

preamble: In case through some mishap this document becomes lost from its proper context, let me be clear that each long standing member of the reading group has their own understanding of an appropriate intro. While we want to have something to offer newcomers, we are not interested (nor do we believe in) a unified sense of the group. So each longstanding member (right now I would define this as coming regularly for at least six months, but I could change my mind about that) is encouraged to write their own introductory page.

1. The group has been meeting once a week (tuesdays at 8 pm) continually since roughly 1996.

2. The group is open to anyone who wants to come, and we read many types of things but we are most/only interested in talking about anarchist perspectives on what we're reading, watching, or learning about.

3. Mostly we read, but occasionally we watch videos or have speakers.

4. We generally don't read whole books, as we have found that people's concentration doesn't last that long.

5. The conversation is much more interesting for all concerned (including you!) if you do the reading.

6. The person who brings in the reading is usually considered responsible for leading the conversation about it. This means being prepared to

a) ask leading questions,

b) explain why it's relevant and/or interesting,

c) contextualize it (if it's historical or about something that isn't commonly experienced). If someone does you a favor by making the copies for something you suggested, then you should still be ready to lead the conversation.

7. People who come and don't talk are common. On one level this is fine and totally reasonable. On another it's irritating. At some point it's nice to know a bit about what people are thinking of what's being said, and to have more ideas and thoughts to bounce around the conversation.

That said, if you laugh or groan at the right places then I'll like you just fine.

8. More irritating than those who don't talk at all, are those who talk all of the time. On the other hand, sometimes these heavy talkers inspire us to new heights, so (as always) it depends.

9. If you want us to read something, ask and/or bring in copies for people. Some people don't use computers, so even if we're reading

something online we still always have at least 5-6 copies for those folks (plus it makes the conversation better if we can refer to it while we're discussing it). Better to ask first since it's possible that we've read it recently. There is no central committee that approves things.

10. We actually are quite different – although because we have known each other for so long, some of the edges are not so apparent (if you stick around you will learn them). Some of us are pacifist, some of us are more activist, some of us are anti-religious, some of us are more mystical, some of us are more academic, some of us have histories with marxist groups, or came from punk, or came straight out of CrimethInc, and so on. (We lost our one worker-identified member and still miss him.) Usually we confront each other directly about our disagreements, although not necessarily as intensely as we might feel the disagreement, and sometimes we're tired of having those conversations and seek other ways to engage with the conflict.

Group culture:

The group does not have labels that apply to everyone but there is a general sense of cohesion around some things.

Labels that we eschew for ourselves (for more explanation, ask someone, or just listen during the group – things sometimes become clear during normal discussion): *activist, leftist, revolutionary, platformist, syndicalist*

Labels that we find not so problematic:
green, post-leftist, critical, anti-ideological, egoist, anti-tech, individualist, cranky

We try to ask pointed challenging questions as a way to strengthen arguments and understand things on deeper levels.

We don't believe that there is one truth. We are suspicious of plans for (after) the revolution. We are tired of the false dichotomy between action and theory (we have been/are accused of being armchair anarchists many times, mostly by people who have no idea what we do when we're not talking to each other). Many of us are older than your average anarchist and have seen a lot of great plans come to naught.

Almost all of us are in projects (on-going or ad hoc) that are anarchist and/or anarchist-relevant. Once a year (for the past 7 years?) people from the reading group have organized an anarchist theory conference called the BASTARD (berkeley anarchist students of theory, research and development).

One of the things we get critiqued for the most is how open we are

to newcomers. We have known each other a long time and had many complicated conversations with each other. We have shorthand and in jokes. If you spend enough time with us, you will be included. If you think that every anarchist group should be immediately transparent to every newcomer, then you will not be happy with us. We are mostly welcoming to new people, but we value the benefits of being an established group. We are here for each other, “each other” being a group that can come to include new people, but not one that is reliant or based on new people. Generally we take it easier on new people than we do with each other, and that’s about as much lee way as folks get.

Humor:

Humor might be the hardest thing to talk about. It’s easy to say that we like to laugh at ourselves and each other and that our humor can seem caustic or scathing. Some people experience that as mean-spirited, and for some it is refreshing.

