the other gatherings, the event led to stronger connections amongst activists in the US and Canada, including those who would be influential in shaping the repertoire and strategy of the global justice movement, anti-racist and indigenous sovereignty movements (Dixon 2014; Crass 2013).

Anarchist Book Fairs 1996 and beyond

The first anarchist book fair in North America also emerged in 1996. Modelled on the book fairs that had occurred in the UK since 1981, the Bay Area Anarchist Book Fair was organized by the community surrounding the Bound Together Anarchist Bookstore to celebrate its 20th anniversary. Some of the organizers had worked on the 1989 gathering, and hoped for something more manageable. Placing books and other publications at the center of the event, approximately 40 anarchist, Situationist, and assorted lefty book and magazine publishers participated. There was also a small selection of panels but no workshops. Speakers included sex-positive educator, author and radical feminist Susie Bright, Jello Biafra from the Dead Kennedys, and cutting-edge lesbian author Kathy Acker (Bay Area Book Fair History). In 2000, the model spread to Montreal. Since then, there have been anarchist book fairs in 60 cities, including 14 in Canada and at least 16 in the US. There are book fairs in 22 countries in Europe. Although primarily local, the largest book fairs do attract participation from around the region. Like the other gatherings, book fairs aim to promote anarchist ideas, dialogue and networking. The ‘inclusive space’ idea is central to the model, and anarchism is central, but does not exclude other ‘traditions’. As the 2017 Bay Area Book Fair website explains:

The Bay Area Anarchist Book Fair is an annual event that brings together people interested and engaged in radical work to connect, learn, and discuss through books and information tables, workshops, panel discussions, skillshares, films, and more! We seek to create an inclusive space to introduce new folks to anarchism, foster a productive dialogue between various political traditions as well as anarchists from different milieus, and create an opportunity to dissect our movements’ strengths, weaknesses, strategies, and tactics (Bay Area Book Fair 2017).

The 2017 Victoria Book Fair cribs from this statement, but makes it even more explicit arguing “The Bookfair is for anarchists and non-anarchists [...]. We seek to challenge colonial attitudes,

introduce anarchism to the public, foster dialogue between various political traditions, and create radical, inclusive, anti-oppressive spaces.” Likewise, a FAQ page for the 2017 Los Angeles Book Fair answers the question: Do I have to be an anarchist to attend?

No! We encourage everyone to explore anti-authoritarian ideas and models for organizing. Since we are not a top down movement or political party, our tactics, ideas and avenues for social change vary. We encourage everyone to engage locally in their neighborhoods, network with like-minded organizers, develop new strategies, learn new techniques in our common struggle, and maintain autonomy and flexibility wherever needed. Indeed, it is our flexibility in action that gives us collective power, especially when we network together.

Although the goal of book fairs do seek to provide ‘space for the anarchist community to gather, reflect, and build tools to move forward in the making of a really free world’, they aren’t attempting to build a pure anarchist society within the book fair (NYC Anarchist Book Fair, 2017). Instead, there is a more formal, articulated, shared set of principles by organizers that shape practice and decision-making. The Montreal book fair collective explains:

The Anarchist Book Fair collective affirms and promotes values of mutual aid, direct democracy, anti-authoritarianism, autonomy and solidarity. We reiterate our opposition to capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, racism, colonialism, statism and all other forms of oppression; we will not accept anyone to participate in the Anarchist Book fair that perpetuates or promotes these attitudes (Montreal Anarchist Book Fair 2017).

The tension between inclusive, open space and “affirming and promoting” anarchist values is different to that taken by the organizers of the events in the 1980s. Because the book fairs often recur, they are often organized by a relatively consistent collective, often with a set of regular ‘tablers’ like AK Press, Crimethinc, and Just Seeds. Gradually, they establish local traditions that build the identity of the event. Particular strategic questions may be returned to year after year in ways that are both locally grounded and globally networked.

