

Anarchism in the United States

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Anarchism in the United States to 1945

Ronald Creagh

Historians have adopted two approaches in their study of anarchism in the United States. Some narratives concentrate on individuals and grassroots movements with relatively well-defined connections to a historical anarchist movement. Others seek traces of anarchism in a broader sense, in fields such as art or philosophy or in some independent group or personality. There is indeed no single “essence” of anarchism but a wealth of perspectives as well as unexpected rebirths.

Both approaches require specific narratives. Elements of anarchism in the broad sense of rebellions against the state or other established authorities appear during the colonial period and up to the Civil War, while after the 1870s, it is mostly absorbed by emergent anarchist organizations. Both currents will fade after World War I due to a variety of causes: mass culture and repression progressively corrode working-class institutions, union leaders are integrated into the establishment, and the Russian Revolution and the New Deal promote participation in political parties as the sole avenue to social change. Before World War II, protest movements rarely dissent with “the system,” but on the contrary call for state recognition of their requests.

Anarchism at Large

Early colonial dissent offers evidence of anti-statism, originating from the religious and socio-economic radicalism developed by lower-class spokespersons at the time of the English Civil War. Antinomianism opposed inner inspiration to political laws, and in the New England controversy of 1636–8, John Wheelwright went so far as to make a principled condemnation of all legislation. His sister-in-law, Anne Hutchinson, opened in her house a group for free discussion of ministers’ sermons, to the great displeasure of the orators. Exiled to Rhode Island, the antinomian mystics rejected all civil authority, with one William Harris claiming that the people should shortly cry out, “No lords, no masters.” The Pennsylvania Quakers had anarchistic patterns of decision-making, and although they voted, they refused to be sworn in and could not run for office; they also rejected many components of public administration such as army, police, and bureaucracy. The frontier spirit called for decentralization, community self-organization, a distrust of hierarchies, and a form of individualism quite different from the European bourgeois posture: one had to count on one’s own resources, learn community life, and make decisions without relying on opinion or prejudice. All through colonial history and even afterwards, a number of riots and rebellions could better be described as insurrections. These uprisings appeared at a time when the state’s hold over society was somewhat fragile and collectivities felt deprived of their rights. Such was the case of early movements like Shays’ Rebellion and other revolts, including those of black slaves, and at the end of the nineteenth century, the Filipino independence struggle.

The American Revolution offered lessons for the future. After all, the Boston Tea Party was an example of direct action and the war against the British was an insurrection. The American anarchist contestation of state authority could find a justification in the Declaration of Independence which asserted the rights of people “to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with one another” and abolish governments “which have become destructive.” In spite of the

Constitution, the Insurrection Act of 1807, the Civil War, and the rampant proliferation of state powers, a large number of dissident movements framed their own Declarations of Independence. Anarchism now was at the very core of the nation's imagination. Even if the word could be insulting, anarchists were rarely marginal people. They were marginalized by the establishment, but rarely by their co-workers. Indeed, anti-statism was an American tradition, though far from the only one.

Communal Experiments

Egalitarian associations appeared with the much-publicized experiment in New Harmony, Indiana, promoted by Robert Owen. The founder's communistic ideas inspired three important trends: a condemnation of capitalism as the defense of private interests; an egalitarianism embracing men and women alike; and the notion that the social environment conditions individuals. Individual reform was therefore insufficient: the whole economic system had to be changed. In 1826, the Kendal commune of Ohio condemned "the system of individual and private interests," declaring: "it is reasonable and justifiable to change the whole system as soon as it can be done prudently, and with safety to the community at large" (Fox 1911/1979: 178). The Owenite movement incited Josiah Warren to start his rural experiments which, in reaction to "socialism" and "communism," advocated individualism. Intentional communities flourished up to the Civil War; they believed that changing the system was a desirable goal, immediately attainable and imitable all over the world.

The 1848 Revolutions

The Paris insurrection of February, and the 1848 revolutions in Europe, introduced in the United States a number of political refugees and spread the spirit of the *Junges Deutschland* and free thought through German papers. In New York, the French Joseph Déjacque invented the word "*libertaire*" (source of the English word "libertarian," originally synonymous with "anarchist"), castigated Proudhon for his anti-feminism, and wrote the first anarchist utopia, *L'Humanisphère*.