Artnoose in 2003

I first came to the Long Haul in 1996. I don't remember the exact function, but I think it was for a party held after a Berkeley Critical Mass. The Free Skool was in full effect, and one of the classes being offered was an anarchist history class. I was pretty new to anarchism and realized that I needed to learn some basics. It's now seven years later and I still attend the weekly study group meetings. I still need to learn some basics, but that's another story. So I'll go back to the beginning, when I first showed up to the study group.

I was intimidated when I first attended. I don't think I talked the whole meeting. I like to joke around with people now and say that I don't think I talked the whole first year. It's an exaggeration of course, but honestly I rarely spoke. During the first meeting I attended, I learned that it was no longer an anarchist history class but an anarchist contemporary issues study group.

"Rats" I thought. I was really in it to learn all about anarchist history. I had been a good student all my life and was ready to take notes and be a star student. Instead I was in a room full of smarties (the people, not the candies), talking about contemporary developments in anarchist theory.

Also in that first meeting, I learned about the brief history of the group before I began attending. It had been meeting for less than a year, and had been an anarchist history class as part of the Free Skool. It had begun at the Long Haul, had a brief stint at the now-defunct Little Planet Cafe, and then returned to the Long Haul. Lawrence had started the class with Gerald, but it had apparently not worked out because Gerald wasn't an anarchist and was therefore leading an anarchist study group from the perspective of a non-anarchist. Through some process I wasn't around for, Gerald left the group and Lawrence stayed.

I knew Lawrence already because I was a big fan of his band, so it was odd to then see him in this totally different context. I knew a few other people too, from other Long Haul events, and then there was a handful of people who I don't remember at all.

Although I rarely spoke at all and had a hard time keeping up with the conversation, I stuck with it for I guess about a

year or so. I had to skip for a little while when my job switched me to Tuesdays. When I returned, Lawrence was still there and sometimes Nick, but everybody else was different. While I had been away, there had been a changeover into more or less the current incarnation of the study group. For a few years there was more or less a six-person core group with a few “part-timers”, and the occasional traveler. It was a small but tight-knit bunch, such that even if I didn’t like what we were reading, I still showed up every Tuesday just to be with everybody.

In the spring of 2001, we held our first anarchist theory conference. It started as a kind of off-hand idea of having an event the day after the yearly anarchist book fair that featured speakers who were all anarchists. In a mere few months, we successfully pulled the conference out of our collective ass. In addition to helping organize it, I led a workshop on anarchist study groups and facilitated a panel discussion on anarchist collectives.

That experience was a point of demarcation in my life. If you had told me five years before that I would be doing a workshop with actual adults in it, and also facilitating a panel discussion with a small theater full of people, I would have laughed at you. I know that it was really me who transformed myself from the person who wouldn’t talk in a group into the facilitator of a panel, but I know that the study group was a big part of it. It’s a big part of who I am today. It’s how I got here, and I wouldn’t be nearly the same if I didn’t come this way. Since then we have organized two more conferences, and I have led another discussion about study groups at a publishing conference in Ohio and been on panels elsewhere. Although I sometimes still have a hard time in megadiscussions, the difference between where I was and where I am is remarkable.

People say a lot of bad things about the study group and the people in it. And usually they’ve never attended a single meeting. There’s sometimes merit to their arguments, and often not. I have been in situations where I’m automatically maligned because I go to a study group, where people talk shit about the study group because they don’t realize that I attend it. And when they find out, they usually say that I’m “not like all those other study

group people,” that I’m “different”. I’ve been called a purist, an armchair anarchist, a lifestylist, and a racist, because I choose to go to the Long Haul every Tuesday night and talk about anarchism.

But they don’t know. I know. I was there. ...

Aragorn!

I am a member (in good standing, with a membership card and all) of the longest running (defined by volume of meetings over time) anarchist group in North America. The Berkeley Anarchist Study Group has met every week for at least the past sixteen years. I have been involved since the first conference that the group put on eleven years ago. The structure of the group is simple. At 8 pm (on the dot) every Tuesday evening somebody starts the group by clearing the verbal clutter in the room with the simple exclamation “Announcements!” Ten to fifteen minutes of brief announcements and report backs ensue, with nods towards activism, consistent local events, and group activities. The next hour and forty minutes involves every permutation of approaches towards textual (and visual) anarchist material. At 9:50 the discussion turns towards what the next week’s reading will be. Recently we have been focusing a bit more on having thematic months of discussion (technology, Camatte, and introductions are all upcoming months) rather than just planning for the next week.