Analysis

Anarchist gatherings share some features. They help to share information and to build ties amongst activists. There are almost always vegan muffins and mediocre (but fair trade) coffee. Each gathering helps to build skills, and share identities and strategies. Each also allows for activists to learn and construct intellectual, physical and emotional knowledge outside of the dominant institutions. As Portwood-Stacer (2013) notes, such events are “key occasions for performing the ethos of anarchist movement culture.” However, the form, content, temporality and spatiality of these events vary. Often there is some sort of social and cultural event, a protest; sometimes there are workshops and some sort of publication exchange or sales. These different events shape contention by spreading tactics, frames, strategy and culture through the publications distributed, and the workshops organized. At events, certain organizations, ideas, images and identities gain and lose symbolic and cultural capital. The capacity of the movement can build or decline. Gatherings matter. They inspire subsequent publications, networks, institutions and campaigns, and shape movement strategies and practices long after the events themselves are finished. This is not to say they are all sweetness and light. These events also result in arrests, assaults, sectarianism, and exclusion.

Like contentious repertoires, today’s gatherings reflect today’s social and political context, the broader movement, and the state of anarchism. Since the anarchist gatherings of the 1980s, they have varied spatially, temporally, and in terms of content and form:

1. From a single, annual continental gathering to multiple, annual local events.
2. From identity caucuses and free schools to networking, exchange and strategy

Both shifts affect the function of the gatherings. I'll discuss them one at a time.

By 1990, four years of annual continental gatherings helped to create new networks, and publications. The anarchist movement expanded as the Berlin Wall fell. The end of the continental gatherings saw a move towards active engagement "Beyond Borders." Anarchists became increasingly networked, communicating within and beyond pre-existing spatial and political boundaries. By 1996, the increasing use of digital technologies facilitated this move to networked movements. As Juris (2004) notes, early 21st century movements were influenced by this anarchist 'cultural logic of networking.' Although the digital world gained power, anarchists still sought physical gatherings.

The earlier continental gatherings provided an opportunity for experimentation. In contrast, local book fairs instead provided opportunities to facilitate exchange amongst different types of activists in a region, while promoting the ideas and practices of anarchism. This more modest and local focus made these events more accessible to local activists, with a more inclusive emphasis that can facilitate local cross-movement organizing.

In addition to changes in form and function, the content of gatherings has changed. Book fairs have far fewer workshops, than the earlier models of gathering. Also, the type of workshops has changed. Since the 1980s, organizers are less likely to prioritize 'identity caucuses' or skill building workshops. In book fairs, identity caucuses largely disappeared. Instead, identity is discussed as intersectional and tied to questions of organizing strategy. The book fairs do not assume the possibility of a unified strategy, but instead offer discussions and reflection on a range of approaches and examples. If we look at the recent program (2017) at the three largest and most regular Book Fairs – the Bay Area, New York City and Montreal, we see programs that combine skill building, information sharing, and reflections on strategy. These discussions hear details about and consider the strategic implications of celebrated international cases (Rojava and Chile in 2017), sometimes include general discussions about strategy (organizing, institution building, media), and sometimes feature strategic discussions for particular campaigns (racist police violence, migrant justice). These discussions are rooted in local histories, and fields. Such discussions of anarchist strategy; shape local anarchist identity. This focus in the content of gatherings has changed the function of the events, away from the building of a counterculture, and away from a shared organizing project to a more transitory space for networking and exchange.

Explaining changes

In the 1980s, a Cold War world with neoliberalism on the rise created the context for the anti-nuclear movement, feminism, the New Left, Black power, communist, socialist, punk rock, indigenous sovereignty and other movements, all of which influenced the form and content of anarchist events. Some of these influences were collaborative, others were antagonistic. In the 1990s, changes in the form, content and function of anarchist gatherings are tied to broader changes in the social and political life. These changes created opportunities for anarchist movements, creating shared targets at a time where old models seemed bankrupt. The internet facilitated communication and networked forms of organization, making it easier for some previously marginalized voices and strategies to be heard. These macro-social changes shifted the ground on which anarchist movements stood and increased their capacity. In the 1990s, as the movement gained capacity, there were more and different collaborations between anarchists and various socialist activists, queer organizers, women of colour feminists, animal rights, anti-racists, environmentalists, and anti-prison activists. This shaped anarchist

participation in and on the global justice movement. The horizontalist networks that emerged during this time Occupy, immigrant justice, disability justice, queer, anti-racist and in anti-fascist organizing.

