
BOOK REVIEW

**ALLAN ANTLIFF (Editor), *Only a Beginning:
An Anarchist Anthology*. Vancouver:
Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004, 406 pp, \$29.95.**

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Only A Beginning looks like an 'art book', and in a certain sense that's what it is. But it's an *anarchist* art book, or more precisely, an anarchist art *history* book, and that makes all the difference in the world. By focusing on events and issues relevant to the Canadian anarchist scene from 1976 to 2004, it provides an entrance into a world, or a world of worlds, that is almost completely absent from both the mass media and academic journals.

The History section, which kicks off the collection, is in essence a retrospective of selected anarchist publications, with an emphasis on anti-civilizationist journals written in English and produced in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal during the 1980s. There is a bilingual entry for Montreal's *Démanarchie* and, overall, enough diversity of time and place to give the reader a strong sense of what Canadian anarchist publishers have been up to.

Leafing through stacks of old newspapers is always intriguing, and with the help of excellent design and production values, *Only A Beginning* definitely gives one the sense of discovering a hidden archive. But what really made the first section a highlight of the book, for me, was hearing the voices of the people who were involved in the production process itself. Resisting the urge to adopt a magisterial position outside of and above the material, Antliff allows anarchist activists to represent and speak for themselves. This

not only helps to situate the texts and images in their historical contexts, and thereby greatly increases their power and interest, but it shows us how an *anarchist* history can — and must — be written.

The following sections contain a wide range of materials, from pamphlets to posters and reprints from many of the anarchist publications covered in the first section, all of which give a strong sense of the depth and breadth of the anarchist movement in Canada. Perhaps most important of all, these sections will hopefully put to rest forever the misconception that anarchist analysis does not proceed beyond ‘hating the state as well as capitalism’. At around the same time as writers like bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde were developing a theoretical understanding of oppression that avoided reduction to any single axis — be it class, state domination, race, or gender — anarchist activists were taking a similar approach in their organizations and analyses. Through solidarity work with Indigenous peoples, immigrants, refugees, Palestinians, and Colombians, through debates around racism, sexism and homophobia within their own communities, anarchists have been struggling not only against ‘external’ powers such as states and corporations, but also against ‘internal’ forces that structure the daily practices of individuals and groups, no matter how enlightened and progressive they might think they are.

Only a Beginning also helps to dispel another common myth, namely that anarchism is primarily destructive in tone. As Antliff points out, ‘anarchists use art to express their ideals, and this is what makes their art so compelling’, from the ‘high’ culture pursuits of literature, architecture, and formal theatre, to the music, poetry, and art found in the streets, zines, and autonomous spaces that are the primary crucibles of anarchist cultural production.

Many would argue, however, that producing art is secondary to producing the conditions of a different sort of life. Fortunately, Canadian anarchists have been active on this front as well, as the section on Autonomous Zones attests. From the long-standing, but recently gutted Spartacus bookstore in Vancouver to the more recently established, but equally successful Winnipeg A-Zone (site of the Mondragon café and bookshop), a wide array of experiments in the construction of alternatives have been carried out. Even though most autonomous zones are indeed temporary, this is no reason for them to be forgotten. Rather, it is deeply important that anarchists acquire and maintain a sense of what works and what doesn’t, so that we can better understand *why* certain problems keep recurring, and hopefully move towards more effectively dealing with them.

In keeping with the desire to avoid the heavy hand of the authoritative historian, Antliff refrains from presenting his own views on these and many other questions. I, for one,

wouldn't have minded a little more in the way of explicit analysis and synthesis, and I suspect that readers who are not familiar with anarchist debates and subcultures will miss much of the implicit side-taking that inevitably occurs through even the most hands-off editorial process.

This is a small complaint, though, about a big book. *Only A Beginning* is beautiful, useful, and politically important, and should be required reading for anyone who cares about the history of socialism in Canada. It is itself a great beginning on a project that will hopefully be continued and deepened — the project of understanding how the anarchist movement in Canada, and elsewhere, has become what it is, and hence where it might best go in the future.