Prelude to the Civil War

Josiah Warren initiated the famous "Modern Times" colony in Long Island, and later made deeper contacts with the working class, particularly the Sovereigns of Industry. A number of people circled around him, particularly William B. Greene, who defended working women's interests in Massachusetts, and Stephen P. Andrews, who founded the Unitary Home in New York and participated actively in what we could call today "Free Universities." He also debated free love with Henry James Sr., whose son, William James, would also express some anarchistic sentiments.

The protest against slavery engendered illegal and anti-statist actions as the Underground Railroad or the abolitionist movement, with the New England Non-Resistance Society of William Lloyd Garrison. One of the most outspoken leaders was John Humphrey Noyes, while Henry David Thoreau adopted a strong ethical anti-statism. Signs of distrust and occasional refusals of allegiance to human governments multiplied (Allen 1930: 694-7). John Brown, who in some ways had been anticipated by Lysander Spooner, became a hero. However, in spite of their condemnation of the institution, many anarchists condemned federal state interference.

Referring to these traditions, early postwar “anarchists” defined themselves as abolitionists – they asked for the abolition of the state.

The International Workingmen’s Association

In the US, the rising working class created its own institutions and, before the age of the penny press, published its own papers, defending its particular aspirations. Cooperativist and mutualist ideas were in the air. Anarchist papers increasingly addressed all social issues, rather than restricting themselves to labor questions, and worked out new concepts of social action.

The foundation of the International Workingmen’s Association (IWMA) in the US brought together people with different convictions, including a fair number of Proudhonians in the American and French sections as well as a strong autonomist current that would not submit to Marx or anyone else. After the eviction of anarchists at The Hague Congress in 1872, most American and French sections decided to maintain their autonomy; some associated with the Swiss Jura Federation, which developed anarchism as a positive conception of social organization.

The dissolution in 1876 of the IWMA, its merging with the Workingmen’s Party of the United States, and later the disastrous electoral experience in Chicago curtailed working-class expectations about political action. Some leaders now embarked on a radical quest for a society in which the worker would no longer be “deprived of the fruits of his labor.”

The Social Revolutionaries

The year 1881 would inspire new actions all over the nation. From Russia came the news of Sophia Perovskaya’s assassination attempt on Alexander II and her execution. She became a revolutionary model and revived the old tradition of tyrannicide. Could the murder of symbolic figures of the establishment spark off an insurrection of the oppressed classes? Not in the United States, said Benjamin R. Tucker, whose *Liberty*, the organ of individualist anarchism, debated for several decades on workers’ rights, economic theory, and other topics. But as it shifted from Proudhonism to radical Spencerism to Stirnerite egoism, this caused dismay to a number of readers for whom anarchism was first and foremost an ethical issue.

In London, the 1881 Social Revolutionary Congress set the framework for a proactive movement. Delegates represented Boston, Philadelphia, New York, the young Icarian branch of French Americans, and the Mexican Federation. This nodal event was followed by two Congresses in Chicago (1881) and Pittsburgh (1883), where delegates endorsed a strategy of unionization as a means to revolution. Anarchist structures were being embedded in the working class across the country. Clubs spread in many cities and in metropolitan areas many neighborhoods and immigrant communities had their meeting place. Newspapers, pamphlets, and booklets multiplied. In Chicago, the *Alarm* claimed 3,000 readers, while the Germans had their daily and the Bohemians their weekly. In New York, Johann Most’s *Freiheit* enjoyed an international readership while other newcomers subscribed to anarchist periodicals from the old country. Labor papers expressed popular discontent and unrest but also described the workers’ condition, advocated woman’s emancipation, free speech, free love, and many other causes.

The Haymarket bombing of 1886, followed by the death sentence for innocent anarchists after a mock trial, did not signal the end of the movement, but induced a number of Chicagoans to

settle elsewhere and propagate their ideas. Many cities like Chicago, Detroit, or Philadelphia maintained their key figures like Lucy Parsons, Jo Labadie, or Voltairine de Cleyre.

The birth of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) introduced spontaneity. They melted into the working-class culture and enlivened it; they also worked out new ideas such as the rank-and-file organization, the general strike, and the sit-in strike.

