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### Anarchism's Legacy

The central aim of Andrew Cornell’s *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the 20th Century* is to trace “the evolution of U.S. anarchism from one plateau—the Progressive Era—to another, the ‘long 1960s’” (p. 280). Cornell explains his rationale by noting that it is “commonplace to distinguish a period of classical anarchism (roughly 1860s to 1940) from a period of contemporary anarchism that was inaugurated in the late 1960s ... and continues into the present.” However, this sharp division between two periods of anarchism “suggests that the anarchist movement was nonexistent, or at least dormant, for a period of thirty to fifty years in the middle of the twentieth century.” The question then poses itself: how are these two periods of anarchism connected, if at all? Or as Cornell puts it: “How did anarchism transform from a class-focused movement based in poor immigrant communities before World War I to one that, in the last decades of the century focused on feminism, environmentalism, and cultural alienation while appealing primarily (but not solely) to native-born, white-middle-class youth?” Cornell addresses this by arguing that there is a “clear line of continuity” between the classical and contemporary modes of anarchism (p. 5). They are not two completely separate historical phenomena. *Unruly Equality* charts that continuity between the years 1916 and 1972.[1]

The book’s focus on this middle period of US anarchism means that the subtitle of the book, “U.S. Anarchism in the 20th Century,” is somewhat misleading. And the blurb on the back stating that this book is “the first intellectual and social history of American anarchist thought and activism across the twentieth century” is simply inaccurate. The book is not a history of US anarchism in the twentieth century and it does not aim to be one. It largely ignores the first fifteen and last thirty years of the century. The first part of the book “traces the disintegration of the traditional anarchist movement from its zenith in the second decade of the twentieth century to its nadir at the outbreak of the Second World War,” while the second part “examines the ways in which ideas and commitments that anarchists adopted in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s fundamentally shaped not only their own movement but also those of the New Left” (pp. 13, 14). It is this second aim, tracing the roots of contemporary anarchism in the anarchism of the 1930s-60s, where the book really excels. Cornell argues persuasively for contemporary anarchism’s historical roots in this period.
By the 1930s the anarchist movement was in poor shape. Two minor publications kept the anarchist flame alive for English-speaking Americans: *Vanguard*, which was published by a small group of anarchist-communists in New York that included Sam Dolgoff and Abe Bluestein, and *Man!*, an insurrectionist publication edited by Marcus Graham. There were some experiments in communal living in the Ferrer Colony in Stelton, New Jersey, and in the Sunrise Co-operative Farm in Michigan. And the early signs of a later dominant anarchist pacifism were visible in the Catholic Worker movement.

From the 1940s onward pacifism became a major issue for the anarchist movement. The experience of refusing to fight in World War II was a formative experience for many anarchists of the 1940s-60s. Those granted conscientious objector (CO) status were sent to Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps, while others, such as David Thoreau Wieck, were denied CO status and sent to prison for refusing to serve. Such struggles as the 1943 prison strike by imprisoned pacifists against racial segregation in the prison cafeteria would prove a precursor of later struggles for racial justice. It was in this early pacifist movement that people like Wieck, David Dellinger, Ralph DiGia, and Bayard Rustin, who would all play major roles in the New Left of the 1960s, began working together.

Anarchist discussion of war resistance and pacifism was developed in the pages of *Why?*, a magazine set up by former members of the Vanguard group and edited primarily by Audrey Goodfriend. *Why?* was joined by other new libertarian socialist publications, such as *Retort* and *politics*. *Retort* was published by Holly Cantine and Dachine Rainer from a small cabin in rural New York, just outside Woodstock, with aims of being a “journal of art and social philosophy” (p. 156). In addition to its political essays, it published early literary pieces by Saul Bellow, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Duncan, Kenneth Patchen, Norman Mailer, and e. e. cummings. After resigning as editor of the then Trotskyist-oriented *Partisan Review*, Dwight MacDonald founded *politics* with a donation from Margaret De Silver, the widow of the famous Italian American anarchist labor leader Carlo Tresca. *politics* would become a major intellectual magazine, publishing work by Albert Camus, Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, and C. Wright Mills. There was substantial cross-pollination between these publications as can be seen in the work of Paul Goodman, who would later gain fame with his *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System* (1960), but in the 1940s was writing for all three publications. A growing influence in this milieu was the work of the Dutch anarchist pacifist Bart de Ligt. His impact can be seen in a letter sent by Dellinger to Cantine, where he includes de Ligt in the left-wing pantheon: “Naturally, I have read quite a lot of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Kropotkin, de Ligt, and Trotsky” (p. 172).

Also during the 1940s, an anarchist-influenced subculture was growing. In San Francisco the Libertarian Circle developed around people who wrote for *Retort* and were inspired by the activities of the *Why?* group in New York. Led by Kenneth Rexroth and Gary Snyder, this group would be the catalyst for the San Francisco scene that would define much of the Beat movement of the 1950s and the Hippy scene of the 1960s. Further cultural developments included the opening of a series of linked institutions, which Cornell explains were “established by the postwar anarchist pacifist milieu in the early 1950s” (p. 203). These included KPFA-Pacifica Radio, the King Ubu Gallery and City Lights Bookshop in the Bay Area, and the Living Theatre in New York.

