

# Imagining an Anarchist Revolution:

## M. Gilliland's The Free

by Dr Daniel P. Jaeckle



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One of the thorniest issues faced by anarchists is imagining a viable process by means of which the contemporary world of dominance and oppression passes into a world of freedom and equality. Is the process to be evolutionary or revolutionary, and if the latter, is it to be violent or non-violent? Interestingly, not many anarchist fictions are dedicated to describing such a transformative process. Most either assume that the anarchist society already exists and devote little attention to how it came about, or they posit some catastrophic event that ends the old order and allows a new one to emerge.

Rarely does an author patiently outline a process of transformation that shows a continuous progress from something like the current state of society to an anarchist one. **1**

It is for this reason that M. Gilliland's *The Free* merits an essay here. **2.**

It is the most detailed fictional treatment of the movement from a world recognizably like our own to an anarchist society that I have read. More importantly, it is imagined strongly enough to allow readers to believe that events could happen this way. That is to say, it gives plausible answers to the two most important questions regarding such a transformation: under what preconditions is it likely to occur, and once it starts what factors most contribute to its success? After a brief summary of the plot, I trace the answers that *The Free* gives to these questions. **3**

*The Free* is unusually difficult to summarize, partly because of the number of characters, many of whom take turns being narrators, and partly because it intermingles personal and public matters so completely. But some idea of the whole can be attained by focusing on the setting, the main characters, and the stages leading up to and including a largely nonviolent revolution.

Most of the novel is set in an unnamed city somewhere not terribly far across the water from the Netherlands. **4**



The time is the not too distant future. As the novel opens, capitalism is on its last legs and global warming has made the weather more severe and dangerous. In this world we trace approximately four years in the young life of Linda Moon, who because of troubles at school and at home runs away, changes her name to Maxie, and moves in with Barney, an experienced anarchist organizer who suffers from bouts of celibacy

With a group of their friends the two soon move into Ragwort CoOp Pool (a consumer/producer cooperative) in a section of the city occupied by squatters and Clanners (Communal Autonomous Networks—about which more below), especially those from the Clan Earth. Barney fathers a child, Moonbeam, with the lesbian Maggie, and later falls in love with Lucia, a main force in the online movement called Women's Rescue. Meanwhile, Maxie pairs with the teenaged traveler Macker, who is trying to free his younger brother and sister from state custody after the deaths of his mother and father. Although Maggie is killed in the takeover of the docks that precipitates the revolution, all the rest of these characters survive until the end, and we largely follow the societal transformation through their perspectives on it.

It is noteworthy that Barney and Maxie are both active enough in the revolution to merit places on the hit list of the oppressive state forces. So throughout much of the novel they are in danger of arrest and death, first at the hands of their own government and, after it falls, at the hands of the capitalist forces who invade the land in order to return it to their sphere of influence.



Looked at from the level of society-wide events, the novel goes through three stages. The first is the slow but steady transformation of social forces before the revolution erupts in full force. This stage is characterized by the weakening of capitalism and the growth of decentralized, non-hierarchical social and economic groups of all kinds. During this period the anarchist culture that is growing up within the state is experimenting with an array of alternative ways of living, from running an economy without money to de-schooling children by having them become active in society, providing them lots of experiences, and supporting them with explainers rather than teachers.

The second stage of the transformation is the revolution itself, the overthrow of the state and the capitalists by the Free, a loose group that consists of all the radicals of whatever stripe acting together as needed. This stage begins when the Free take over the docks and precipitate a confrontation with the army. On the first day they win over a great many of the soldiers sent to disperse them, and in short order they extend this initial success until the capitalists and their political lackeys are forced to retreat.

The third stage involves the Free's confrontation with the invading forces from other countries as the foreigners attempt to restore the capitalist way of life to the new anarchist society. This stage in many ways is the most dangerous. Macker is arrested, Maxie flees for her life, and Barney and Lucia barely escape arrest by the Special Forces. It also has the potential to be the most violent stage of the transformation because the invading forces are not fighting against their families or friends but rather against people they consider immoral anarchists opposed to any acceptable way of life.

The novel ends with the invasion forces backing down both because the soldiers are seduced to the way of living they see in the land and because the inhabitants threaten retaliation by targeting first and foremost the officers of the invading force. At the end, although Barney has been shot, Maxie has attempted suicide, and Macker has suffered imprisonment and injury to his hands, still the couples Maxie and Macker and Barney and Lucia are reunited, safe, and ready to live in the new anarchist society.

A more detailed analysis of the anarchist transformation in *The Free* needs first to address the two preconditions that Gilliland posits as necessary to its success, namely, the internal weakening of capitalism and the creation of anarchist groups of all kinds within the capitalist structure of society. The revolution recounted in the novel would have had no chance if capitalism had remained healthy. But as the

story opens two forces have reduced its power.

