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Why young people in the UK are returning to anarchism

Jak Hutchcraft

19 April 2023

There's a boarded-up venue on a busy road in Brighton. Wedged between an Oxfam and a Card Factory, it has no fancy signage, no clear indication of what goes on inside, or if the place is even open. But on the boards covering the windows there are some words:

"For a social system based on mutual aid and voluntary co-operation: against all forms of oppression. To establish a share in the general prosperity for all – the breaking down of racial, religious, national, gender and sex barriers – to resist ecological destruction and to fight for the life of one earth."

I'm at the Cowley Club – Brighton's anarchist cooperative social centre and music venue. Inside there's a bookshop and café area displaying titles like *Prison: A Survival Guide*, *A Primer on Anarchist Geography* and *Crass Reflections*. Further into the room there's a huge mosaic mural that says *Mutual Aid & Cooperation*, next to a wall plastered in posters saying things like *END SIEGE IN GAZA*, and *The Only Good Fascist is a Dead Fascist*. A notice board to my right is full of pamphlets and flyers about fox hunting, fracking and upcoming punk

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Retrieved on 19th April 2023 from www.huckmag.com
Amid brazen abuses of state power and growing inequality, anarchist principles have been creeping back into the mainstream. Jak Hutchcraft talks to some of people the leading the charge.

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shows. This volunteer-run venue was opened in 2003 and hosts gigs several times a month, as well as organising workshops and talks, offering a free library, running a food bank, and priding themselves on being a base for “projects dedicated to grassroots social change.”

“We also create a space where different anarchist groups can organise, like hunt saboteurs or any other kind of local anarchist group, if they want to plan direct political action,” Floralis, one of the volunteers, tells me. The 27-year-old dedicates her time every week to the bookshop, café and library, as well as working full-time elsewhere. “It also means just providing a warm space for people and feeding people that are hungry.” The space is named after the city’s own Harry Cowley, who was a key figure in fighting fascism in the 1930s, as well as organising and campaigning for the homeless and disadvantaged communities in Brighton.

Far-right activity has been escalating in the UK over the last few years, with the government’s anti-protest bill and rising anti-migrant and anti-refugee rhetoric fuelling hate from the top down. The Labour party opposition have been largely toothless after the failure of the Corbyn project, leading a lot of people to leave the party or abandon Westminster politics altogether. On top of that, there’s the government’s response to the pandemic, which ignored advice from health professionals and focused on giving lucrative contracts to their cronies. This put social care and duty into the hands of the people. In this setting, anarchist values have emerged in unexpected – and even mainstream – places. One of which was the mutual aid response to the pandemic.

“Someone sent me a link to the One Show on BBC. You know, really glossy, happy-clappy program,” anarchist writer Dr Jim Donaghey tells me over the phone from his home in Belfast. “You very rarely see anything political on there, but they invited one of the people who set up the COVID Mutual Aid UK network onto the sofa to have a chat. They’re an anar-

chist and they were sitting there talking about the principles of mutual aid. Everyone was nodding along like, ‘This is great. Everyone helping each other, that’s fantastic!’”

There were 4,300 mutual aid groups set up by volunteers during the pandemic to help provide food and the other essentials to communities all over the UK; from London to Newcastle, west Wales to Glasgow. It’s estimated that these grass-roots projects had up to three million volunteers at their height, and four in ten centres are still active. By the end of 2021, the Tories tried to hijack them, calling the response “community-run Conservatism.” However, Dr Donaghey – a self-described “punk anarchist who works in academia” at Ulster University – explains that mutual aid is actually a core tenet of anarchism. One that’s all about people “helping each other on a democratic basis to make sure needs are met, and not waiting for the state to come in and do it for them.” The phrase was first coined by late-19th Century Russian anarchist and anthropologist Peter Krapotkin. In *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) he states that it is present and essential throughout human history and the animal kingdom. “[It] is deeply interwoven with all the past evolution of the human race,” he writes.

Another key anarchist belief is one of abolishing the police and prison system. Despite being seemingly one of the more extreme and divisive ideas, it’s also made its way into mainstream conversation in recent years. In the wake of the horrific murder of George Floyd in 2020, and the countless other videos of police brutality against people of colour in the United States, Black Lives Matter adopted #DefundThePolice as one of their focuses. In the UK, with Sarah Everard’s murder in 2021 and the jailing of serial rapist and former officer David Carrick last month, many have been questioning police power. Recent figures show that one in 100 police officers in England and Wales faced criminal charges in 2022 alone, further adding to public distrust. On BBC radio in January even the Conservative police and crime commissioner, Donna Jones, called for

the Metropolitan Police to be “broken up” following the level of corruption and gross misconduct that has come to light.

