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Learning from the Complexities of History

More than one way to query the past, many
questions to ask

F.O.F.

2017, Summer

a review of

Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century by
Andrew Cornell. University of California Press, 2016

*Nonviolence Ain't What It Used To Be: Unarmed Insurrection
and the Rhetoric of Resistance* by Shon Meckfessel. AK Press,
2016

Reading about history with anarchist ideas in mind can often be inspiring and sometimes even lead to insights useful in present-day situations. Andrew Cornell and Shon Meckfessel have written books that are treasure-troves of information about the multifaceted 20th century North American radical movements for societal change. They are helpful companions to the various memoirs and retrospectives on anarchist groups of the period published during the past decade by Anatole Dolgoff, Penelope Rosemont, Franklin Rosemont, Larry Gambone, Ben Morea, and others.

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Fifth Estate #398, Summer, 2017, accessed March 24, 2024 at

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/398-summer-2017/>

[learning-from-the-complexities-of-history/](https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/398-summer-2017/learning-from-the-complexities-of-history/)

*F.O.F. is a long-time anarchist and friend of the FE, and is a
friend of fossils, but not fixated on them.*

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Cornell directly explores some of the lesser known relationships between anarchists of various tendencies, militant labor union activists, groups fighting against racism, cultural rebels, those fighting for women's, lesbian and gay (now more broadly including LGBTQ), liberation, as well as pacifists addressing when and how to employ non-violent methods of protest.

Concentrating on the first seven decades of the 20th century, he describes diverse anarchist groupings, including insurrectionist, anarchist-communist, anarcho-syndicalist, anarcho-pacifist and countercultural tendencies.

He outlines the growth of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) at the beginning of the century and its relationship to anarchists in the U.S., including the IWW's pioneering creative use of on-the-job direct action and the free speech movements, both providing important resources for later labor and social justice struggles. The role both the IWW and anarchists played in the anti-authoritarian rejection of Bolshevik subversion of the 1917 Russian revolution is touched on.

Cornell also briefly considers World War I and the postwar political repression of IWWs, anarchists and socialist groups along with attacks on African American communities which were occurring at the same time.

Meckfessel's book while not primarily focused on anarchist history as such, provides some highly relevant context through exploration of concerns of the other political movements and examination of the dynamic meanings of the demonstrations, riots and urban rebellions that created the background of the 1960s and 1970s.

In considering riot as rhetoric, he discusses the focus in the 20th century insurgencies on demands for social justice compared with the concentration in the 21st century on breaking out of powerlessness.

Motivated by current debates about violence versus nonviolence in activist circles, both Cornell and Meckfessel examine

how these concepts were understood in the past and how they are represented in establishment and anarchist circles today.

While recognizing the importance of the ongoing discussion of this issue, there are also some other topics that these books bring to mind which deserve further examination.

For many in the movements of the mid-20th century, finding forms of organization that were appropriate to and reflected non-hierarchical means and ends was of prime importance. Cornell notes how anarchists indirectly contributed to ideas of egalitarian, decentralized organization in Black Freedom struggles during the late 1950s and 1960s, as well as the ways that movement motivated anarchists to think more deeply about the intersections between class and racial oppression.

He also tantalizingly refers to the relationship between changes in class composition—which occurred at the beginning of the 20th century, in the 1920s and again after the Second World War—and the resulting changes in manifestations of resistance and rebellion.

Meckfessel notes the relationship between changes in class structure and increasing inequality that have contributed to growing government control and repression of expressions of dissatisfaction. Over time restructuring of the labor market also definitely has had a significant impact on who would be attracted to anarchist movements.

While the changing makeup and size of anarchist groups has caused disorientation and justifiable worries about isolation from the larger society, Meckfessel asserts that they have also provided opportunities for developing more egalitarian and liberatory relations between different groups opposing the status quo. He notes that diversity of goals and tactics can be understood as strengthening anti-authoritarian possibilities because of a multiplicity of self-definitions, even though posing severe ongoing challenges.

With this in mind, it is relevant to explore more deeply the differences and similarities in meanings between concepts of non-hierarchical anti-authoritarian methods of self-organization in the past century and today.

Many anarchists of the 1960s and 1970s era were not interested in either non-violence or armed struggle groups, but favored the kinds of self-defense they learned through their interactions with the IWW (as mentioned in memoirs and retrospectives and remembered by many who have not recorded their experiences).

During the late 1960s through the beginning of the 1980s, the IWW helped to educate and encourage many young anarchists and anti-authoritarians who felt alienated from both pacifist and self-styled militaristic vanguards. Close examination of this experience could possibly shed further light on the emergence of later insurgencies, including but not limited to, connections with ecologically-concerned groups.

The conflicts between Marxist and anarchist ideas of the state, the genesis of revolutions, and struggles for national liberation also deserve further scrutiny in the context of the historical information and frames of reference developed by both Cornell and Meckfessel.

It is just possible that deeper discussions of these and related topics could contribute to a greater clarity about truly meaningful resistance in the future.