The primary physical force subverting the traditional economy is the global warming that capitalism has caused. For example, shipping across the ocean has become difficult because of rough seas, airplanes can only fly at certain times of the year, and hurricane force storms are apt to hit the home city of the protagonists and wreak havoc at almost any time. The disastrous effects of these ecological changes on the capitalist economy are compounded by internal weaknesses within the economy, most especially the financial system.

The banks themselves are going under largely due to credit scams and “the debt and mortgage strikes” organized by their customers. **4**

By the time the novel opens most foreign-owned companies have fled the country because there is no more profit to make. Local capitalists are trying to keep the economy afloat, but because everything depends on credit from the financial institutions that is no longer forthcoming, factories have shut down or are on the verge of closing and leaving one more hole in the economy.

With the private sector failing, the government has had to take over a number of economic functions to keep things running. But the state itself has become so strapped for cash that it has had to borrow from the credit union of the Pools. With no major surviving source of revenue except import and export taxes, the state is no longer capable of paying even the interest on its loans. Consequently, the establishment schools cannot pay teachers; they can only stay open by using retired teachers who volunteer their time to run classes of a hundred students.

The army and regular police are ill paid when they are paid at all, and as a result their loyalty to the state has been eroded. And daily life has become difficult. The electricity goes out frequently, and each apartment has a meter (like a parking meter on the street) that needs constant feeding to keep light in the house.

Unemployment is rampant and there is no prospect of a future boom in the capitalist economy. In short, capitalism is all but dead, and its extreme ill health has left a breach for other forms of social and economic organization to fill.

Gilliland is well aware that in the last fifty years one of the most important shifts in anarchist thought involves the temporal location of the anarchist society.

Instead of seeing it only in the future, it is now commonplace to assume that the desired kind of anarchist society can begin now, indeed, has already begun, in any association of people that is decentralized, non-hierarchical, and anti-authoritarian.



In a famous passage, Colin Ward tries to capture this idea, often called prefiguration, by means of the metaphor of the seed beneath the snow: "a society which organises itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste, privilege and its injustices, nationalism and suicidal loyalties, religious differences and their superstitious separatism". **5**

Early in the novel, part of Gilliland's project is to show that a number of different kinds of anarchist organizations which have been buried by authoritarian institutions are now emerging. Some of them are interpolations of the kinds of organizations that exist today, while others do not yet exist but could and, Gilliland thinks, should exist. Although the range is wide, from de-schooling projects to online assistance programs like Women's Rescue, from the perspective of the revolution the three most important types of organizations are the CoOp Pools, the CLANS, and the Free Union.

In the helpful glossary at the back of the book, a CoOp Pool is defined as a combined consumers and producers cooperative, including a voluntary pooling of resources and skill sharing. Typically the CoOp Pools provide a ration of goods and services Money Free, but do measure their value, in Wurts, which includes a variable supply/demand percentage plus ecology cost, and a part for social desirability factors. **6**

These cooperatives are not strictly communist, if by communist one means "from each according to ability, to each according to need." In theory at least a person could fail to produce according to her ability. But it is not obvious what would happen in such a case; the novel never presents a good example, perhaps because such non-producing persons are so rare as not to merit attention. Generally, new members of a CoOp Pool are given credit cards and simply join the system without any fanfare. And they are as free to leave as they were to join. The system is fluid, non-hierarchical, and open.

The second major type of group, the CLANS (Communal Autonomous Networks), began as youth street gangs. They have been converted by organizers like Barney into militias associated with the local pools. Each CLAN has its own traditions and often its own specialty: for example, members of the Clan Orca are merchants and fisherpeople, while the Clan Eagle members have learned to use technically sophisticated wings to fly.

Finally, there is the Free Union, a horizontal organization of industry-specific unions that have taken the place of traditional unions. The traditional unions failed because they could not protect workers from the loss of pay and jobs as the capitalist factories and businesses failed. As conditions worsened, groups of workers simply took over factories, and in the novel's present they are running them on their own according to the principles of self-management. These renegade unions also organize mutual aid among the members and their families.

At the beginning of the novel, these anarchist groups are in touch with each other through several kinds of direct and indirect networks. Computers are crucial to their linkages, so that, as with the actual anarchist movement today, groups not only in the same city but world-wide have online connections and affiliations. They have also become expert at the fast creation of news stories with an anarchist slant, and they can use their computer connections and media skills to get the stories out quickly. Computers are also used for surveying opinions and voting on emerging issues so that direct democracy becomes convenient and timely—a process aptly named Wise-Mass.

In addition to the internet, cell phones are crucial and increasingly so as the plot moves forward. They play the role they play for many of us today—instant communication for people on the go. But they also have more revolutionary purposes. For example, Barney and Maxie have codes for secret messages from informants inside the capitalist system, and the Free even use cell phones to detonate improvised explosive devices. Without the possibilities created by the information age anarchism could not have gotten organized enough to execute the successful revolution that the novel envisions.