“How much money would you need from the Arts Council to set fire to a police car, every night, for a one-month run at the Fringe?” Liv Wynter shouts at the beginning of their anti-police play *How To Catch a Pig*. “For every institution we burn to the ground, let something grow in its place.”

Liv is a playwright, performer, anarchist and abolitionist from London. They use their performance and creativity as a way to share their ideas, whether it’s through their punk band Press Release or DJ collective Queer House Party. “The DIY [punk] scene is full of a lot of neoliberalism and people like fucking Wet Leg saying, ‘fuck the Tories’ every other day, but it’s not actually doing anything,” Liv tells me on a video call. “*How To Catch a Pig* brings people together who are organising. We invite people along to meetings, we hand out police intervention guides and stop-and-search intervention guides.”

There are perceptions of anarchists as violent, and anarchy as chaos. With Liv’s speech about burning cop cars in mind, I ask them if these perceptions are fair. “To me, it’s an ‘it’s not going to be easy’ moment,” they say. “The revolution is not going to be a super simple thing. It’s going to be long and hard and difficult, and the police are going to get bigger and stronger, and you’re going to have to take a gun to the gunfight, know what I mean?” As Sarah Lambie writes in her book *Abolishing The Police*, abolition shouldn’t be treated as a singular or revolutionary event but as an ongoing process – “a way of life and a collective approach to social change.”

Throughout history, social change has been led by hard fought battles. Whether that’s women’s rights, gay liberation or the civil rights movement, both violent and non-violent direct action has been used to varying degrees to win whatever freedoms we enjoy today. Floralis got into anarchism through reading about the activism of Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers as a teenager.

police corruption, but in 2023 these issues have come to knock at all of our doors, loudly and more urgently than ever before.

a sweatshop worker-turned-anarchist revolutionary who took direct action against sweatshops in the late 19th century.

The late anthropologist and activist David Graeber argued in a 2004 essay that the 21st century will be one of anarchist revolution. He contextualises anarchism in our modern political landscape, and lauds the positive changes in anarchist action and thought. He also highlights the missing “details” in the vision, such as concrete alternatives to contemporary legislatures, courts and police, and also how an anarchist political vision will be accomplished in a non-authoritarian way. Academic texts aside though, anarchist beliefs are meaningless unless they’re put into action in the real world. Whether that’s providing food and refuge for those who need it like the Cowley Club, actively fighting fast fashion like Jay at No Sweat, or providing an example of how the world could be, like the mutual aid projects still dotted all over the UK. For the people I spoke to, activism comes first and theory comes second. There are huge obstacles facing those trying to change things, but none large enough to quash their fight for a better tomorrow. To quote David Graeber’s aforementioned essay, “It is clearly a long-term process. But then, the anarchist century has only just begun.”

Whether you’re an anarchist or not, with the social unrest, the cost of living crisis, the climate crisis, the brazen abuses of power we see and the growing inequality, it’s hard not to feel that the current system is failing us. In the recent edition of DOPE, a writer called “C” describes us as being “entrenched in a kind of zombie capitalism: “No one really believes in it, it’s no longer really alive, but still it stumbles on, refusing to die.”

With that in mind, is it any surprise that people are looking elsewhere for answers? Is the system actually working for anybody but the super rich right now? And isn’t it up to us, the people, to make the world a fairer, kinder place? In the past it might have been easy to ignore the issues that anarchism tackles head-on, such as employment, inequality, oppression and

“I grew up as a person of colour in quite a white town. I got into a lot of activist history because I was experiencing racism but I didn’t understand what was happening to me.” As a non-binary person of colour, she explains, being an anarchist is part of her identity. “If you go around Brighton, there’s a reason why most transgender people you meet are anarchists,” she explains. “It’s because we as a community have helped ourselves more than our government has helped us. If we wait around for someone else to provide for us, then we are simply not going to survive.”

