The Mall or the Agora?

Revitalizing the Anarchist Bookfair

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Anarchist bookfairs are one of the most interesting features of anarchist life.

A bookfair is immediately recognizable as hierarchical. There are the booksellers and there are the consumers. What separates the two is not merely the physicality of a table, but the capital investment it represents. Those distroing have usually been required to purchase space in the bookfair. But moreover they have had to invest in the things they are now trying to sell.

And these investments are often well beyond the means of a good percentage of the anarchists they attempt to sell to. A table for a day can cost between 50 and 200 dollars, and while it used to be the case that anarchist bookfairs would usually provide extensive outdoor space for free tabling or blanketing, this practice has unfortunately dried up. While the SF Bookfair for example used to have dozens of folks laying out goods on blankets for free when it took place in peninsula park, these days you see at most two or four packed in on the sidewalk or side of a building. Where buying a table inside was once an act of luxury and largesse toward the organizers, today it is more of a requisite.

Few squatters or punks have that kind of money to casually throw away, and so there's immediately a very clear ordering provided by the tables. Age, wealth, and social capital are tangled up in various ways table to table, but the looming sense of difference and inaccessibility is palatable.

Whereas, once upon a time, kids would casually bring their personal zines or collections of pamphlets in order to make a few dozen bucks, this is now blocked by the expense of formal tables. Thus, the only anarchists who can afford to table are largely publishing houses, formal organizations, and a few well established artists.

And the anarchist publishing houses sit on tens of thousands or even millions of dollars of built up investment. Staffed by bored middle aged punks going through formulaic interactions they've repeated in city after city, with the same people. Ostensible political enemies see each other in town after town, a cultured civility bleeding slowly into an old boy's network dedicated to maintaining and containing the anarchist milieu. Today the nihilist has the syndicalist's back, tomorrow the platformist calls the insurrecto to give him a heads up about some "crazy feminists." While the kids party or fuck off, the elder book-slingers meet up in fancier restaurants afterwards in large polite clusters, perhaps dragging along a few new apprentices, dangling the promises of elite membership to them. Money is spent casually, to the silent alienated terror of the poorer friends dragged along, and rareified politicking is engaged in shamelessly.

Grumbling and snark about "Anarchy Mall" is universal among the rank and file, but it doesn't change anything about the structure of the affair.

"Alas," comes the immediate saccharine refrain, "there is no ethical consumption under capitalism."

At every moment, in every square inch of an anarchist bookfair, the tension is apparent and laughed off. "Is anything you do under capitalism ethical? Is working or buying anything ethical? Of course not." The bookfair is then seen as a kind of extension of the tensions and hypocrisies that we are forced into in our daily life, a space where we directly generate and replicate those tensions because, "what are you gonna do, you gotta earn a living."

The problem here — and one of the core reasons that edifices of social capital are able to be built in backrooms of the anarchist milieu — is that a confused and impossible ideal is used to blind and derail all inquiry into better ways of relating to one another.

Anarchists have unfortunately been slid into opposing markets in and of themselves — seeing exchange, money, etc, as primordial evils or the core source and logic of capitalism.

As a consequence we dismiss considering *how markets could be different* as a reformist thinking. The notion of an "egalitarian" market is seen as an impossibility, and thus we surrender to the most perverse norms when we construct marketplaces.

This doesn't have to be the case.

Let me elaborate on three possible changes, mostly centered around removing barriers to entry, and how existing hostility to markets impedes adoption of them.

1) Remove or dramatically undermine the cost and necessity of tables.

There are always tradeoffs when it comes to venues and the costs attendant to trying to make them accessible, but popup venues in parks or parking lots are totally possible. Imagine if bookfairs in a city were more frequent than giant annual events and more fluid. We might see anarchists doing small popup fairs where vendors mix alongside other uses of space like a free store or really really free market. Part of the reason bookfairs become such laboriously regimented and ossified undertakings is because few people are willing to put up with consistently organizing them, especially when there's the cognitive dissonance of opposing markets. On the other hand small bands of young anarchists frequently find ways to put on small really really free markets and the like for marginal costs, but get starkly limited attendance in part because we frown upon selling and buying. Creating spaces where more individuals or informal groups are encouraged to have their own distro, art, or project and all table (or blanket) together would create more dynamism and active engagement. And if the giant publishers can't afford to table in a random park this month in some town they don't live in, with all the risk and randomness attendant to such schemes, all the better. That anarchism has for so long been dominated by Big Formal Publishers and Big Formal Organizations has always been an embarrassing disgrace.