But it takes more than technology and a myriad of anarchist affiliations to prepare for the revolution. It also takes people like Barney, who has been working for years to tie disparate groups more closely together as a step toward revolution. Barney's special traits are his ability to communicate with people from all kinds of groups and his indefatigability in keeping up connections with those people over years. Although he and others like him have been working behind the scenes for a long time even before the novel opens, within the bounds of the narrative itself it takes something over three years from the time that Maxie runs away from home at the opening until the moment is ripe for revolution. (We know this because

early in the novel Maggie is four-months pregnant, and her child Moonie is about to turn three when Maggie is killed on the day the revolution begins.)

With the creation of several types of anarchist organizations, the technology to make communication immediate, and dedicated people working behind the scenes, it is fairly obvious why the movement is successful in turning so many people away from the old societal ways and attracting them to the anarchist cause. And the more that come over, the nearer the revolution.

The novel not only discusses global warming, the dissolution of capitalism, and the growth of anarchist organizations on the macro-level; it also examines the kinds of pressures that lead individuals to join the Free by initially focusing on Maxie Moon.<sup>7</sup>

The book opens with a lengthy account of the worst day imaginable for a teenage girl like Maxie. She discovers that her father is seeing a young woman from the neighborhood, vomits on the nun who is her teacher, is slapped by the nun and punches her back, tells her mother in front of a neighbor woman that her father is seeing someone and is called a liar for her efforts, and is pawed and hit by her father when he comes home.

Maxie realizes for the first time that her father has been abusing her for some time, and she finally admits to herself that the abuse is not her fault, that she is not the one wrecking the family. So she leaves home and sets out on her own, never to return. Her first move is to call Barney, a community organizer whom she met when he ran a playground program for youth. As the novel opens he is organizing the CLAN gangs into defense forces for the Pools, among other things. Barney takes Maxie to the flat he occupies, where she soon meets Maggie, an activist lesbian who comforts her, re-clothes her, and literally “adopts” her according to the Pools’ ways. Soon a group including Barney, Maxie, Maggie and several others moves into a squat together in one of the more central Pool territories.

In this new world with her new friends Maxie feels a sense of belonging, quickly overcomes most of her fears, and becomes an active and daring member of the Free. Clearly, her experiences are to be taken as typical of the youth of the time, especially the alienated and vulnerable ones: life in the old way is brutal and holds no future, whereas the way of the Pools and CLANS is dynamic, hopeful, and, most importantly, welcoming. It is no wonder that the Free can expand to become a major force for the good life in an otherwise dying society.

The second question posed in this essay is that of the factors that make for the



success of the revolution when it does erupt. This issue is pressing because so far in history no anarchist group has succeeded in establishing and maintaining a libertarian society for an extended period of time, the example of the Spanish Revolution notwithstanding. But Gilliland details how such a revolution might work in fact.

In addition to the preconditions of the internal weakness of the capitalist regime that is to be overthrown and the prefigurations and organization of the Free, two factors leading to a successful revolution seem most crucial: a quick and effective opening takeover so that the revolution does not get crushed before it even begins, and the creativity of the Free in imagining nonviolent ways to bring the enemy over to its side. To these factors we now turn.

At the end of the book in a short non-fictional section called “Revolutionary Fiesta” Gilliland quotes Diego Camacho, a participant in the 1936 anarchist takeover of Barcelona, to the effect that in that historical case it took only 36 hours to convert private to collective property.<sup>8</sup>

In the novel Gilliland is trying to show how the day-and-a half insurrection that worked in Barcelona could succeed again: the Free take about that long to effectively end the government’s resistance to their takeover.

The keys to this rapid initial success are an effective spark to the revolution, inside information about the government’s intentions from high placed informants, and a quick and massive outpouring of support from the population as a whole.

The spark that sets the course of events irrevocably on the track of revolution is the dockers union vote to take over the entire dockyard complex, including the factories and residence areas within its borders. The order of events surrounding this vote are a bit hard to follow, but they involve a series of three group actions. The first occurs two days before the revolution actually breaks out. It is a mass assembly of a large number of groups comprising the Free. Barney is the dynamator, the new term given to the Free by Lucia to refer to the one charged with facilitating a meeting.

The speaker with the most crucial message to share is Micky O’Byrne of the Free Dockers Union. He tells the group that on the next day in a dock-wide assembly the unions are going to vote to strike the port and occupy it as a Free Area. To give the takeover the maximal chances of success he asks for the union’s integration into the CoOp Pools, financial support from the CoOp Credit Union, and armed support from the CLANS Assembly.



