

# A Revolutionary Movement Hits Small-Town America

Eugene, Ore., has become a test kitchen for anarchists who have taken their message mainstream.

Kim Murphy  
Times Staff Writer

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Officers apprehended a suspect during an anarchist rally in downtown Eugene, Ore., last month.

EUGENE, Ore. — The Blair Island Cafe was supposed to be good for the Whitaker neighborhood. A clean, colorful place with Mediterranean-style pasta and seafood, an alternative to the organic bakeries and cheap microbrew taverns that have always nourished this community of 70-year-old bungalows, food co-ops and what appears to be the largest remaining population of Volkswagen buses in the hemisphere.

The popular resistance started last August with a broken restaurant window, and when that was repaired, another, and Another.

Then the literature castigating “yuppie gentrifying scum” and their BMWs parked outside. Fearing worse, the Blair Island Cafe closed its doors late last year—and the movement to keep Whitaker a low-rent refuge for the down-and-out raised its collective fist in victory.

“It is possible to build and maintain a very strong and self-empowering resistance to the pioneering gentry ... through individual and small group actions,” read a flier posted recently near the site of the former restaurant. It urged a process of neighborhood self-destruction as an antidote to escalating property values. “Resist the urge not to litter. The health and diversity of our neighborhood depends on it.”

Eugene for years has stood with communities like Berkeley and Santa Cruz as a seedbed for the counterculture, the kind of town where 1960s-era liberals grew into middle age, got jobs and sport utility vehicles, took over the City Council and passed resolutions about investments in Burma and Styrofoam containers at fast-food outlets.

Then the anarchists moved in. Forget about investments in Myanmar; smash the banks. Why bother about hamburger wrap? Close down McDonald’s. And so this Oregon university town has given birth to one of the most active communities in what seems to be a small but growing national resurgence in anarchist thought—a movement dedicated to wiping away just about everything the last 2,000 years of human civilization has produced: government institutions, industrial development, technology.

## **Eugene Becomes a Lab for Anarchists**

Eugene, a city of 150,000 that is best known as the home of the University of Oregon, has become a test kitchen for the principles of anarchy applied to small-town America. Issues like upscale restaurants and condominium developments, new downtown parking lots and logging of local forests—these are as likely topics as the writings of Emma Goldman and Noam Chomsky during weekly meetings of the 20 or so members of Eugene’s Black Army Faction.

In recent months, anarchists have vandalized the minivan of a police officer, writing “Die pig” across the back window; waged war over the removal of dozens of Stately old trees to make way for a downtown parking lot and residential development; started a grassroots community school with training in subjects like vegan cooking and worm cultivation; launched damaging attacks against local computer software and Nike outlets, in addition to several banks and restaurants; leafleted banks, mortgage companies, fast-food outlets and lawyers’ offices with messages like “Viva la Unabomber” and “Actualize industrial collapse.”

Nearly 75 showed up at a Northwest anarchist conference in Eugene in June, and later that month eight police officers were injured when a downtown march called by the Anarchist Action Collective to smash computers and television sets turned into a riot. Rocks and bricks were hurled through bank signs, shop windows, a hotel and motorists’ cars in a street action that included more than 200 activists. Police responded with shields, batons and made 20 arrests.

The anarchists are mostly teens and twentysomethings with inclinations toward black clothing and punk rock. But their numbers include middle-age intellectuals, artists and writers. And Eugene’s entire activist community has joined with them

on issues like the downtown trees, logging of national forests and animal rights. (It was probably the animal rights issue, businessmen say, that led to the smashing of the front window of a downtown furniture store advertising a “leather sale.”)

“I am not going to allow any group of ... urban terrorists to make our city streets a place where people feel like they can’t be,” said Mayor Jim Torrey, who was vomited on at a City Council meeting by a defender of the downtown trees.

“Eugene can be categorized as a unique city ... because we enable people of various points of view to feel comfortable in expressing themselves and feel comfortable in how they dress and where they convene,” Torrey said. “And to have an organization like the anarchists take advantage of that and create a situation where our streets are not safe—it has finally come to a point where the citizenry feels that enough is enough.”

The anarchists respond by saying that extreme times—high school shootings, corporate exploitation of Third World labor, destruction of native forests, genetic engineering of food—call for extreme measures.

“As governments and Corporations continue to kill us, many—mainly leftist and liberal types—still carry an article of faith in creating change through playing by the rules and being ‘civil’ to the system... In fact, one of the only reasons the state is getting away with what they’re doing today is because activists have quit using the revolutionary tactics of the 1960s,” a group of “anonymous, local anarchists” said in a statement in April.

“When a society is built on violence, violence is one of the only things that society can understand, and take seriously.”

## Movement Can Be Traced to 18<sup>th</sup> Century

Anarchist thought goes back at least to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and has been an important undercurrent in Marxism, trade union syndicalism and in conflicts like the Spanish and Russian civil wars. “Anarchism, in my view, is an expression of the idea that the burden of proof is always on those who argue that authority and domination are necessary,” writes Chomsky, the MIT linguist and anarchist whose writings since the Vietnam War have helped keep anarchism prominent on the fringes of political thought.