The reason the ASG can happen is because

1. We have a free, publicly-known location to meet. We are an active part of the Long Haul community with all that entails.
2. We are old(er). As a group our median age probably hovers around 40. This has all kinds of implications including consistency, a lack of ego (this author not withstanding), and responsibility-without-making-it-a-thing.
3. We have different skill sets. We have people who are involved in day-to-day anarchist projects, who know languages,

who know history or philosophy, and who have experience from which they speak. The regulars are surprisingly not half-assed (even if I disagree with them).

Pros

- The Study Group is one of the few places someone can achieve a kind of rigor towards study outside of “Their” control.
- Reading requires practice. To be a reader means doing it—if not every day, then so consistently that it requires no internal dialogue.
- Rigor requires patience and an understanding that few things are interesting just from linear study. An understanding of the gestation and geology of ideas doesn’t particularly benefit from sitting down in front of the last few decades of Foucaultian research.
- A study group is a wonderful way to share a life with others who are interested in studying similar things as yourself.

Cons

- The act of studying isn’t the same act as applying what is studied. It is action but it is the action of studying. This can be confusing.
- Social dynamics apply. As with every other group the success of the study group is the same as the success of your D&D party. You have to have a tank, a paladin, a couple of thieves, and a troll to bash every once in a while.
- Lack of preparation haunts every conversation. Usually less than half of the room has given a particular reading a serious read and less than half of that has done any thinking about how to talk and think about a text.

It used to be that the political orientation of the ASG was a central concern. The founder of the ASG is one of the editors of *Anarchy: a Journal of Desire Armed*, which obviously informed the politics of the group (he has since left the group). More than politics though, I would say, the original group had an orientation towards readings of history (anarchist history first

among them) and the current group has a serious orientation towards philosophy (Continental). These orientations of course help frame the conversations. I imagine this philosophical orientation would be hard to break up.

But perhaps the harder instinct to break up, and one that is frustrating me lately, is a studied lack of interest in conversations around application. This is purposeful and appropriate on so many levels that it is hard to want to shake the foundations of the ASG in particular, so I have a proposal that I'll get to at the end of this post. But the context is important and the reason the ASG is so fundamentally anti-practical is because of the toxic activist environment here in the Bay Area. Every ASG member (there have been a few exceptions but none of the regulars) has passed through (traditional) activism on their way to the ASG. We are damaged people, damaged by the horrorshow that is the existing order and those who would replace it with an equivalent nightmare.

The reality of realpolitik is one of compromise and manipulation. It would be hard to define it, especially as an anarchist, without using words like negotiation or subterfuge. The study group is repulsed by all of these things. It is pure that way. But the end of this world will involve impurity and the study group is not enough.

Impurity isn't the same thing as compromise, but the line has to be discussed; among peers, among allies, and even among critiques. More pointedly there is discussion-as-action which is real, has changed my life, and I see many of my friends suffer for not having access to it... but there is also something-else-as-action that I still crave. I'll call it by a different name that will shade it in an older distinction. I have a desperate desire to do more experimentation but I lack the type and tenor of mad scientists I would like to do it with. I am going to call this new formation a think tank, where ideas are formalized along with an urgency to reality check those ideas through rigorous intentional implementation and attack.

When I say attack I don't desire a temper tantrum but galvanization. I want to take things I know, I understand, and find

interesting and impregnate them with more capacity. I want a group of people who not only have good ideas and some patience with failure but enough bravery to be scalded by hot things and not run away.

anon response: one reason the group works is that it meets in a neutral space. initially it didn't and there were some difficulties around disagreements and implied rules of hospitality, civility, politeness, etc.

another related reason it works is that there's no desire to keep people around or 'convert' them if they're wrong or are jerks. at times i have been kind of shocked how blunt regulars can be with new-comers. this might prevent the group from becoming a mega-church, but i do think it contributes to the honesty or "purity" that aragorn! mentions.

lastly, i share aragorn!'s desire to do something more with/than the weekly discussions. one thing i have thought about is producing some sort of text/synopsis of the group's reactions to a text.

by the way, one other amazing thing about the group is that it doesn't limit itself to anarchist texts. some of my favorite discussions have been around classical or mainstream texts re-read and considered from an anti-hierarchical, non-authoritarian perspective.

