

Thank You, Anarchy: Notes from the Occupy Apocalypse
By Nathan Schneider; University of California Press; paperback
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Reviewed by Jonah Raskin

Nathan Schneider, the author of *Thank You, Anarchy*, must know that it's too early to write a history of the Occupy Movement, and that it's too late as well. Of course, *Thank you, Anarchy* isn't a history book. Part pamphlet, part meditation, and part dispatch from the vortex of a fiery volcano, it hits the ground running and doesn't end until Occupy itself comes to an end - not with the proverbial bang but with the proverbial whimper. But maybe it hasn't ended. Maybe it's morphing right now into something that doesn't have a name or a face and that wears several hats all at once. Nathan Schneider ought to have entitled his book, *Thank You, Anarchy Part I*, or *The Anarchy Chronicles # 1*. America hasn't seen the last of anarchy and anarchy hasn't made its final exit from the stage of history in the United States, either.

But maybe I ought to say something about myself, and my point-of-view. As a civil rights activist, ban the bomb protestor, Yippie, Weatherman, and agit-pop contributor to Liberation News Service, I read Schneider's book with at least two sets of eyes, maybe three. I wanted to look at Occupy through the lens of my own history as street fighting, marijuana-smoking, self-defined sexual outlaw - and as an anti-imperialist, too - and I wanted to look back at my younger self - and the movement that shaped me - through the lens of Occupy. With my third set of eyes, I wanted to see Occupy from outside American borders - from the Third World, as we were wont to call it all through the War in Vietnam.

Fortunately, Schneider populates his fast-moving cinematic chronicle with exiles from around the world who belonged to Occupy, or who hovered at its edges, observing and participating. More often than not, it's those outsiders, not the native born American anarchists who have the insights. The Spanish, the Greeks, the Argentineans and the South East Asians really get Occupy.

Marina from Argentina observes, "Only in the U.S. do you start a movement and people give you money." Monica from Spain tells Schneider what ought to have seemed obvious - "this occupation wouldn't last forever. It shouldn't. Don't expect it to." Then there's the dynamic duo of Natasha and Amin who insist that "the

movement's problem...wasn't a matter of violence or nonviolence; it was a lack of imagination. There was too small a repertoire."

Indeed, in a very short space of time, Occupy revived and repeated almost every single gesture, tactic, and attitude that had been embraced by radicals from the 1960s and 1970s and sometimes from the 1920s and 1930s. If nothing else, American radicalism sure does know how to recycle itself over and over again. It gets an A+ for mimicking the movements of the past; but perhaps that's in the nature of all countercultural, anti-capitalist, anti-materialist movements in the United States.

Like the undergraduates in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the anti-war activists in the Mobilization (the Mobe) and dozens of other smaller protest groups, the anarchists, pseudo-anarchists, and wanna-be revolutionaries in Occupy argued about participatory democracy, leadership, the media, celebrities, tactics, co-optation, repression and resistance. Protestors from the radical past that I knew, and in the radical present that Schneider depicts, showed very little understanding of history and little appreciation of the fact that American revolutions have never really followed the patterns of European revolutions, though American revolutionaries like to think so. We've never had a 1789 or a 1917. We've never been Robespierre's France, Lenin's Russia, or Che's Cuba.

Schneider captures the initial euphoria that swept across Occupy and the rapid descent into a kind of helplessness and despair. "The movement lent U.S. society so much energy, rage, and creativity," he writes. "But after more than a month without Liberty Square as a home base, the movement had lost its center; meetings often went nowhere." Schneider offers a hero – Daniel Berrigan, the anti-war Catholic priest – not surprisingly given his own conversion to Catholicism which he mentions early on. He also offers a villain - Chris Hedges, the rabble-rousing, publicity-seeking reporter - who comes across as an opportunist and a hypocrite. From Schneider's perspective, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg looks like a crafty politician, and New York City cops appear to be not unlikeable blue-collar workers just doing their job.

Schneider defends Occupy up and down the line. He also criticizes it step-by-step. "Encampments alone really posed little threat to the power of the corporate elite," he observes. At times, he's bossy, as when he writes, "the unions needed to endanger their pacts with politicians and big business, to actually shut down the engines of an unjust economy." Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but that sounds like arrogance to me.

Of course, *Thank you, Anarchy* doesn't aim to be indifferent, neutral, and non-aligned. On every page the author takes a stand; those who like the stands he takes will no doubt applaud him; those who disagree might hiss and boo. *Thank You, Anarchy* is one man's version of Occupy; probably everyone who took part has a different story to tell. That's the way it was in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and in SDS, too. Call it anarchism or call it individualism. Every defiant American seems to have his or her own distinct voice.

Schneider's account will surely be followed by other accounts; authors who add their voices to his will surely take issue with him. Fortunately for them, he provides a very big target, though he also presents himself as a moving target. He changes his mind and looks at issues from more than one perspective, though he comes back repeatedly to the idea that Occupy was "art before it was anything properly organized." Like Yippie Abbie Hoffman who said that the only *ist* that he was, was an *artist*, Schneider appreciates guerrilla theater, the power of the spectacle, and the seductive force of the street festival.

Near the end of his volatile book, he suggests that the movie *Fight Club* "played a role in training the relevant subset of the generation that birthed Occupy Wall Street." I would have said that even more influential than *Fight Club* was Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference* with its emphasis on sticky messages, the power of context, and salesmen who make emotion contagious. The occupiers look a lot more like Gladwellians than Orwellians, anarchists, or situationists. In Schneider's treatment they also look like narcissists, as when one protestor exclaims apropos a story about Occupy in New York's best selling paper, "*The Daily News!* We've already won!" With comments like that it's not surprising that Occupy didn't win. Like the protesters from the Sixties, the protesters in Zuccotti Park/Liberty Square were hung up on the media. Like the protesters from the Sixties, they thought that media attention meant the triumph of the mass movement.

"Revolution really isn't as far off as it might seem," Schneider insists on the next-to-the-last page of his book. Far be it from me to tell him what to expect or not to expect. I would only say that I heard the very same words over and over again in the Sixties and Seventies from radicals who sincerely believed in the revolution and who did everything in their power to make it happen. I said it myself many times over that revolution wasn't far off. I still hear myself say it, though I know it's not true. American revolutionaries have always

told themselves fairy tales. Nathan Schneider follows in that radical tradition.

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