ANARCHIST VOICES

PAUL AVRICH

AN ORAL HISTORY OF ANARCHISM IN AMERICA
Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America, Paul Avrich, AK Press, 2005, ISBN 1904859275, 9781904859277, 574 pages. This book contains 180 interviews conducted over a period of 30 years. The interviewees were active between the 1880s and the 1930s and represent all schools of anarchism. Each of the six thematic sections begins with an explanatory essay, and each interview with a biographical note. Their stories provide a wealth of personal detail about such anarchist luminaries as Emma Goldman and Sacco and Vanzetti. This work of impeccable scholarship is an invaluable resource not only for scholars of anarchism but also for those studying immigration, ethnic politics, education, and labor history. Paul Avrich is a professor of history at Queens College and the Graduate School of the City University of New York.

The Day Wall Street Exploded: A Story of America in Its First Age of Terror, Beverly Gage, Dec 30, 2008, Business & Economics, 416 pages. Just after noon on September 16, 1920, as hundreds of workers poured onto Wall Street for their lunchtime break, a horse-drawn cart packed with dynamite exploded in a spray of ....

Anarchist Portraits, Paul Avrich, Feb 1, 1990, History, 316 pages. From the celebrated Russian intellectuals Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin to the little-known Australian bootmaker and radical speaker J. W. Fleming, this book probes the ....

What is Anarchism?, Alexander Berkman, Jul 1, 2003, Political Science, 237 pages. For those who have questions about Anarchism, or seek a better world, Berkman has the answers.


The Modern School Movement Anarchism and Education in the United States, Paul Avrich, Jan 1, 2005, Education, 434 pages. Modern Schools sought to abolish all forms of authority, and to usher in a new society.


At the cafГ© conversations on anarchism, Errico Malatesta, Piero Ammirato, Jan 1, 2005, Political Science, 159 pages. While Malatesta was hiding from the police he regularly went to a cafe in Ancona, Italy. He had shaved off his usual beard but he was still taking a risk. Especially as this ....


Emma Goldman: Making speech free, 1902-1909, Emma Goldman, Candace Falk, Barry Pateman, Jessica M. Moran, 2005, Biography & Autobiography, 639 pages. This second of a three-volume set documenting Emma Goldman's life and work in the United States covers the years from 1902 through the end of 1909, from the 1901 assassination ....

Emma Goldman: Made for America, 1890-1901, Emma Goldman, Candace Falk, Barry Pateman, Jessica M. Moran, 2003, Biography & Autobiography, 655 pages. A documentary history of Emma Goldman's life and work in the United States. This is the first of a three-volume set of the most important letters, newspaper articles, speeches ....

A New World in Our Hearts 8 Years of Writings from the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, Roy San Filippo, 2003, Political Science, 112 pages. A collection of writings on contemporary revolutionary anarchist issues.

fleeting lovers, and loyal comrades. This ....


Sacco and Vanzetti The Anarchist Background, Paul Avrich, 1996, History, 265 pages. The Sacco-Vanzetti affair is the most famous and controversial case in American legal history. It divided the nation in the 1920s, and it has continued to arouse deep emotions....


This book contains 180 interviews conducted over a period of 30 years. The interviewees were active between the 1880s and the 1930s and represent all schools of anarchism. Each of the six thematic sections begins with an explanatory essay, and each interview with a biographical note. Their stories provide a wealth of personal detail about such anarchist luminaries as Emma Goldman and Sacco and Vanzetti. This work of impeccable scholarship is an invaluable resource not only for scholars of anarchism but also for those studying immigration, ethnic politics, education, and labor history.