Conclusion

While social movement gatherings, *in general*, allow for networking, material exchange, information sharing and identity building; the scale, form and content of a gathering has implications. While gatherings like the 1989 Without Borders conference in San Francisco brought large numbers of people together to learn and experiment, the diversity and scale made it difficult to build coherence around strategy. Active Resistance events worked to develop a shared movement strategy, but the changing context and logistical difficulties made massive gatherings resource intensive, unwieldy, and possibly unnecessary. In the new networked context, shaped in part by online networks, book fairs have been able to support the horizontal forms of organization, increasing (albeit short term) mobilization and be more locally grounded. However the wave of protest that initiated the book fairs, has declined. So too, have the number of book fairs. There appears to be uncertainty about the way forward.

At a time when the anarchist movements that build and are built by gatherings, have difficulty sustaining powerful movements on the scale that we need, it is useful to reflect on the utility of anarchist gatherings for supporting movement goals. No single form offers the recipe for success. Like tactical fetishism, there can also be a ritualistic adherence to the forms of gatherings. Book fairs offer a deepened set of local relationships, and their consistent organizing team and location can allow for reflection and intensification of strategy, but like any form, they can also become routinized and institutionalized in ways that can reproduce exclusions, blind spots and hierarchies. While they counter the criticism of being disconnected from day to day organizing, the ties to those in other locations may be unnecessarily weak. Reflecting on the changing form, function and content of these gatherings, may offer strategic insight for activists seeking to strengthen movements.

Social movement researchers benefit by considering the form, content and function of non-contentious movement events. These events are rich with meaning making, experimentation, network forming and identity construction. In this way, to understand the strategy, identity and practices of the global justice movement in North America, Active Resistance might be examined. To understand the shape of, and tactics of the movement against the imprisonment of Leonard Peltier or Mumia Abu Jamal, an analysis of the collaborations between the anti-racists, animal rights activists and prison abolitionists at the anarchist gatherings of the 1980s would be useful. To understand the shape, structure and ideology of recent anti-fascist and anti-racist mobilizations, book fairs might offer clues. Although social movement theory tends to neglect these spaces, thinking of them as cultural ephemera, they are spaces that underlie relational processes of diffusion, solidarity, strategizing, movement learning and networks that cannot easily be understood otherwise.

The desire to 'build a new world in the shell of the old' through physical convergence remains a key component of anarchist movements. But even the perfect utopian experiment cannot interrupt systems of oppression. In a period of love mobilization, the gatherings of the 1980s built connections and a prefigurative subculture. As the movement accelerated and expanded, that subculture was called into question by new participants. Anarchist activists increasingly built another world both inside the gatherings, and outside in the streets, institutions and networks. Today, there are anarchist book fairs in many cities. These spaces are powerful, but not perfect. In her recent book *Against Purity – Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, Alexis Shotwell (2016) warns that the obsession with finding pure spaces and practices – spaces or perfect events, will get activists into trouble. Reflexivity about form, content and function of gatherings will help build in strategic ways. To understand the power of movements, including anarchist movements, we need to think about movements and contexts in

dialogue. The strategy, identity and practice of movements are products of history, and producers of the future. Gatherings of activists are gatherings of past relations, as these relations build a new world.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Graeme Bacque, Irina Ceric, Andy Cornell, Chris Day, A. Iwasa, Eryk Martin, Mac Scott, Simon Springer, Suzy Subway, Kevin Thomas and all the others who shared their memories and archives.

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