

H-Net Reviews

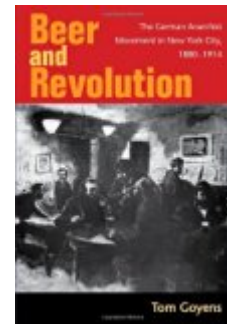
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tom Goyens. *Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York City, 1880-1914*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. 263 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03175-5.

Reviewed by Thomas Adam (University of Texas at Arlington)

Published on H-German (March, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher



“There were no bombs, though there was plenty of beer”[1]

Tom Goyens’s book investigates and describes the cultural and social infrastructure of New York’s German-American anarchist circles. It provides a colorful, impressive picture of this movement and makes a significant, valuable contribution to the recent turn towards transatlantic and transnational history by looking at a truly transatlantic movement: anarchism.

The German and German-American anarchist movement in New York was, as Goyens points out, “part of the broader history of international radicalism, making it an American, a German, and a transnational movement” (p. 3). And, although many in this country might identify anarchism with open and sometimes undifferentiated violence (and the Haymarket bombing in particular), there was nonetheless more to the movement. Anarchism was defined by two fundamental experiences: “one of momentum, the other of exclusion” (p. 5). Goyens contends that “the anarchists’ opposition to the state—their civil disobedience—became the foundation for a self-sufficient culture of defiance” (p. 6). Therefore, he explores the infrastructure of the anarchist milieu in New York by looking into its neighborhoods, particularly via meeting places, such as saloons and lecture halls. Yet, it would be impossible to reduce New York’s anarchist milieu to the meetings and political discussions in beer halls and saloons. Like the Social Democratic milieu in various German cities, it included social and cultural activities such as reading clubs, theater and musical groups, and even picnics, all of which represented the attempt to create a counterculture.

According to Goyens’s interpretation, beer halls were not just convenient places to meet and drink beer; they also “mirrored the anarchist sensibility” (p. 37). Since anarchists despised organization and structure, beer halls offered places for less formal political activities. New York’s saloons and beer halls provided a “decentralized network” for the movement, which represented a culture that was anathema to mainstream American culture and linked the anarchist movement to a “bohemian-artisan” lifestyle. Goyens’s suggestion that these meeting places also stood in opposition to orthodox socialist culture is somehow questionable, however, since German socialists practically built their movement in beer halls.

These claims may strike specialists as not especially novel. Many of his observations remind the reviewer of the results of similar studies of the German Social Democratic movement in the 1880s and 1890s. For instance, when Goyens describes a typical anarchist meeting and points to the function of the beer collector, one is immediately reminded of similar mechanisms in German Social Democratic meetings. Goyens correctly asserts that beer played a central role in German (Social Democratic) social life. In both German and American saloons, owners of these establishments allowed socialist or anarchist groups to meet in their back rooms not only out of sympathy, but also because they knew that anarchists in New York and Social Democrats in German cities such as Leipzig would provide a guaranteed income. In Leipzig, it was even customary for Social Democratic groups to pay *Lichtgeld* (“light money,” a charge to cover operat-

ing expenses) if they did not drink as much as the owner of the establishment had expected. Goyens's recounting of contemporary criticisms of overreliance on beer halls and the attendant emphasis on beer-drinking, as well as the groups' pride in conducting orderly meetings, will remind readers of comparable criticisms voiced by more radical Social Democrats in the German context. American militants and German radicals even used the same terminology when they spoke of petty club mentality (*Vereinsmeierei*), a phenomenon beautifully captured in Willi Bredel's *Die Väter* (1957). From my perspective as a student of Leipzig's Social Democratic movement, which always (but unjustifiably) carried the stigma of radicalism within the German movement, New York's German-American anarchists do not really appear radical. Goyens points to strong differences between the New York, Chicago, and London branches of anarchism and thus reminds us of the differences within that movement. He also traces the path of New York's foremost anarchist leader, Johann Most, to anarchism and reminds us that anarchism was not Most's choice. Expelled from the SPD, Most was pushed in its direction. He basically became an anarchist by default.

While within the historiography of American radicalism, Most and the Haymarket affair often serve as the epitome of German-American radicalism, Goyens's book reveals the diverse opinions, personalities, and neighborhoods that constituted the backbone of German-American anarchism in New York. His study moves beyond stereotypical portrayals and uncovers the fractured and divided anarchist culture of that city. There was not merely one German-American subculture in the city, as divisions occurred between more recent German immigrants and German-Americans who had already lived in the United States for years or even decades. Distinctions were also felt between German and Austrian émigrés. While the latter were proud of the progress that had been reached in their country, Germans were bitter and infuriated by Otto von Bismarck's anti-socialist laws, which had forced them out of their home. New York's anarchist subculture was by no means homogenous. It was an "amalgam of revolutionaries united in their opposition to the state, church, and the moneyed class but otherwise in disagreement over methods of action and a vision of how

an anarchist society should function" (p. 125).

Much of this may not appear especially novel. Indeed, Goyens's suggestion that German and German-American anarchists created a subculture of their own reminds me very much of methodological discussions since the late 1980s about the description and analysis of the Social Democratic movement in Germany from 1871 to 1914. Goyens speaks of a "mosaic of little worlds" (p. 7) to describe a concept to which German historians have traditionally assigned such terms as "milieu," "subculture," or "alternative culture." These concepts share a reference to urban spaces that provide niches for alternative life styles. Moving in the same general direction, in *The Monied Metropolis* (2001), Sven Beckert has demonstrated how a concept such as *Bürgertum* could successfully and fruitfully be applied to the study of similar phenomena in American society (in Beckert's case, the *Bürgertum* of New York).[2] I wonder if it would advance our understanding of urban subcultures such as the German-American anarchist subculture in New York if we would apply concepts such as "milieu." The advantage of transnational history is to look beyond traditional boundaries and national stories. It might also help us in developing a terminology that is not determined by national context but by a truly comparative perspective, and the application of such terminology across such boundaries would be an ideal test case.

Despite the familiarity of some of its themes, Goyens's book is an excellent example of transatlantic and transnational history. By placing anarchism in its transatlantic context, Goyens successfully follows individuals such as Johann Most from Germany to England and to the United States. It can only be hoped that other scholars will follow in Goyens's footsteps and that this work will spark many more inquiries into transatlantic and transnational phenomena.

Notes

[1]. Goyens, *Beer and Revolution*, 43.

[2]. Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Thomas Adam. Review of Goyens, Tom, *Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York*

City, 1880-1914. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23999>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.