Immigrant Circles

As anarchism dwindled within old German communities, new anarchist networks appeared in the immigration of French-speaking miners in Pennsylvania, Italians in the Paterson silk industry, and other groups like the Mexican Americans and the Russian exiles. The best structured movement was Jewish American, particularly in the clothing industry. Everywhere issues were vehemently discussed, particularly within the Jewish community, which was also confronted with Zionism. Effervescence contributed to promote public figures such as Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, and, on a lesser scale, lecture tours by foreign visitors and organizers such as Peter Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, Luigi Galleani, Camillo Berneri, or Joseph Tortelier. A sparkling array of newspapers, particularly *Mother Earth*, with a readership of several thousands, and the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, a Yiddish daily, covered the country. Anarchist events were now visible on the American scene, including among artists and a few intellectuals.

After the Palmer raids, the movement faded, notwithstanding the arrival in 1931 of another influential couple, Rudolf Rocker and Milly Witkop, and Carlo Tresca's labor agitation. Nonetheless, the cross-fertilization of international relations helped the movement to survive.

The International Impact

American anarchists were associated with the Magón brothers' revolutionary efforts in Mexico. They inspired the Sikh Lala Har Dayal, the Chinese Ba Jin, and the Japanese Kotoku Shusui. May Day celebrations around the world memorialized the Haymarket martyrs. The IWW developed in the US and spread to other countries. In spite of repression, anarchists aroused a world protest against the infamous trial of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in the 1920s. The protesters later established international anti-fascist organizations. The 1936–9 Spanish Civil War impressed radicals and was a turning point for some. When World War II broke out, it was a recent convert, Dwight Macdonald, who now carried the pacifist torch with fellow writers such as Paul Goodman.

SEE ALSO: American Revolution of 1776 ; Anarchism ; Anarchism and Culture, 1840–1939 ; Anarchism in the United States, 1946–Present ; Anarchosyndicalism ; Berkman, Alexander (1870–1936) ; Boston Tea Party ; European Revolutions of 1848 ; Flynn, Elizabeth Gurley (1890–1964) ; Garrison, William Lloyd (1805–1879) ; Goldman, Emma (1869–1940) ; Haymarket Tragedy ; Haywood, Big Bill (1869–1928) ; Hutchinson, Anne (1591–1643) ; Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) ; Magón, Ricardo Flores (1874–1922) and the Magonistas ; New Harmony ; Owen, Robert (1771–1858) ; Palmer Raids ; Proudhon, Pierre Joseph (1809–1865) ; Sacco and Vanzetti Case; Shays' Rebellion ; Slave Rescues and the Underground Railroad, United States ; Spanish Revolution ; Utopian Communities, United States

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Anarchism in the United States, 1946–Present

Gabriel Kuhn and Jesse Cohn

In the first decades after World War II, anarchism did not play a significant role in US politics. One notable organization emerging in the 1950s was the Libertarian League (dissolved in the late 1960s) around anarchosyndicalist Sam Dolgoft (aka Sam Weiner, 1902–90), but the immigrant communities that anarchists like Dolgoft came from were rapidly integrating, leaving African Americans as the largest pariah group – a community in which anarchists had almost no presence. The pacifism espoused by some anarchists during World War II, in contrast to communists’ support for the war after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, further marginalized the movement, though endearing them to a segment of bohemia on both coasts. In this counter-cultural milieu, the writings of Paul Goodman (1911–72) proved influential.

Partial Revival of Anarchism in the 1960s and 1970s

Anarchism, although rarely in an ideologically pure or traditional form, regained popularity in the late 1960s in the context of the decade’s social protest movements. Anarchist elements were present amongst the Yippies, or in Situationist groups like San Francisco’s Point Blank or New York’s Black Mask, and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) harbored a number of anarchists. It was one of these, decrying the seduction of SDS by authoritarian and van-guardist tendencies, who would come to have the strongest impact on the US anarchist movement and its development: Murray Bookchin (1921–2006).

The emergence of radical feminism, with its anti-hierarchical ethos, afforded another opportunity for the rediscovery of anarchism. Throughout the 1970s, Peggy Kornegger and others contributed to a growing body of anarcho-feminist theory. Meanwhile, although black radicals tended to take Third World Marxist movements as their model, some looked back to anarchism; the Black Panthers reprinted Nechaev's *Catechism of the Revolutionary*, and in 1979, a former Panther disenchanted with communism, Lorenzo Komboa Ervin (b. 1947), published his seminal pamphlet, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*, introducing the concept of a "Black Anarchism" to radical debate. Another ex-Panther, Ashanti Alston Omowali (b. 1954), began publishing a zine titled *Anarchist Panther* in 1999.

