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Exploring the Past & Present of Anarchists in New York City

Rui Preti

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A review of

Radical Gotham: Anarchism in New York City from Schwab's Saloon to Occupy Wall Street, Tom Goyens, ed. University of Illinois Press, 2017

New York City is well known for its radicals, past and present. The lives and deeds of some noteworthy anarchists who have lived there (including Emma Goldman, Paul Goodman and Murray Bookchin), and the high points of local movement history have been discussed extensively in articles and books. Yet there is a shortage of bottom up histories describing and exploring the lives of non-famous anarchists of earlier times or currently.

Several of the articles in Tom Goyens's volume, *Radical Gotham*—including his fine introduction—provide overviews and narratives of anarchist life and times in New York that enrich understanding of rebellious movements there and in the wider world.

In his introduction, Goyens notes that his book starts from the premise that

“...anarchism is and has been a distinct, resilient, transnational, and significant political philosophy and movement that deserves to be studied on its own turf. Liberal and Marxist historiography has not always taken this approach. The success or failure of anarchism, for example, is often judged by socialist or Marxist criteria. Those who search the past for or expect from the future a successful ‘anarchist state’ or ‘anarchist party’ fundamentally misunderstand the movement: anarchists never set out to accomplish such a project.”

The book begins with essays dealing in depth with the first anarchist groups in the city—German, Jewish, Italian, and Spanish immigrants—between roughly 1880 and 1930. The writers skillfully explore the social dynamics and histories of these groups and their publications. With their awareness of common human needs and their close connections with like-minded people elsewhere, these groups shaped the New York anarchist culture as cosmopolitan and internationalist in spirit.

Later selections focus on less broadly-based groups that the authors believe to have had significant influence on pre-World War II and post-World War II anarchist tendencies in the city, such as the Catholic Worker movement and the Why?/Resistance group. Unlike the groups dealt with in the first section of the book, these were clearly rooted in North American intellectual experiences and spoke to a broad range of leftists in addition to anarchists.

Essays on Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, the Living Theater, Gordon Matta-Clark’s Anarchitecture, and the radical art and cultural center, ABC No Rio, explore the impact of post-World War II consumer society, slum clearance, and gentrification on the cultural life of the city from anarchistic perspectives.

Most essays in the book focus on ways in which anarchist ideas became the basis of a variety of autonomous cultural projects and acts of resistance. For example, readers are informed that theater projects were as important to German and Jewish anarchists of the 19th century as to the Living Theatre or the Motherfuckers in the mid-20th century. They concretely describe the ways anarchists from various tendencies have criticized capitalist society, both through political actions such as demonstrations, as well as through the metaphors of artistic presentations.

Several essays in the collection deal with the highly relevant topic of social space. Historically and today, New York anarchists have always experienced the problems of finding and maintaining spaces. A lot of effort has been put into establishing and supporting radical spots for meetings and performances in saloons, halls, and the like, no less than the public spaces of streets and parks.

In recent decades, places for meeting, rallying, and living have been disappearing, part of the social atrophy brought on by neoliberal political-economic pressures. The essays on ABC No Rio and Occupy Wall Street deal specifically with these challenges, but the importance of social spaces also runs as a theme through many other selections.

Unfortunately, the book fails to develop a fuller understanding of why and how anarchist groups and activities have become less rooted in immigrant and industrial working-class neighborhoods over the years. This might have been at least in part remedied by including articles about some other mid-20th century anarchist groups that participated in the New York scene and discussed the changes, such as the Libertarian League and Anarchos.

It is somewhat disappointing to find that the essay dealing with Occupy Wall Street does not actually discuss the involvement of anarchists as such. The author indicates that anarchist

ideas influenced the development of processes used for deciding and executing the projects each Occupy group chose.

But many of the projects were basically leftist reformist in character. The author tells us:

“Occupy Wall Street was not explicitly ‘anarchist’ or even anti-capitalist per se, but it bore the deep imprint of anarchist praxis in its emphasis on building alternative forms of political and social engagement outside conventional politics and the hegemony of the commodity form. In fact, most occupiers would probably have rejected the moniker, since the figure of the nihilistic, bomb-toting anarchist continues to dominate the national imaginary.”

In New York City, Occupy protested unjust Wall Street institutions, primarily arguing against the mechanisms resulting in the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, while avoiding confronting capitalism directly.

The ways in which New York anarchists did or did not engage in Occupy are not addressed. There is no discussion of the highly charged debate about the black bloc tactic in which Chris Hedges infamously branded participants as “the cancer in Occupy.” Perhaps it might have been more fruitful to choose other events and activities to explore for recent anarchist experiences in New York City.

Despite the shortcomings of some of the articles, *Radical Gotham* is definitely worth reading, especially because of the connections it makes between past and present in the anarchist journey, as well as the questions it can provoke readers into raising.

Rui Preti is a long-time friend of the *Fifth Estate* and a great believer in the value of continuous questioning.