Leona

So you think you want to come to the reading group? You've heard the rumors of a kick ass group of people who have been meeting regularly for over 15 years, people who are hard-headed and critical, who are comfortable calling each other names, an open group that is frequently mostly women, frequently racially mixed, multi-generational, intellectual but not particularly academic, and you think you could get something out of such a group?

That's awesome!

This group has all the benefits of a group that has been meeting for a long time, and many of the drawbacks. There are in-jokes and inhouse terminology that newcomers probably won't get (although people will explain it if you're stand-up enough to ask). OGs are tired of having some of the conversations that might be fascinating to newcomers. OGs are familiar

with each other, sometimes communicate in short hand (which can be confusing to new comers), and have histories that include conflict as well as happy times. You will be stepping into a stream with currents that are not always obvious.

There are plenty of differences between us, from our ages (from late teens to 60s), to where we're from (punk, hippie, Midwest, East Coast, West Coast, urban, not-quite-so-urban), to our class background (them's fightin' words), etc.

And of course we have a lot in common too. Most of us are pretty prepared to look at the brutal truth (as we see it) of current situations. We mostly think that the state of the world is depressing, and that there isn't a lot of activity that makes us think anything will change for the better in the near future. It's pretty easy for all of us to find the weak spots in the actions that people take in the name of change. A lot of us take part in those actions, or in some actions, but usually not with an expectation that the fundamental social change we want is going to come from those actions.

Most of us are sympathetic to a green anarchist, post-left, anti-civilization perspective – although few of us would go so far as to label ourselves as such.

Most of our favorite conversations come from the places we disagree with each other.

One of the common criticisms we have received is that we are not sufficiently friendly to newcomers. For one take on that, read Aragorn!'s piece on toxic activism. For here I will just say that we are not trying to appeal to everyone (nor could we, *obviously*, even if we wanted to), and that we welcome the creation of more reading groups, rather than everyone's incorporation into one.

History

The study group started as a free school class on anarchist history, about ten years ago. It was taught by two people, one an anarchist (who was the backbone for the group until very recently), and the other a communist. These two had very different opinions about what makes change, and what needs to change,

to make the world they want. But they liked each other. So they agreed to teach the class together. At some point the free school ended but people continued meeting, and the group morphed into a reading/study group, and the communist stopped coming.

A few of the thousands of things that the group has read (and might read again under the right circumstances):

Stirner's *Ego and its Own*

Green Anarchy magazine

Anarchy magazine

multiple pieces on the Spanish Civil War

Foucault

Bonnano

We also watch videos and movies from time to time – from Adam Curtis documentaries to popularizations of the Spanish civil war. Our most recent was *12 Angry Men*, for an interesting discussion on people's thoughts about jury duty...

The newcomer experience

One story in the ASG mythos is of one of the earliest and longest-standing members, who for months barely spoke when she started coming, back when the history class began. She was happy that people didn't try to make her talk, or think that they had to leave space for her to talk. She was happy that people believed that when she wanted to talk she would, and she could be trusted to determine that for herself. This is important in the mythos because it is indicative of ongoing tendencies.

Our expectation is that people will speak up if they want to and will not if they don't. If you're new and want to talk we will listen to you. Of course, we give newcomers a lot more leeway than we give each other when it comes to ideas that we've talked about before (although there may be a bit of eye-rolling at particularly worn terminology or questions). Questions will be answered to the best of the group's ability (there might be a couple of conflicting answers, and the questioner will get to choose the answer they like!). Even when the conversation is lively and people are barely giving time for one speaker to stop before launching into their own ideas, we still tend to give some

priority to newcomers, once we know that the desire to speak is there.

If you raise your hand, you are likely to be laughed at (or with). There is no one to call on you. We are self-regulating or un-regulated, or both.

The group meets in a community space that has one decent sized room, usually set up with chairs around two tables in the middle and then outlying chairs and sofa space. Also there are stairs that people can sit on if they want to be above it all. A lot of the OGs come early, and the chairs around the table tend to fill up first, so if it's important to you to be at the table, come on time or early.

And the first Tuesday of the month we meet an hour early for potluck, and conversation of a more personal nature. There are usually at least some dishes that are vegan and nut free, and many of us like spicy food.

Perhaps we will see you there. Come ready to laugh.