In this world of direct democracy the Pools, Credit Union, and CLANS cannot decide on their response to O'Bryane's request until after the union assembly formally votes to take over the docks the next day. But it is immediately apparent that opinion is split. Significantly, in the testosterone-filled hall Maggie speaks out against the prospect of violence saying that if the assembly were half women there would be no possibility of their supporting O'Bryane's request for armed support.

Although this meeting ends with no major decision, it is clear to all that if the dock unions do have armed support in their takeover of the docks—and they may well be headed in that direction—then civil war will follow as night follows day. The second major meeting takes place the next day when the unions vote first to strike and then to take over the entire dock complex and unite with the Free Pool CoOps.

Immediately after these votes, the union puts its plan into operation, a set of actions on which Maxie comments as follows:

It was instant takeover. Just add supporters. Their defense groups had left already, bulldozing their way out the doors, to close the roads.

They were calling forward the big groups, assigning coordinators with flags and sending them on various tasks. Mainly to back up the pickets, but also to occupy offices, tour the factories, secure the machinery and the wharves. Stop ships leaving, take over the Customs headquarters, with their Union. Later, the police station itself. That's some of it. They had it well thought out I must admit.<sup>9</sup>

So the gauntlet is thrown down in front of the government, and it is time to see what support the dock unions will get from the CoOps and CLANS. The final action in the series is the vote of the Assembly in the Dock, with country-wide computer voting on whether or not to supply funding and arms to assist the dockers. Partly as a result of aggressive campaigning by groups like Women against War and the Pacifist Warriors the vote goes in favor of nonviolence. So the

democratic formalities end with a coalition of the unions, Pools, and CLANS committed to a nonviolent but activist stance.

While this last stage of democratic decision-making is in process, however, the Free are hardly waiting around for the final tally. In Maxie's interview with Brian Harper, a member of the Docks Defence group, it becomes clear that well before the vote is over many people have decided on their response to the prospect of an army at the gates in the morning.

They are already forming a nonviolent human blockade:

**'Brian, can you tell us what is planned to happen here if the army really arrive at dawn tomorrow as we expect?'**

**'Yes well that depends on what the Assembly decides on how people are voting up and down the country. But all these people you see sitting here outside the wall have decided already on the human blockade, and we've heard that thousands more are on their way..'** Brian explained clearly.

**'So you probably won't resist with arms.'** - I said.

**'Well if they decide on arms it would be very awkward, because we have no guns here as you can see. And in any case we could never start shooting with all these people sitting in the street.'** - **10**

As the day before the revolution draws to a close, the Free do all they can to ensure that this human blockade works. They set up bales of hay as a form of protection in case the army attacks, establish first aid stations, and encourage people to bring gas masks. More positively, they also ensure that flags with the names of their Pools are waving to let the soldiers and police know they are confronting friends and family from their area. Barney and Maggie are set up in a bunker to broadcast to the troops an invitation to cross the lines and join the Free. And reception groups are ready to lead the soldiers through the road blocks, give them breakfast, offer them credit cards, jobs, housing, and health care, and take them to the group from their area.

This seemingly spontaneous organization of the reception of the enemy at the barricades works nearly perfectly when the soldiers and police arrive the next morning: many of the state forces come across the lines and join the Free, the violence is minimal—only one death occurs, that of Maggie—and soon the forces that remain loyal to the state retreat. The dockyard and the Free are safe for the moment.

But the initial stage of the revolution is not quite finished. The governmental leaders quickly plan to attack the supply depots of the Free at nine in the evening

of the same day. However, as usual the Free have inside information about the attacks and so set up barricades in the streets and prepare weapons such as Molotov cocktails. The fight for the supply depots is quickly over, in large part because the soldiers and police do not have the heart for it and the mercenaries never show up. Without outside forces, the government has no chance of successfully countering the Free, either militarily or politically. And so in one day for all practical purposes the first stage of the revolution is over.

A large factor in the rapid success of these initial revolutionary efforts is the inside information that the Free receive. It comes from two different sources. The first is James Smith, born James Fitzroy-Smythe, son of a major industrialist and heir to a large fortune. James' life changed forever when his father discovered that he was having a homosexual relationship with Michael Dalton, a famous member of the Wildcats, "an underground organization dedicated through agitation, propaganda and sabotage to promoting the takeover of the workplace by the workers."<sup>11</sup>

The elder Fitzroy-Smythe had the police frame Dalton and six other members of the Wildcats for robbery. After being beaten to the point that they signed confessions, much to the sadistic delight of James' father, they were imprisoned, and later Dalton was killed. So James threw off his past, changed his name to Smith, was caught trying to bomb a police computer center, and served four years of the six-year sentence. Now he runs a consulting business called "All The Answers" as a cover for his gathering of information to help bring down the system. To the Free he gives three files: one on businesses about to go under, a second on abandoned properties, and the third the government's file on the Free, including plans to attack the Free's Air Factory and a hit-list of those among the Free that they intend to kill. Barney and Maxie are prominent on the list.