In chapters 7-8, Cornell describes in more macroscopic detail how this anarchist milieu developed, looking at its relation with the black freedom movement (chapter 7) and the 1960s New Left and counterculture (chapter 8). He traces how the early pacifist movement around the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the War Resisters League,
and Peacemakers led into the Journey of Reconciliation movement of 1947 against segregated buses and in turn into the development of the civil rights movement. He describes how this movement, as organized in and through groups like Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), echoed the non-hierarchical methods of organizing of the anarchist-pacifist movement. However, Cornell tries not to exaggerate the anarchist influence here. It was quite limited. He places more focus on how the black freedom movement influenced the anarchist movement than vice versa. He looks at the debates regarding this movement in the pages of the main anarchist publications, which had, by this stage, undergone some transformations. Why? had been renamed Resistance. A new New York-based anarchist group, again organized around Sam Dolgoff and former Vanguard members, had launched the publication Views and Comments. And Dellinger, Rustin, and others involved in the Journey of Reconciliation launched the highly influential Liberation. Within the pages of these publications the development of the black freedom movement was discussed at length. There was some controversy surrounding the growth of theories of national liberation and debates concerning violence, both in terms of the movement in the United States and in the movements against colonialism and imperialism globally.

These controversies continued into the sixties with the rise of the New Left and the counterculture. In his chapter on this, Cornell zooms out and gives a nice but reasonably familiar description of the libertarian end of this period. He sketches an overview of groups like Rebel Worker in Chicago, the Diggers in San Francisco, Anarchos and Black Mask/“Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker!” in New York, and Fifth Estate and MC5 in Detroit. And his discussion of some of the conflicts in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and in the movement generally are a good introduction to the topic.

Cornell argues that “as the 1970s dawned, the anarchist movement looked much more like it does today than it did before World War I: its members were predominantly young and middle class and were enamored of critical theory; and increasingly they were turning toward the politics of feminism and ecology. Then, as now, anarchists devoted considerable energy to living out their beliefs in daily life and expressing their politics through consumption choices, sartorial cues, and countercultural artistic practices” (p. 16). He concludes by describing his book as “a prehistory of contemporary anarchism” (p. 280).

The problem is that at times the book can read precisely as this, a history where the past inevitably leads to the present and where it is assessed through the lens of contemporary anarchism. This is a particular problem with the early part of the book. His discussion of classical anarchism at its height in chapter 1 is rather odd. He describes the movement as a “class-focused movement based in poor immigrant communities,” but he devotes a mere four pages of a fifty-two-page chapter to anarchosyndicalism (p. 5). In contrast, he gives eleven pages to what he calls “anarchist bohemianism.” Strangely, it is within the framework of early twentieth-century anarchist bohemianism that he discusses issues of race and gender. He addresses the relation of race- and class-based organizing in a single dismissive sentence and treats gender as though completely separate from the class-based concerns of people like Rose Pesotta and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union. Despite explaining that the “numerical zenith” of US anarchism at the start of the century owed “significantly to the organizing vehicle provided by the IWW” (Industrial Workers of the World), in subsequent chapters the IWW scarcely appears (p. 51). Even in the discussion of the decline of classical anarchism, the decline of revolutionary syndicalism is almost entirely folded into the Red Scare after World War I. He neglects not only the “class-focus” of classical anarchism but also its immigrant base. Throughout the book, Jewish anarchism
around *Fraye Arbeter Shtime* and Italian anarchism around the insurrectionist *L’Adunata dei Refrattari* and the syndicalist Carlo Tresca reappear at curious junctions. But the story of these immigrant groups is never fully told.

From the decline of classical anarchism onward, questions of class and relations of production are rarely addressed. We see occasional glimpses of how these issues were being considered. For example, he includes a quote from Dellinger: “the fight against military conscription cannot be separated from the fight against the economic conscription involved in private ownership of the country’s factories, railroads, and natural resources. *The enemy is every institution which denies full social and economic equality to anyone*” (p. 173). But overall there is little sense in the book that the people being discussed are concerned with a libertarian *socialism* or with an anarchist *communism*.

Despite these criticisms, in writing *Unruly Equality* Cornell has provided both a fascinating in-depth history of mid-century anglophone US anarchism and a useful overview of the roots and development of contemporary anarchism in the United States. As a result, Cornell’s book is certainly a welcome contribution to the historiography of US anarchism.

Note

[1]. In a nine-page epilogue, Cornell provides a “cursory outline” of anarchism from the 1970s to today (p. 291). This outline is remarkably comprehensive and to my knowledge accurate. It will be a useful guide for any historian wanting to examine contemporary American anarchism.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at [https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms](https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms)