The 180 interviewees in this oral history (mostly anarchists, but also their friends, associates and relatives) represent diverse political tendencies-individualists, collectivists, pacifists, revolutionaries. What unites them is an optimistic faith that people will live in harmony once the impositions of government disappear. The respondents give firsthand recollections of Emma Goldman, Rudolf Rocker, Sacco and Vanzetti and other key anarchists; describe their experiences in libertarian schools and colonies; and offer trenchant observations on the dangers of authoritarian communism, bureaucracy and entrenched institutions. Among those interviewed are self-proclaimed "philosophical anarchist" Roger Baldwin, founder of the American Civil Liberties Union; Daniel Guerin, historian of the U.S. labor movement; Alexandra Kropotkin, English-born daughter of Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin; Albert Boni, publisher of "Modern Library" classics and a socialist; and Dwight Macdonald, who launched the journal Politics in 1944. Avrich (The Haymarket Tragedy) profiles a movement that continues to exercise an appeal with its calls for self-determination, direct grass-roots action and voluntary cooperation.

Avrich (history, Queens Coll.) is America's leading authority on anarchist movements. Through his many books and articles he has shown that anarchism is a distinctive political tradition with deep roots in the American experience. Anarchist Voices draws on interviews with native and foreign-born anarchists that Avrich has been conducting over the past 30 years. While a few of his subjects are relatively well-known (Dwight MacDonald, Daniel Guerin), most are obscure. The interviews, however, address major historical figures such as Emma Goldman and Sacco and Vanzetti, as well as the impact of anarchism on the education system, ethnic movements, and the New Left. Avrich's absorbing collection makes a vital contribution to the history of the American left. Expensive but recommended for academic and larger public library history collections.

Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America is a real treasure. It's more than 450 pages long, but I couldn't put it down. The book allowed me to escape into the lives of the real participants of the Anarchist movement of North America in its previous heyday of the 1890s-1930s. Originally published in 1995, Paul Avrich interviewed hundreds of Anarchists and former Anarchists who were mainly in their eighties and nineties in the 1970s, the majority dying within a few years of the interviews. I was especially impressed by this, since it gave hundreds of people who had led
amazing lives a sort of last memoir before they passed, much in the same style as Working by [by whom?]

It is divided into six sections covering much of the American Anarchist movement. It is mainly centered around the east coast, especially New York. They are 1) Pioneers, which focuses on relatives and close friends of the famous Anarchists like Alexander Berkman and Ben Reitman, 2) Emma Goldman, who was hugely influential and left a strong impression on everyone interviewed 3) Sacco and Venzetti, which details mostly Italian Anarchist experiences around the famous trials and frame-up of the Italian immigrants, 4) Schools and Colonies, which focus on the Modern School movement like the Ferrer school or the Stelton colony in which Anarchists tried to build communities and separate themselves into a lifestyle, 5) the Ethnic Anarchists, focusing on different groups which really brought ideological Anarchism to the United States, like the Russians, Jews, Spanish, and Italian immigrants, 6) the 1920s and beyond, which links the activities after the big decline on the US Anarchist movement after the 1920s until the 1960s and the rise of the “new anarchist movement” starting in the 1980s.

What really struck me about this book was how similar some of the arguments of the Anarchist movement were in the past to those of the present. Past divisions between sub-groups were detailed in the text as well. As Avrich explains, the main split was between the Anarcho-syndicalists/communists and the Anarcho-individualists. Today, the main split is between the Anarcho-syndicalists/communists and the eco-anarchists. The discussion also includes people who got burnt out on anarchists because they thought the anarchists were ineffective. Many do not regret their involvement in the movement and look back on the years they spent in the movement as the best years of their lives.

In the end, the book is very inspiring because so many of the interviewees still call themselves Anarchists and see that the fight for a better world will continue no matter what. Many of them remain idealists and are hopeful that the world they have worked towards will come about someday. They have hope despite having seen the world nearly destroy itself, supposed comrades (like the Communists) betray them, and enough bickering to make anyone cynical. Many of them had not been involved in the Anarchist Movement for many years, or had simply been involved in book clubs or discussion groups that passed on the ideas. And yet they are still committed to the idea that all humans should be free of oppression and that no government can make you free no matter where you are on this earth. Read more ›

