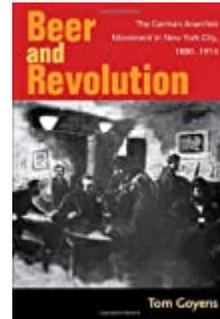




Tom Goyens. *Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York City, 1880-1914.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. 263 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03175-5.



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Anarchism Uncovered

In late February 2008, authorities found an unknown substance in a Las Vegas hotel room—with a comatose man, guns, and an “anarchist-type textbook”—that tests later confirmed was the deadly poison ricin. A week later, New York investigators announced that the bomb-throwing cyclist who damaged a Times Square military recruiting office likely had ties to a New York anarchist group. These recent events garnering national headlines and the rapt attention of 24-hour news junkies only served to reinforce the popular perception of anarchism as a shadowy, dangerous movement. This view of anarchism is anything but new, but as Tom Goyens illustrates in his book, *Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York City, 1880-1914*, it is also anything but complete. Goyens takes the reader to turn-of-the-century New York beerhalls, saloons, and public parks where anarchism was not just an alternative, anti-institutionalist, and anti-authoritarian political ideology, but a culture consciously crafted and practiced. By analyzing the intersections of political thought and social spaces, of abstract ideas and lived experiences among German anarchists, Goyens contributes in a meaningful way to a broader understanding of radicalism in urban

America.

Goyens’s focus on German anarchists in New York City brings a largely overlooked group of Gilded Age radicals into view. His skillful biographical sketches of German anarchist leaders and discussions of ideological debates and infighting that occurred within the movement highlight the contributions New Yorkers made to the evolution of anarchist political thought in America, and of the importance of personalities in the development of social movements, radical or otherwise. Though his narrative bogs down at times with lengthy descriptions of ideological nuances and differences between various anarchist factions, Goyens does succeed in making the bigger point that anarchism, when analyzed from within rather than in comparison to the mainstream, was not a universal, monolithic radical movement. The German anarchist community in New York itself was not “homogeneous, single-minded, well-oiled” but “fractured” and “loosely connected” (p. 112).

New York’s German anarchists never gained a significant level of visibility. Unlike anarchists in Chicago and the associated agitation of the International Work-

ing People's Association there, New York anarchists did not connect in a meaningful way with or make a palpable impact on the labor movement in the industrial corridor of greater New York City. German anarchists did not lead spectacular strikes nor did they organize a political party or leave a legacy of legislative success. These factors partly explain the absence of the New York anarchists from the historiography of radicalism. But as Goyens points out, political activism and labor agitation were not the focus of New York's German anarchists. In fact, it was the New Yorkers' opposition to utilizing electoral politics and trade unionism as vehicles for change that fueled antagonisms between them and their Chicago counterparts. Still, Goyens contends that the New York anarchists' lack of public visibility and measurable successes does not mean that they should be ignored, but rather understood as a subgroup of American radicals and as a part of the social, cultural, and political milieu that was turn-of-the-century New York.

Taking a page from the playbook of James Scott, Goyens looks to the spaces created by anarchists and imbued with anarchist ideology in order to uncover the character and hidden transcripts of the German anarchist movement. German anarchists in New York, Goyens observed, created a "self-sufficient culture of defiance" which "existed physically in a space replete with its own signifiers, symbols, and rituals" (p. 6). Consciously set apart from the mainstream, this geopolitical space of clubs, saloons, beer halls, and picnic groves were part and parcel of the oppositional nature of the movement. Physical spaces, Goyens maintains, are therefore as important as, if not more important than, the New York anarchists' public undertakings. To understand and appreciate the German anarchist movement in New York on its own terms, one must grasp these spaces, their political role, and the identity derived from them.

Goyens deftly illustrates how radical insignias, flags, and memorials to fallen comrades were important elements defining anarchist spaces. These spaces, moreover, were safe havens for anarchists to engage in political discussions and exchange radical literature. However, they also were physical manifestations of anarchist political ideology where anarchism could be "lived and expressed" (p. 58). Anarchist saloons, for instance, were small, autonomous, and egalitarian. Anarchist theater performances, song, and poetry similarly expressed provocative themes of resistance and revolution under the guise of innocent entertainment. While the products of a self-conscious exercise in insularity that likely contributed to mainstream America's conceptualizations of anarchists

as dangerous others, according to Goyens, anarchists' alternative spaces and activities undertaken therein "were anarchism" (p. 58).