Just like Floralis, everyone I spoke to had their own personal entry points to anarchism that doesn’t necessarily involve pouring over political history or theory books to get to grips with its core values. Music, especially punk, is a gateway for many. Dr Donaghey co-edited *Smash The System!* – a book examining the relationship between anarchist punk and resistance, covering bands, activists and anarchist movements from Croatia to China. Among its interviews is Asel Luzarraga, a Basque musician and author who was framed and convicted of terrorism by the Chilean government after writing blogs discussing Chilean state violence against the indigenous Mapuche people.

Closer to home, black metal band Dawn Ray’d have been flying the black flag since they came together in Liverpool in 2015. “Anarchy comes from the ancient Greek word *Anarkhia*, which just means without rulers,” vocalist and violinist/vocalist Simon Barr tells me. “I think that’s a wonderful explanation of it, because it doesn’t mean chaos. It doesn’t mean violence, necessarily.” He goes on to say that it’s actually capitalism that is inherently violent. “[Capitalism] uses violence to steal resources from around the world. It moves and destroys and kills indigenous populations that are in the way. Violence is all around us all the time. You might not be suffering it yourself, but it is happening. So I think that when somebody lashes out and breaks a window or punches a fascist in the face in a

city centre, is that as bad as the crimes against the earth and the crimes against people that we see committed by the ruling class constantly?"

Despite their militant views, Dawn Ray'd recently appeared on the cover of Kerrang! – the biggest rock magazine in the UK. "I've been very careful on this new record to be as politically direct as I can, lyrically," Barr says. "We try to live these ideas in our day-to-day lives, to the best of our abilities. We haven't watered down our beliefs at all. For a lot of people the appeal is the militancy, I think."

It hasn't been a smooth journey for the three-piece, however. The black metal scene has had a problem with fascism and neo-Nazism since its beginnings in Norway in the early 90s. In Britain there have been direct links between black metal musicians and far right terrorist groups such as the Order of the Nine Angles. "We played an anti-fascist benefit show and we took a photograph with an antifascist action flag outside the venue in Lewisham. That photo [pictured above] blew up," says Barr. "We got a load of abuse online. A load of death threats. Like, hundreds and hundreds of negative responses to that." Instead of spooking them, though, it made the band double-down on their values. Their new album, *To Know The Light*, doesn't leave much to interpretation, opening with the call to action: *"Fuck the police, tear down the prisons, fuck the state, disrupt its mechanisms. Rupture its fabric, action now!"*

As the backlash to Dawn Ray'd's photo illustrates, modern political tensions often play out on the modern battlefield of social media. However, a lot of anarchist messaging is being proliferated in print, carrying on a long tradition of anarchist newspapers in the UK. In London, I meet up with George and Oriana, who are part of Dog Section Press – a not-for-profit publisher who put out countless books and who run a quarterly newspaper called DOPE. With a readership of around 30,000 (for context, that's more than *The Spectator*) mainly in London, Bristol and Manchester, DOPE is given to street vendors

for free to sell for £3 a copy, which has earned it a nickname of the "anarchist Big Issue." This raises £360,000 annually for the vendors, many of whom are vulnerable, homeless or living below the poverty line.

"We have a section that talks about work, a section that talks about liberation, and a section that talks about prison. The rest of the articles are all sorts of things," Oriana, who designs the magazines, explains as we sit upstairs in Whitechapel's long-standing anarchist bookshop Freedom. Oriana often works with established artists such as Sheffield artist Phlegm, who specialises in huge, surrealist street murals of Bosch-esque creatures and impossible machinery. "Beautiful things are not just for rich people," she adds. "They're for everyone."

"We try to include timeless ideas," George adds. "Sadly, so many of the things that were being fought 100 years ago are still completely relevant now. Property, housing, prison, work, all of these anti-capitalist struggles are still completely relevant. The problems with police, landlords, of ownership in general, all these big ideas are timeless." The situation and imbalance between bosses and employees is also arguably worse now than it was fifty years ago. With zero-hour contracts, lack of job security, automation and mass strikes (including a total strike at the NHS for the *first time in history*), the struggles that people were fighting at the turn of the 20th century are very much alive today.

This idea of recurring struggles is echoed by Jay Kerr, an anarchist from London who runs the anti-sweatshop campaign No Sweat. He tells me over the phone that he feels he's fighting an old fight, not a new one. "The big brands exploiting people in developing countries and the global South is just an extension of what happened 100 years ago in the east end of London. A lot of the solutions are similar too, in terms of workers getting together and organising and fighting for better wages and conditions and stuff." He goes on to cite Emma Goldman,