I, too, am glad that AK Press re-printed this (unabridged) oral history project by the late great Paul Avrich. In this classic tome, Avrich brilliantly brings to life the fascinating stories of the heroic women and men, most of them immigrants, involved in the anarchist movement of the early 20th century. I especially found interesting the stories about Emma Goldman, Sacco and Vanzetti and the free schools inspired by the work of Francisco Ferrer. That said, I was a little dismayed that a few of the individuals interviewed espoused ideas that many activists today would consider reactionary, such as support for Zionism and the Cuban exile movement. It bewilders me, for example, how any anticapitalist could denounce Salvador Allende and the social experiment he attempted in Chile. Likewise, I was troubled by the fact that the bulk of the book dealt almost exclusively with issues of economic exploitation and the state, ignoring equally important topics like race, gender, sexual orientation and the environment. Nevertheless, this is an important book, and despite its enormity, a surprisingly quick and enjoyable read.

This is a most welcome, unabridged, reprint of a volume first issued in 1995, issued as part of AK Press’s reprinting of the works of the well-known historian of anarchism, Paul Avrich who died in 2006. The book is based on the oral testimonies of participants in, or who had first hand knowledge of, the anarchist movements in north America during the period 1880 â€“ 1970, the interviews being conducted during the period 1963 â€“ 1991. It is arranged thematically covering, in turn, Pioneers, Emma Goldman, Sacco and Vanzetti, Schools and Colonies, Ethnic Anarchists, 1920s and after. Each selection is prefaced by an introduction in which the author summarises the salient background to the topic and illustrates the theme with some choice extracts from the interviews. Each of the 180 interviewees only appears in one of the sections, although it readily
becomes apparent that many could be placed in several of them. Length of interview chosen for use varies from half a page to as many of 5 or 6, but simple maths shows an average of just under three pages each. The interviews are supplemented by copious notes which provide much valuable additional information on topics and personalities not otherwise covered, with some corrections of information provided in the interviews (something all oral historians have found – first hand testimony whilst valuable, most always be cross-checked for errors.)

The range of interviewees is very impressive, from those who are probably known to most contemporary anarchists such as Sam Dolgoff, Fred Woodworth, Fermin Rocker, Daniel Guerin, and Nellie Dick; those related to people many will have heard of, e.g. Alexandra Kropotkin, Laurence Labadie, John J. Most jnr, and Spencer Sacco; to a wide range of militants and activists known only to their own circles, such as the Russian Maximalist Clara Halpern, the Spanish CNT activist Federico Arcos, Chinese anarchist Dr. H.L. Wei, Polish Jewish anarchist Branka Greenberg, Cuban anarchist and refugee from Castro’s regime, Gustavo Lopez and many others.

Although, for reviewing purposes, I read this straight through, I suspect it’s main use in future will be as a work of reference, giving important insights into how participants viewed those around them in the anarchist movement. It is quite revealing, for example, to see just how many viewed Emma Goldman as a dumpy sex-obsessed woman, devoted to the cause mainly being a dumpy sex-obsessed woman, devoted to the cause; said cause mainly being Emma Goldman; - but equally she was also seen as a fine public speaker and one who could be relied on to help out those who needed help. Alexander Berkman also divided his contemporaries some regarded him as an irresponsible terrorist, whilst others emphasised his positive personal qualities. Opinions too, are divided on Sacco and Vanzetti (two Italian anarchists almost certainly framed for murders they did not commit and subsequently judicially murdered) with most agreeing that they could not possibly have committed the acts they were accused of, but others hinting that maybe they weren’t so innocent after all.

What this volume emphasises is that, although many anarchists were immigrants and tended to organise amongst their own people, (hence the chapter on ethnic anarchists), one also gets the feeling that the movements were bound together in other ways. Whilst many anarchists co-operated on the main campaigns of the time (although both world wars produced significant splits) two other factors were important in the creation of a movement, those being the schools and colonies. These help bring people together on a daily basis and helped to educate the next generation of activists (or so it was hoped.) Whilst some of the colonists were what would today be described as “lifestylists” with vegetarianism and naturism much practiced, many of the colonists were also employed in the cities doing manual work where they could be active in unions such as the ILGWU, whilst others were in the IWW.

