Hist. 2063
Anarchism: History, theory, practice

M/W 7:30-8:45
Raymond Craib
rbc23@cornell.edu
Office: 436 McGraw Hall

Anarchism. What is it good for? A political philosophy and approach to social organization that arose simultaneous with other grand “-isms,” anarchism, perhaps more than any other idea and practice, has been condensed down by its critics and observers into a vague set of often contradictory caricatures. Is ‘it’ characterized by bohemian communities of nihilists, their rebellion culturally innovative but politically impotent, book-ended by Friedrich Nietzsche and Johnny Rotten? Or is ‘it’ individualist libertarians who walk in the ideological footsteps of Murray Rothbard and Ayn Rand? Or collectivist anti-capitalists who tread the paths blazed by Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin? Or, most famously, is ‘it’ a murky underworld of conspiratorial bomb throwers, held together less by bonds of solidarity than by a commitment to violence? This seminar provides some relief from such limited and constraining perspectives by taking anarchism seriously as a social and political practice and tradition, one rooted largely in the left-wing critique of both the state and capitalism.

Questions we will continually consider include: What has anarchism been historically? Would we be better off thinking in terms of anarchisms (in the plural) rather than in the singular? Why or why not? What have been the basic principles that are foundational to most anarchist movements? Autonomy? Self-management? Non-hierarchy? Consensus? And what about the issue of violence? At what points, and why, has anarchism resonated with people? At what points, and why, has it been suppressed, appeared to have gone underground, and subsequently been found again (which is not to say “re-emerged”)? Why has anarchism refused to go away? And what is an anarcho-syndicalist anyway?!