Later, on the day of the assembly that introduces the idea of the dock takeover, James delivers a report on the state of the docks and a warning that taking them over would lead to a country-wide revolution and a retaliatory response by the foreign governments that do the bidding of the trans-national corporations.

Needless to say, to have all this information before the insurrection is crucial to the Free. But the information from the other informant, Peter Kennedy, is even more essential. Kennedy is an aide to General Mulcatty, the army officer responsible for taking back the docks on the first morning of the revolution. It is Peter who tips off the Free that the army and police will begin their attack at 6 am.



Soon the government suspects that Peter is the traitor and so gives him false information to feed to the Free. But at the last moment he manages to get the real information from Mulcatty, namely, that the army is going to hit all the Free's supply depots beginning at nine pm. He only barely gets that true information to the Free by means of his dedicated cell phone before the secret police find him and shoot him dead. At the cost of his life he passes information to the Free that is absolutely crucial to the success of the initial insurrection. Like Maggie, he is one of the first and most important martyrs of the revolution.

The final factor that ensures that the revolution gets off to a good start is the massive support of the people themselves as they see the prospect of a new form of society emerging from the actions of the Free. In preparation for the confrontation at the gates of the dockyard on the first morning of the revolution, twenty thousand people come to “sit in front of tanks, with their babies and their grannies.”<sup>12</sup>

At the risk of their lives and the lives of their children they are willing to welcome their enemy into their midst. Fortunately, in the event the risk turns out to be well worth taking: the soldiers and police officers cross over to them in what Barney aptly calls an “historic mass mutiny.”<sup>13</sup>

These deserters themselves have little option but to join the Free as well: they cannot go back to their units without fear of reprisal, and the Free provide more benefits than any other group in the society—certainly more than are provided by the government. But the swelling of the ranks of the Free at the dockyards is only the beginning of the mass conversions. After the Free stop the government attack on the supply depots on the first evening of the insurrection, nearly the whole population of the country recognizes that the revolution has legs and so wishes to join the movement.



Once again Barney summarizes the situation perfectly: ...it was a watershed, the army being openly humiliated instead of destroying our goods depots, and the soldiers coming over that evening.

Because all the police began to follow suit, country stations were already allied with us, now more were publicly declaring for the Pools Federation.

Now everyone from rubbish collectors to the health workers, from the park keepers to the semi state bodies, were lining up for a credit card and anything else that was going. **14**

It hardly needs saying that the mass conversion of large numbers of people to the Free contributes greatly to the initial success of the revolution. Without the desertions from the police and army and without the thousands willing to organize as needed, a relatively bloodless takeover might have been very bloody indeed.

With the right spark of the dockyard takeover, the essential inside information on the government's plans, and the rapid conversion of a large part of the country's population, the first stage of the revolution goes as well as can reasonably be expected.

But the battle is only half done. For as James Smith rightly warned in the broad-based assembly meeting where the topic of the dockyard strike was broached to many of the groups constituting the Free, a successful revolution would force the rest of the capitalist world to respond: the spread of the alternative economy of the Free **"would be seen as a shocking example to a whole lot of other small bankrupt countries and so-called 'Failed States.' We'd be seen as threatening the hegemony of the trans nationals."** **15**

And a threat to power of the trans-national corporations is sure to mean armed intervention. In fact, however, it takes about a year before a coalition of the willing, the Pacification Intervention Force (PIF), actually invades the country, and so the Free have adequate time to prepare. They take steps to delay the PIF advances and cripple its effectiveness, for example, mining the roads and digging tunnels into the prisons to have access to any prisoners might be taken. But more importantly, they adopt the nonviolent strategy to "subvert, infiltrate, convert and corrupt" the PIF before they can bring the country back into the capitalist fold. **16**

Although not everyone is in favor of the decision to remain nonviolent for as long as possible, interestingly Gilliland does not spend much time on the moral philosophy behind that choice. There is no extensive presentation of the usual arguments that to turn to violence is to adopt the worst characteristic of the enemy and to surrender the fundamental anarchist values of respect for others and mutual

aid. Nor do the Free debate the principle that a nonviolent society cannot be born out of violence, that the ends cannot justify the means.

What Gilliland does do, however, is to explain how nonviolence can be effective. He or she thinks it can only be so when the utmost creativity is expended in the task of winning over the enemy to one's side. This creative nonviolent activity is the ultimate key to the success of the revolution in the face of the PIF invasion.