The sense of an anarchist network may, however, also be a product of the methodology, as Paul Avrich followed up leads from people he had interviewed to those he may of heard off, but had no way of contacting. Equally though it can also show just how long-lasting the relationships were that were formed so many years earlier, the prime examples being the children who went to the free or modern schools and / or lived in the colonies, keeping in touch for 60 years or more.

Another aspect needs to mentioned, these are the survivors, the ones who stayed (or ended up in) North America, the ones who didn’t return to Russia or die in Spain, the ones who didn’t get drafted and died in the world wars, the ones who didn’t die in prison or through substance abuse. If you like they are the ones who managed to survive in the heartland of capitalism. And what many will find heartening is the fact that many people kept the faith; even into their twilight years, whilst others regard anarchism as a youthful folly, at best a dream that never came true and others see it as a way of looking at the world, an orientation, which guided them through life without ever being realised. Most now see education as the way forward. (Although ironically, the children who were raised in the anarchist colonies or taught in the schools, often dropped the overt anarchism, but became rounded, intelligent and industrious people, often artistically talented or academically gifted. Of course one might see that as a vindication of the anarchist methodology, if not the politics.)
Inevitably given the number of participants and the fractious nature of anarchism, not to mention the inclusion of some who never were anarchist, there are still various grudges carried over, ill-feelings expressed, political differences as pronounced now as ever. What seems particularly alarming is the number of unreconstructed Stalinists interviewed. Also there's an overwhelming sense of a movement that has passed into history, or at least one that had lost touch between the generations, a disconnect as much cultural as political.

Another important aspect of the book is that although it's mainly about anarchism in north America, as many of the participants lived elsewhere for significant periods of their lives, one also gets a glimpse into anarchism in other countries as well. There's considerable information buried in here on the movement in places such as Russia, Poland, Italy, Spain, France, Britain, China, and Germany, amongst others. Also there's much information of interest bibliographically, with details of otherwise obscure publications, pseudonyms, printers and so forth. (The list of periodicals is very impressive.) The book is finished off with a list of further reading (sadly not updated) and a comprehensive index, which is particularly useful when following up all the (q.v.)'s in the text.

Overall, this is pretty much an essential purchase for anyone who is interested in the lives of the not-quite-so-famous anarchists, the ones who did most of the donkey-work, who arranged the meetings, who wrote the magazines, who taught in the schools or lived in the colonies, the union and anti-war activists and so forth. It prompts the question as who, if anyone, is out and about interviewing participants from the generation of the 1930 – 1960's – many have already passed on, both in America and elsewhere.

active Alexander Berkman America anar anarchism anarchist group anarchist movement arrested attended Aunty Avrich became Bolshevik born Boston Bronx brother Chicago chist colony Communist comrades daughter deported Detroit died edited editor Emma Goldman factory Father Ferrs Ferrer Center Ferrer School Fraye Arbeter Shtime Galleani Harry Kelly interview Italian anarchist Italy Jewish anarchist Joseph Cohen journal knew Kropotkin labor later lectures Libertarian Book Club lived loved Luigi Galleani married Modern School Mohegan Mother Earth moved never organized paper Paul Avrich Philadelphia police prison published Radical Library Revolution revolutionary Road to Freedom Rudolf Rocker Russia Sacco and Vanzetti Sacco-Vanzetti San Francisco Sasha sister social socialist Spain Spanish spoke stayed Stelton Street Sunrise talk taught teacher told took Tresca Union United Vanguard Vanguard Group visited Voltairine de Cleyre wanted wife workers World wrote Yiddish York City young

Through his many books on the history of anarchism, Paul Avrich has done much to dispel the public's conception of the anarchists as mere terrorists. In Anarchist Voices, Avrich lets American anarchists speak for themselves. This abridged edition contains fifty-three interviews conducted by Avrich over a period of thirty years, interviews that portray the human dimensions of a movement much maligned by the authorities and contemporary journalists. Most of the interviewees (anarchists as well as their friends and relatives) were active during the heyday of the movement, between the 1880s and the 1930s. They represent all schools of anarchism and include both famous figures and minor ones, previously overlooked by most historians. Their stories provide a wealth of personal detail about such anarchist luminaries as Emma Goldman and Sacco and Vanzetti.