There are small but active anarchist movements in cities as diverse as San Francisco, Detroit, New York, Kennebunkport, Maine, Ozark, Ala., and Hiram, Ga. But the anarchists of the 1990s are taking on technology and civilization itself as the enemies, in addition to capitalism and the state, said John Zerzan, a Eugene anarchist writer who hosts weekly meetings of the Black Army Faction at his small home in a leafy Whitaker alley.

“I do think in terms of going back, really. Of dismantling things—the whole modern system, the technological system. Otherwise, you’re not really talking about changing anything. You’re just hiding,” said Zerzan, 55, who attained a notoriety of sorts for

his visits and correspondence with convicted Unabomber Theodore J. Kaczynski, with whom he says he enjoys an intellectual kinship.

The specter of police wielding pepper spray and batons in a progressive town like Eugene, Zerzan said, reflects the fact that Eugene's anarchists have moved beyond traditional progressive politics, even in a town that sees frequent action by radical groups like Earth First! and the Animal Liberation Front.

"We're not progressives. We're not leftists. We're not liberals. We are way past that," Zerzan said.

Whitaker, the neighborhood that straddles the Union Pacific tracks on the fringes of downtown, has become the center for the anarchists and other more mainstream activist groups that occasionally share the anarchist agenda. It is a neighborhood of stately maples and rundown bungalows, organic markets and bakeries, batik curtains and herbal teahouses.

At a time when migration from California has driven up housing prices in Oregon, it is the low-rent district, and Whitaker residents aim to keep it that way.

A key element of the anarchist agenda is the rejection of the traditional 40-hour-a-week job and the consumerism, and resultant environmental devastation, that such jobs support. A good many homes have no phones or television sets.

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“I think what you’re seeing here in the Northwest is … one of the last places where there are maybe still some wild places, and a lot of people—whether you call them anarchists or citizens—they’re really concerned about [preserving] these wild places,” Lewis, 43, said one recent afternoon spent, as he often spends summer afternoons, on the front porch with a book. “But it’s not just a single issue. You’re seeing classism everywhere. The rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. And the kids are seeing that, and they’re getting angry.”

“There’s obviously a lot that needs to be dismantled. You’ve got to start by taking back as much as you can of your life … rely on yourself and your neighbors rather than the state and institutions,” said 17-year-old Eric, a member of the Black Army Faction who declined to give his last name. “School is just a place where you’re being coerced into this life of a yuppie workaholic.”

Eric wears the dreadlocks and black attire of the Eugene anarchists, who also wear black masks during street actions. Many others have adopted earrings, nose rings and lip rings.

## Explaining the Allure of Being Radical

Dean Rimerman, a forest activist who has attempted to mediate between the violent and pacifist wings of Eugene, says he can understand the allure of radical action.

“The baby boom generation stumbled upon this great, meaningful awareness of how we could be a much more loving, caring society … , and unfortunately a lot of those elders have not stuck to their roots,” he said. “But what’s happened is people have been so concerned with working, to make their car payments, to make their house payments, to buy nice stuff, that they aren’t even spending time with their own kids.

“So you have all these kids in the community, and by them throwing a rock through a window, all of a sudden they get a sense that they actually have some power. When that brick goes through the window, there’s that sense of liberation for the first time.”

Jeff Passerotti, whose dream of owning his own business was dashed when the Blair Island Cafe closed its doors, says the anarchists were fighting a paper tiger when they picked him as the enemy.

“In the end, after we closed, they wrote this big thing on the side of the building: ‘We won.’ It was kind of hilarious to me because we weren’t fighting any battles with them,” Passerotti said.

“I kept trying to talk to them about anarchy, but they didn’t want to talk. When I was in college, I was a member of the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. It wasn’t that it was lost on me. I just couldn’t fathom that you couldn’t have a dialogue with them.”

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■ **Culture:** Eugene, Ore., has become a test kitchen for anarchists who have taken their message mainstream.

By KIM MURPHY  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

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## ANARCHY: A Revolutionary Movement Makes Gains

Continued from A1

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### Eugene Becomes a Lab for Anarchists

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Associated Press

Officers apprehended a suspect during an anarchist rally in downtown Eugene, Ore., last month.

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## Atlanta Gunman's 2 Children Eulogized

From Associated Press

LITHIA SPRINGS, Ga.—Boys and girls dressed in their Scout uniforms on Monday escorted the coffins of Matthew and Mychelle Barton, whose father killed them and tucked them into bed with their toys before going on a deadly shooting rampage.

Pictures of the victims in soccer and cheerleading outfits sat in a hallway outside the White Columns Chapel in this Atlanta suburb, where they were eulogized as loving, active children.

Fellow Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts acted as pallbearers.

"I want to remind you how your



The Ted K Archive

Kim Murphy

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The Los Angeles Times, 3 Aug 1999, pages 1 & 8.

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