2) Normalize putting your content online for free.

This one raises hackles because unfortunately many anarchists are gripped in the chains of marxist narratives around being owed reimbursement for your labor. In the worst form this looks like declarations that, "If you torrent a book you're stealing from the author." But more subtle variations are still common, "why should I put my manuscript online and deliberately hurt my own income?" Well let's peel apart what's unique about rendering *information* into a good in a transaction. When you sell someone pickles you are generally perceived as owing them honesty about the content of the good. A buyer can't fully consent to a transaction when all the details about what is being transacted are hidden from her. The information asymmetry is sharp and

can turn quite pernicious. Consider a famous writer whose books will be influential regardless of whether you find content in them deplorable. In order to stay aware of or craft defenses to his writing you are forced into paying him money. And this flips around to create barriers to the unknown writers tackling new material in challenging ways — why take a chance by buying a zine or book if you don't know whether you'll like it? Additionally while it's easy to see people trading pickles in a free society, it's hard to see intellectual property norms persisting, since they depend upon proactive censorship by the state. Information is not a naturally scarce good, unlike your particular batch of homemade pickles, it has to be forcibly made scarce. Anarchists of all stripes should see ourselves at war with the intellectual property norms of our society and seek to undermine respect for them in every way. A physical book is a scarce good with tangible costs to its construction, and there are reasons people can desire them instead of the raw text. Authors can always make money from their labor via explicit and more consensual methods of donation that don't rely upon artificial information asymmetries. But most of all the distinguishing of an elite authorial class within anarchism is deeply pernicious and dangerous. An authorial class (and publishing house hierarchies) propped up by the state's intellectual property norms is even worse. Whatever your position on property, treating information like property is far more pernicious than more normal sorts of property like pickles, and its unique injustices shouldn't get obscured by "all property is bad" conflations.

3) Utilize sliding scales to blunt harm (and tax the rich).

It's eternally amusing to me that we — the evil market anarchists — are frequently the only vendor at anarchist bookfairs utilizing an explicit sliding scale. Part of the reason for this is that making prices fluid feels like *haggling* to a lot of anarchists, and they want to avoid dwelling upon the reality of the transaction as much as possible. Money is typically exchanged quickly and with a faint sense of distaste and mutual apologia, the publisher grimacing when they give the price. But I feel it's obviously unconscionable to charge a threadbare teen squatter the same as a surburbanite middle aged marxist. Sliding scale is often a fuzzy sort of haggling that leverages honor and personal ethics — and in rare instances someone openly takes advantage of it — but usually after the "well what do you suggest?" it becomes a more open and forthright conversation that helps situate both participants in the exchange to one another. Compassion and honesty is met with the same, a flickering moment of communism where both parties collaborate in figuring out how to reapportion goods between them to resolve issues of desire and cost. Unlike the imperious declaration of prices by some faceless org, this approach doesn't hide from the nature of the exchange, but seeks to influence its character. It's long been pointed out that one of the ways freed markets erode concentrations of wealth in the absence of the state is via an inability to hide behind some impersonal anonymization. The rich man always pays more at the local marketplace. And so to do the aloof bookfair tourists who I know won't read or take seriously the things they buy. But there's one more benefit of utilizing a sliding scale: it allows me to express on the market my own desire at getting certain material into particular hands. A pugnacious kid comes over to pick an argument and ends up being defused from the cartoonish narrative he came in with, hesitantly buying a single booklet while suspiciously eyeing another — I happily hand him the second for free. I write and reproduce the work of others in order to affect the world, to engage with it. If such effort has value to someone then I am happy to receive the gift of their money in exchange, but if not, then I have always been happy to substitute a little bit of pushing a mop or fixing a website to obtain the things of exchange value I want.

These three changes are not panaceas, there are deep and wider problems with the anarchist milieu and with the gentrified, centralized, precarious contexts of capitalism that frame us. But they would go a long way in revitalizing the rotting bookfair form. What they require is a solid sense of our core ethical values, and a less cartoonish and suffocating fear of markets.

The agora has always been a fecund site for anarchists. The marketplace a site for building prefigurative alternatives and mobilizing resistance. Selling burritos and tamales alongside IWW organizers shouting from soapboxes about the latest strike. We've allowed the simplistic middle class concerns about "consumerism" to crowd out the reflexive lumpen spirit of hustling.

So long as anarchists continue to fear markets we will lock ourselves up in tense hypocrisies that give cover to problematic dynamics and reinforce institutional power.

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