"Avrich shows that anarchists were much more than black-caped figures with fizzing bombs, but at the same time he does not try to sanitize them. He makes it quite clear, for example, that Sacco and Vanzetti were disciples of Luigi Galleani, who favored bomb and dynamite attacks on capitalists, and that they were active members of terrorist conspiracies."--The Times Literary Supplement

Born on August 4, 1931 into a Jewish family originally from Odessa, Avrich traveled to the USSR as an exchange student in 1961 following Nikita Khrushchev's 1959 visit to the United States. While there working on his thesis, The Russian Revolution and the Factory Committees, he researched the Kronstadt rebellion and the role of anarchists in the Russian Revolution. This information allowed him to produce pioneering and important works on these subjects.
Avrich wrote extensively on topics related to anarchism, including books on Sacco and Vanzetti, the Haymarket Riot, and the Kronstadt Rebellion. Other important works include a biography of Voltairine de Cleyre, The Modern School Movement (a study of an anarchist-inspired educational program) and Anarchist Portraits, and an important oral history collection, Anarchist Voices (edited). He also spoke regularly at the Libertarian Book Club in New York.

Avrich, Paul, Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America. 374 pages. This AK Press edition contains 180 interviews conducted by the preeminent American historian of anarchism over 30 years of research &#8211; Interviews with figures both prominent and obscure, capturing the human dimensions of our movement and giving the subjects space to reflect on their struggles and ideals published at $28

More than that the study of history has also lost one of its finest proponents because Avrich was also a great historian. If his work brought to life those who shared "the beautiful ideal" it was because he used his considerable talents to treat his subjects with respect, thus avoiding the glib condescension that characterized much of what constituted "anarchist history" in the academy.

Avrich's work reflected his skills as a linguist, the absolute importance he placed on primary sources and his perseverance in finding them, an ability to sustain long, and sometimes fruitless periods of research and a writing style that enabled him to encapsulate his findings in a readable and engaging manner. Central to all of this was a consistent and rigorous insistence on accuracy. He went further, looked deeper and reflected more pertinently than others. He allowed anarchist voices, missing from history, to speak for themselves, with a minimal of authorial judgement or intervention, and much of what we know about the history of anarchism in America is due to the work of this one man.

His work on anarchism in Russia formed the first half of Avrich's published career. His first book, "The Russian Anarchists" (1967) was a model of what we would come to expect. Succinct, readable and yet packed with information reflecting Avrich's use of primary sources, it brought to English speaking minds a lost history. It also reflected, as much of his work would do, one of the primary tensions in anarchism, between those who search for organizational structure to support their anarchist ideas and those who are far more wary of any organizational apparatus. He treated the relationship of anarchism and violence with scrupulous fairness and rigor, an approach that ran throughout all of his writing, and reflected confidently the nuances and complexities of anarchism in Russia. He clearly stressed the constructive qualities of anarchism in 1917 and onwards, developing his earlier dissertation on " The Russian Revolution and the Factory Committees". His work "Kronstadt 1921" (1970) destroyed the Bolshevik myth of Kronstadt being a counter-revolutionary center whose vibrant revolutionary movement had long been dissipated. On the contrary, to Avrich, it was in effect a last ditch stand against the centralizing, counter revolutionary excesses of Bolshevism. Again scrupulously documented, the work brought what had long been known in anarchist circles to a much wider audience.