The anarchist press was also recovering. In Tucson, Fred Woodworth founded the oldest still publishing anarchist journal in the US, *The Match!*, in 1969. In 1975, the underground journal *Fifth Estate*, founded 1965 in Detroit, turned into an influential anarchist journal. In 1980, the individualistic *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* was founded in Columbia, Missouri. One of the most influential anarchist books of the 1980s was Fredy Perlman's (1934–85) *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!* (1983), which is widely regarded as a precursor to the anarcho-primitivist movement that developed in the 1990s. Several books published between 1978 and 1995 by historian Paul Avrich (1931–2006) provided essential contributions to the study of anarchist history in the US.

Other forms of anarchist movement infrastructure were slower to emerge. In 1971, Bookchin founded the Institute of Social Ecology, an important center for the development of anarchist thought in the US for the next three decades. Activists involved in the Clamshell Alliance, wedding anti-authoritarian organization to the newly emerged anti-nuclear movement in the late 1970s, inspired the creation of Food Not Bombs. None of these institutions drew much participation from blue-collar workers or communities of color, however, and the cultural identification of anarchism with youth and whiteness would be reinforced by the emergence of the predominantly young and white punk subculture at the end of the 1970s.

Second Revival: The 1980s and 1990s

Punk, while politically ambiguous, espoused an anti-authoritarian, "Do-It-Yourself" ethos that fostered a renewed interest in the anarchist tradition among the young, and by the 1980s punks were anarchism's most visible representatives. In Minneapolis, the Profane Existence collective, founded in 1989, functioned as a focus for the anarcho-punk movement. Meanwhile, links between anarchism and the radical segments of the environmentalist movement continued to deepen, as groups like Earth First! turned to anarchist direct action tactics such as eco-sabotage, while Bookchin's philosophy influenced the emerging Green movement.

Various developments characterized the anarchist movement in the 1990s. While anarcho-syndicalist Noam Chomsky (b. 1928) became US anarchism's most prominent author, Hakim Bey's 1991 essay collection, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, propounding a non-ideological, artistic, and spiritual understanding of anarchy, was also highly influential. In the same year, the Love & Rage Federation was founded as a North American anarchist organization. It split in 1999 over disagreements about principles of organization. An anarcho-primitivist movement emerged around author John Zerzan (b. 1943), whose popular essay collection *Future Primitive* (1994) featured radical anti-technology and anti-civilization sentiments. Murray Bookchin caused much debate with his booklet *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An*

Unbridgeable Chasm (1995), a critique of what he condemned as individualistic “lifestylist” tendencies within the anarchist scene. The booklet proved divisive in anarchist circles and marked the end of Bookchin’s dominant influence on anarchist discourse. The reaction against Bookchin peaked in Bob Black’s polemic *Anarchy After Leftism* (1997), a text that also marked the beginning of the post-anarchy movement, most prominently advocated by *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, editor Jason McQuinn (b. 1952). In 2002, Bookchin announced his “break” with anarchism.

The opening of a US branch of British-founded AK Press in 1994 and the foundation of the Institute of Anarchist Studies as a forum for theoretical debate and research in 1996 were both major contributions to the country’s anarchist infrastructure. Throughout the decade, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and Earth Liberation Front (ELF), both with strong anarchist leanings and support, conducted sabotage actions against alleged perpetrators of animal exploitation and environmental destruction.

Anarchists were strongly involved in the 1999 anti-World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle, receiving media attention unknown in decades. A rapid growth of the anarchist movement followed, and numerous anarchist collectives, journals, and projects emerged. While a lot of the media attention after Seattle focused on the militant anarcho-primitivist movement centered in Eugene, Oregon, contemporary US anarchism is remarkably diverse and includes projects like the CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective, organizations like the Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists (NEFAC), networks like Anarchist People of Color, and a revitalized Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Moreover, anarchism’s influence now extends well beyond explicitly anarchist groups, as anti-authoritarian organizing methods have become widely adopted by radicals of all stripes.

SEE ALSO: Anarchism ; Anarchism and Sabotage ; Anarchism in the United States to 1945 ; Anarchosyndicalism ; Earth First! ; Food Not Bombs, United States ; Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) ; Nechaev, Sergei (1847–1882) ; Punk Movement ; Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)

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