Two passages in which the Free react to specific situations by creative nonviolence will show us how they prefer to operate. The first occurs when Macker has been taken captive by the PIF and is being temporarily held in an armored vehicle. The enemy convoy is met by a crowd of gutsy Clan Yeti youth, the description of which merits quoting:

**Shaven and tattooed, more than half naked, wearing pouches, wide yellow arm bands and leather belts. Some in black. Some in green. Some on ponies. Steering their big wheeled trolleys, loaded with beer and ice. With bagpipes, trumpets, quivers, and the mockers blowing!<sup>17</sup>**

In a carnivalesque mood (not uncommon in this novel) the Clanners offer their beer and marijuana to the commandos for free, although with great good humor (also not uncommon in this novel) they set up a donation box for "Victims of Corporate Terror." Soon they also provide music, popcorn, and fruit. The Clanner women respond to the flirtations of the soldiers at the same time that they hand out cards telling the invaders how not to treat women. The Clanners also hand out free phones with a "What's-On" magazine.

Obviously, the soldiers are taken aback by these tactics, one calling the mission "a trip to another planet." But they are also very interested in talking to the Clanners and asking them questions. In the end the Clanners do not manage to get Macker out of custody during this initial confrontation with the enemy, but they have found him and soon report his location to his family and close friends. In the



meantime, the column is held up and learns something of the humanity, however unusual it may be, of their anarchist enemies—the first step to mutiny.

The second case of creative nonviolent activism in the aftermath of the revolution and subsequent invasion also concerns Macker. He is eventually taken to a prison, where he is held cuffed together with two other prisoners and their guard, a soldier named Wain. With them are three young women cuffed to a guard named Myra. At first it appears as if Macker will be freed, for when the PIF accepts the Ultimatum it promises to release its prisoners. But it soon becomes clear that it will do so only if the prisoner has an ID, proof of a regular residence, bond, and a medical certificate. Macker, who has none of those documents, appears to be headed for a long imprisonment.

But the prison security is compromised; specifically, the food service has broken down and has been taken over by Clanners. Two of them come in with a cart filled with stick-on tattoos. They give cell phones and credit cards to the guards Wain and Myra, enticing them to join the Free. Later the same night Macker's brother and Lucia's daughter, young Duna, sneak in on the pretense of passing out midnight popcorn to prisoners.

They already know all about the guard Wain. His ex-wife is not allowing him to see his daughter, even though he is entitled to online contact with her under neutral supervision. Women's Rescue has found Wain's sister, who has agreed to be the neutral supervisor. They have also contacted the ex-wife and gotten her to agree to the online contacts between her ex-husband and daughter so as not to incur prosecution for violating the girl's rights. Meanwhile Duna is flirting with the bisexual Wain, and they promise him a visit from the gay activist Jerry, whom he knows slightly.



Soon the two chains of handcuffed folks “escape” to an adjacent bar and then to the outside world. Myra gets to try out her credit card, and Wain has an online chat with his daughter. Eventually Wain decides to return to the army, and so the Free fashion a media event in which they “free” some of their “prisoners,” including Wain. The cover story that he was captured by the Free works with his army. They accept him back without issue. And now the Free not only have Macker back and Myra now among them; they also have another compromised soldier in the invading force, one who will never harm them for fear he will lose contact with his daughter.

From the ideological perspective Gilliland’s greatest success in the novel is this envisioning of creative nonviolent actions that undermine the will of the enemy to fight. The case of Wain best shows the combination of factors that are involved. First, there is information. In the internet world of the Free, all they need to learn is Wain’s identity and they can find out his life story, identify what he wants, locate his sister and ex-wife, and set up an interview between him and his daughter. Without access to immediate and virtually infinite information such tactics could not work.

Second, success requires organization. Unless there was a Women’s Rescue network, there would have been no lawyer to lean on Wain’s ex-wife to agree to the contact. And without the Clanners to go into the prison and identify Wain, there would have been no opening to the information.

Third, a number of people have to be willing to take risks, including the possibility of bodily harm or even death. People have to go into the prison at a time when clearly there are guards who want to rape the female prisoners bound to Myra. The courage shown, even by young teenagers, throughout the novel is remarkable.

Fourth, there has to be complete openness to accept Wain and Myra into the Free. One of the most attractive features of the anarchist society in the novel is the willingness of its members to accept all comers—including soldiers who a minute before were their enemies. They give newcomers food and credit cards and, most importantly, the ability to choose what they want to do. When Wain decides to go back to the PIF forces, the Free not only have no trouble with his choice but also go out of their way to assist him so that he has a persuasive cover for his absence.

The fifth and final factor is solidarity. If they call Jerry from the prison in the middle of the night and ask him to meet them so he can talk to Wain right away,

Jerry has to be ready to get up and go. If they believe Wain needs to be seduced in order to be turned and release his prisoners, Duna is perfectly willing to seduce him—despite her youth. If they need to stage a release of “prisoners” so Wain can go back to the PIF with impunity, everyone is willing to join in. They even televise the event. One gets the sense that no one in this society ever has to do anything by herself.

Taken together, these factors of information, organization, courage, openness, and solidarity are characteristic of the society of the Free. And they are all used in creative ways to further nonviolent direct actions that make the revolution possible.