His "Russian Rebels 1600-1800" (1972) continued his interest in the revolutionary heritage in Russia and, again, was unflinching in its examination of its subjects. His groundbreaking "Anarchists in the Russian Revolution" (1973) completed what we may call the first phase of his work. A collection of primary documents interspersed with appropriate editorial commentary it allowed the reader to see and read, often for the first time, the words of the Russian anarchists themselves. From the swirling and tremulous words of the Anarcho-Futurists to the Petropavlovsk Resolution of Kronstadt we see the reach and range of Russian anarchism.

In the preface to his "An American Anarchist: The Life of Voltairine De Cleyre" (1978) a work in memory of Max Nettlau, himself a great historian of anarchism, Avrich writes of abandoning his project of producing a comprehensive history of American anarchism writing that "a fuller examination of the materials at my disposal, together with the discovery of new sources, aroused a growing sense of the complexity of the movement, of the richness and diversity of its history." The rest of his life would be spent exploring that complexity, richness and diversity. He also found his methodology. He would explore the lives of those who played a role in the movement because "From most existing accounts â€œone gets little understanding of the anarchists as human beings, still less of what impelled them to embark on their unpopular and seemingly futile course."
Anarchism, as a result, has seemed a movement apart, unreal and quixotic, divorced from American history and irrelevant to American life." His work on De Cleyre was a brilliant introduction to this complex and anguished woman. We quickly become aware of the fierce quicksilver mind she possesses and realize, through Avrich's deftness, that we are in the presence of some kind of greatness. Written nearly thirty years ago it remains unsurpassed as a narrative of her life and an appreciation of the multi-faceted nature of her ideas. Through the interactions that constitute her life a history of anarchism also begins to emerge.

His two greatest works now lay ahead of him. "The Modern School", dedicated to anarchist librarian Agnes Inglis, (1980) is a jewel of a book. It describes a moment in American anarchist history where culture and militancy meet. Nearly every line drips with original research; the narrative is clear and precise, linking complex and apparently contradictory themes and helping the reader decipher them. If the work on De Cleyre has not convinced us, his work here makes it crystal clear that American anarchism was much more than Benjamin Tucker, Emma Goldman, and Alexander Berkman. "The Modern School" rightfully re-establishes many lives previously lost to the historian as critical players in the attempt to create anarchy in America. Avrich is re-defining our knowledge, our expectations and our appreciations. It is a book to read and re-read and like all great works each re-reading teaches us something new. So too with his next major work "The Haymarket Tragedy" (1984), dedicated to Joseph Labadie, which continued the standard he had set himself. Using original sources he creates an unforgettable picture of anarchist practice and culture. The heroism and tragedy of the whole affair are presented to us in a highly readable narrative. People are presented to us as fully rounded with their flaws as equally obvious as their strengths. A seminal event in American radical history is presented to us clearly yet passionately. It is the book on Haymarket, the book on late nineteenth century class struggle anarchism and culture and a volume to treasure.

"Anarchist Portraits" (1988) dedicated to Arne Thorne (a profound influence on Avrich) was a collection of essays on a wide range of subjects. All reflect Avrich's customary elegance. He is at ease writing about the Australian anarchist "Chummy" Fleming as he is discussing Kropotkin's Ethical Anarchism. His essay on Jewish anarchism in the United States is essential reading while his sketch of Alexander Berkman's life remains a most valuable template. His essay on "Sacco and Vanzetti: The Italian Anarchist background" was the forerunner of his "Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background" (1991). Here again he looks at a critical event in the history of the left in America and through his biographical style brings individuals and their ideas to life. The remarkable human qualities of many of the anarchists are clearly drawn as well as their inconsistencies and flaws. The violence that runs through this period of history is portrayed straightforwardly without any attempt to judge or moralise. As a result Sacco and Vanzetti, and all the others who were in their affinity groups, are presented in their richness and complexity. A richness and complexity no one else had been able to reflect. A by-product of his biographical approach is that we are guided through the history of anti-organizational and insurrectionary Italian class struggle anarchism of the period, in a manner that brings life and meaning to its theory and actions.

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