Certainly, knowledge of bomb-making and violent acts of "propaganda by deed" had a place within the German anarchist movement and its objective of bringing about revolutionary change. Yet as Goyens shows, leaders of the movement perceived such actions not as terroristic but as self-defense. For the New York anarchists, words too were weapons. Verbal "posturing" was a "form of resistance" (p. 4). Giving words their just due, Goyens impressively weaves the story of the development of an anarchist press in the United States through his narrative. As he notes in his introduction, a significant number of anarchist periodicals from the time period in question, albeit largely printed in German, are available and Goyens uses the cultural news and reviews they contained as important sources for unmasking the geography of the anarchist movement in New York. The content of and language used in the "juicy editorials and news" of these periodicals, however, are for the most part absent from his analysis (p. 14). This leaves the reader with only a hazy impression of the power and use of rhetoric, inflammatory or otherwise, and how this rhetoric complemented the creation of German-anarchist identity through the appropriation of space.

Although New York's German anarchists embraced a radical political ideology, created an alternative political culture, and supported a vigorous press, they were nonetheless part of the city's larger German immigrant community rooted in Little Germany on the Lower East Side. From language- and a craft-based approach to work and leisure, to gender norms and drinking customs, ties of commonality existed between German anarchists and non-anarchists alike. It is clear from Goyens's analysis that New York's German anarchists negotiated multiple layers of identity, but their interactions over time within the wider German immigrant community go largely unexplored. Was theirs an uneasy or even hostile co-existence? Or, did the commonalities of "a common language, a love for beer and music, and a sense of ethnic pride" neutralize differences of political ideology so that a radical subculture could function (p. 22)? What can we learn about the character of the German anarchist movement which, as Goyens notes, advocated egalitarianism but that struggled with questions of gender equality in marriage and society and that remained "largely a men's affair" rooted in a male-dominated culture of saloons and clubs (p. 155)? More on this radical-mainstream relationship within the German immigrant community

would have enhanced Goyens's already strong work, especially because the anarchist spaces that were so essential to the movement's identity were not located in a separate "anarchist" neighborhood, but rather were peppered throughout the German immigrant neighborhoods of greater New York City.

On the other hand, Goyens does explore how patterns of immigration changed the culture and character of New York's German anarchist movement over time. The German presence among New York's anarchists ebbed and flowed with prevailing U.S. immigration trends. The proportion of Germans emigrating to the United States decreased by the turn of the century while immigrants arriving from southeastern Europe and Russia increased substantially, so that in sheer numbers, German anarchists played a less visible part in New York's broader anarchist movement. The 1890 repeal of the Anti-Socialist Act in Germany curbed the flow of German radicals emigrating to the United States so that by the late 1890s, key participants in New York's German anarchist movement shifted from first-generation German-speaking immigrants to younger, American-born, second-generation German anarchists. By the first decade of the new century, German anarchism was one part of a more collaborative multi-ethnic movement. Coinciding with this shift, intellectual rebellion rather than violent revolution gained primacy within the movement as the best means to bring about radical change, and an active radical press replaced saloons and clubs as oppositional spaces where anarchist ideals were celebrated and ideas were shared.

State and federal legislation targeting anarchists enacted in the wake of the assassination of President McKinley by a purported anarchist, as well as the repression of Germans and radicals during World War I, further undercut the viability and physical presence of a definable German anarchist movement in New York. By the mid-1930s a definable German anarchist movement was all but gone. This lack of permanency of New York's German anarchist institutions brings up difficult questions about the meaning and value of space as an analytical tool for uncovering the history of anarchism. Goyens poses the question if, "In the context of the dominant (capitalist) organization of urban space⁴. Did anarchists actually subvert capitalist normality?" but leaves the reader to decide (p. 181).

Still, *Beer and Revolution* does contribute new information to and a new way of approaching the history of anarchism and radicalism. And as voters ponder their choices of candidates in the 2008 presidential election, Goyens's work is a valuable reminder of the rich and varied debates that informed and shaped American politics in the not-so-distant past. But perhaps most importantly, Goyens, in discussing the transnational nature of the anarchist movement, observes that "[t]he marketplace of ideas ignores national borders" (p. 3). This is a statement that is as instructive and thought-provoking in our own time—when national borders are becoming increasingly irrelevant and grassroots opposition movements are developing in the face of globalization—as it was for German radicals during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

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