Admittedly, this position of nonviolence does not mean that in certain circumstances the Free (or small groups with it) never turn to violence. A partial list of such exceptions would include the following. First, on the morning that the revolution begins a group of government commandos shoot an anti-tank grenade at the bunker from which Barney and Maggie are speaking to the crowd, killing Maggie and wounding Barney. The Free fire back at them with shotguns and so for the moment, as Barney tells it, “the State had trumped our pacifistic bluff.”<sup>18</sup>

Fortunately, however, that morning no further violence occurs and no government forces are killed. Later, when the Free learn through an informant that the government is going to try to seize their communication and supply hubs, they organize armed resistance. When the soldiers arrive they kill a few of them, including one who is burned alive with a Molotov cocktail. In addition, there is some looting after the skirmishes are over. But the important point is that the violence is so minimal. The soldiers have little heart for the fight, the killing ends quickly, and the Free do not harm the enemy deserters and prisoners. Sometime later, when the Free have to face the invading PIF self-defensive violence seems to be more necessary.

The PIF soldiers are difficult to bring over to the side of the Free peacefully because they have no relatives among their enemy and no history of observing anarchist groups in action. Indeed, because of the slanted international media coverage of the anarchist revolution the PIF soldiers are apt to think of the anarchists as sexually crazed, drugged up weirdoes who need to be brought back to decency and order.

As a result, in addition to all the nonviolent means of winning the PIF soldiers over, the Free take two steps that involve the potential for violence. First, in order



to slow the invasion they use IEDs to mine the most likely highways that the PIF forces will have to take, and when the time comes they actually set off some mines with cell phone triggers. Admittedly, the purpose is to delay the columns, not kill people. But in fact there is no guarantee that soldiers will not get killed. (As it turns out, Maxie loses her unborn child and Macker is captured in the bombing scene most closely narrated.)

And second, the Free give the PIF an Ultimatum: if by a certain day and hour they do not cease fighting the Free will begin “killing them back, tit for tat and starting with their officers.”<sup>19</sup>



Fortunately, the Ultimatum works and the PIF backs off, if only temporarily, making any further violence against them unnecessary. Finally, a small group from within the Free assassinates Killian Bate, the worst bully from Maxie's days in school and, after the revolution, the leader of the Brotherhood, a counter-revolutionary macho group working with the PIF. They play upon Bate's long-standing hatred of Maxie to entice him to the place where she recently has been living and execute him with a bullet to the head. However much Bate deserves such treatment, his assassination remains the most openly violent action of the revolutionaries in the whole novel.

Gilliland's decision to include some violent acts within the larger context of

nonviolence is not a blemish on the novel. On the contrary, the whole thrust of the description of the revolution, both in terms of its multiple narrators and their varying perspectives and in terms of the sheer wealth of details, is to make the event seem as complex as possible. Although one might be able to predict such events as a backlash against the Free by the foreign multi-national corporations and the governments that do their bidding, it is impossible to predict the day-to-day and even hour-to-hour events as they unfold.

In fact, because the Free is not a centralized, hierarchized social unit, one cannot even say that all of its constituent groups always agree and act in concert. Their values of initiative, spontaneity, and personal freedom ensure that there will be a dispersion of ideas, plans, and types of action among the members.

Even among the closest of friends in the book, Maggie and Maxie, there is not complete agreement about tactics: Maggie is far more of a pacifist than Maxie. She boldly speaks against arming the dockers' union at the first meeting in which it is raised, while Maxie is impressed with the organization of the dockers and will herself become active in the bombing of roads that the PIF will take in their invasion (though, again, without trying to kill enemy soldiers).

Barney also says that she would approve of the plot to assassinate Killian Bate if she were available to do so. Within this context, it is hardly surprising that different types of violent acts will be committed by some members of the Free. To expect that things could be otherwise would be to oversimplify the portraits of both the anarchism and the revolution so painstakingly developed within the novel.

When one steps back from the novel it is easy to see that Gilliland's narration of a successful transformation from a society not far from the state of western Europe today to an anarchist society is so compelling because of the amount of detail provided and the complexity of the situations that evolve as the plot unfolds.

The preconditions for the revolution that eventually topples the existing order include the ecological and financial factors damaging capitalism and the many kinds of anarchist groups that emerge within the society itself. These groups spring up almost as if by magic to take the place of failed capitalist organizations. And they succeed not only because they perform the functions that capitalism used to perform but more importantly because they provide a sense of belonging to people like the young and alienated Maxie.

The kinds of activities that these various groups undertake in the novel are many

and varied, from highly advanced ways to cultivate forests to ways of generating power without the use of carbon, from organizing activity centers for toddlers and older children to providing support for threatened gays.

The complexity continues in the novel's engagement with the issue of violence. Yes, some members of the Free commit violent acts during the revolution and against the invading forces that want to win the land back to capitalism. Some of that violence is completely intentional and integral to the strategies of success and survival. Some is more spontaneous.

But in the end the commitment of the Free to nonviolence is even more impressive. They prefer creative nonviolent action to violence whenever possible. And Gilliland is maybe nowhere more compelling than in the representation of such nonviolent actions as virtually infinite in creativity, whether it is spontaneous or planned, small or large, personal or social.

I do not know if this novel would ever persuade champions of the status quo that a transformation to an anarchist society is possible and might even succeed. I must admit that in my more pessimistic moments I fear that the trans-nationals would soon reinforce the twenty thousand troops of the compromised PIF and take more aggressive action against the Free.

But despite any such lingering fears, still the novel goes further in depicting a successful anarchist revolution than any other anarchist fiction I know.



## Notes

*\*The page numbers in these notes should be about the same as those in the pdf and printed book*

**1** Of course, there are revolutions and revolutions. For example, the Syndicate of Initiative in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (New York: HarperPrism, 1974) attempts to pursue a permanent revolution to keep the society of Anarres truly anarchist. But that is not the same as a full examination of how the society became anarchist in the first place. For more on Le Guin's ideas of revolution see Essay Four below, as well as Taylor Andrew Loy, "Anarchy in Critical Dystopias: An Anatomy of Rebellion," MA Thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2008 (available at [theanarchistlibrary.org/library/taylor-andrew-loy-anarchy-in-critical-dystopias-an-anatomy-of-rebellion](http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/taylor-andrew-loy-anarchy-in-critical-dystopias-an-anatomy-of-rebellion)).

**2** *The Free* was first published in 1986 by Hooligan Press of London (with a parenthesis after the copyright date saying "Except to anarchists"). In this original version, the book consisted of eleven chapters and 142 pages. In 2007 the novel was rewritten and greatly expanded. The text, now 342 pages, five acts and fifty chapters long, was published online in 2011 and in paper by Amazon in 2012. It can still be downloaded for free at [thefreeonline.wordpress.com](http://thefreeonline.wordpress.com). It also has a Facebook following and a wordpress blog, so that readers can respond. Although all these comments become part of the experience of the novel, for purposes of simplifying what follows **I refer to and quote only from the 2012 printed version.**

I should add that the 1986 version has its own interest. It does not often engage in ideological statements, it ends with the more realistic deaths of some characters as opposed to the more romantic ending of the 2007 version, and the speed of the narrative is compelling. I encourage those who can find the 1986 version to read it as well.

A biography of Gilliland is provided at the back of the book, and it is singularly amusing. It refuses to be clear about the author's gender (a decision I shall honor in this chapter by using "he or she" as the pronominal reference). Age, place of birth, and so on are also omitted. What is given divides into five parts: a degree in English Literature, a period as a Layabout in an unspecified locale, several years squatting in Amsterdam, six and a half years in Brixton, where the first version of the book was written, and an "extremely early" retirement near Barcelona, where he or she plays around "with gardens and mechanics, and, um, / look after children and horses," among other things (334). He or she does answer emails as

well: comments on an earlier version of this essay saved me from many errors in fact and focus.

**3** This approach to the novel obviously minimizes the interactions among the characters and their personal developments. But it also minimizes two other fine features of the novel—its attention to methods of ecological improvement from permaculture to alternative energy sources, and its attention to the wealth of detail on the functioning of the various social groups within the anarchist society. The novel could have just as easily been approached from an ecological or sociological perspective with interesting results.

**4** In a personal communication Gilliland reports that the lack of specificity of the setting is intentional, though he or she hints that the land has similarities to Ireland.

**4** Gilliland, *The Free*, 53.

**5** Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, 2nd ed. (London: Freedom Press, 1982), 18. The thought that anarchism is not about the future but about “uniting in new forms” in the present goes back at least to Gustav Landauer, especially his 1901 essay “Anarchic Thoughts on Anarchism,” conveniently to be found in *Revolution and Other Writings: A Political Reader*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Kuhn (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 84-91.

**6** Gilliland, *The Free*, 330.

**7** In providing this narrative of Maxie’s coming to anarchism *The Free* participates in the Bildungsroman subgenre of anarchist fiction as found in such novels as Dan Chodorkoff’s *Loisaida*, the power of much anarchist fiction hinges on making the pain inflicted by capitalist society personal and on making the comfort of anarchist society viable as an antidote.

**8** Gilliland, *The Free*, 341.

**9** *Ibid.*, 175.

**10** *Ibid.*, 182.

**11** *Ibid.*, 134.

**12** *Ibid.*, 183.

**13** *Ibid.*, 195.

**14** *Ibid.*, 205.

**15** *Ibid.*, 173.

**16** *Ibid.*, 238.

**17** *Ibid.*, 238.

**18** *Ibid.*, 195.

**19** *Ibid.*, 280.

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