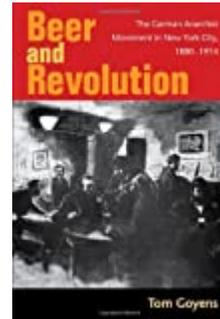




Tom Goyens. *Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York City, 1880-1914.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. 263 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03175-5.



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Mostly Harmless

That a book about New York anarchists should be edited by a press from Illinois is one of the subtle ironies that come with the subject: while most Americans still show an “irrational fear of socialism,” let alone anarchism, the few that have ever been brave enough to look into the matter at all are at best familiar with the Chicago anarchists, and have heard of the Haymarket affair (p. 213). Tom Goyens is to be applauded, therefore, for at least trying to start plugging the gap in our knowledge about anarchists and the variety of their associations, activities, and lives in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when anarchism was strongest around the world and when it first provided a glimpse at a viable alternative to capitalism and its system of reckless exploitation. Furthermore, the approach that he announces at the start is genially adequate to the subject: how can an elusive internationalist idea, such as anarchism, be described in terms of a regional entity? The first of the six chapters into which the book is divided attempts a socio-geographic answer, looking at “the social space for a dissident subculture” and portraying the anarchists of New York very much in

the way that the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) appears in the sixth scene of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* (1922): mostly harmless, big words and revolutionary rhetoric versus a peaceful practice of beer-hall discussions and communal picnics (p. 17). The resulting socio-geographic image of an anarchism that was largely limited to the area between Myrtle and Flushing avenues (see map on p. xi) does a lot to humanize and deflate the stereotypical image of wild-eyed, bushy-haired men in black wielding lighted Mills bombs that the mass media successfully generated and maintained.

The following chapters swerve away from the “power-geography” to trace the development of the anarchist subculture (chapter 2), and then (chapters 3 and 4) to focus mostly on the impact of the most well-known and arguably also most spectacular of the New York anarchists, Bavarian-born Johann Most, before Goyens returns to the political culture of German anarchists on the whole (p. 8). No other book has led the way this deep into an understanding of anarchism as a political

culture rather than as a threat to the rest of the world. Apart from the chapters on the personal development of Most, the period and the book's focus are largely on and about what Goyens calls "communist-anarchism"—from the point of view of the later twentieth century an obvious oxymoron, but here referring to the communitarian model of mutual aid and self-effacing solidarity propagated by the followers of Peter Kropotkin. One of the ironies the book uncovers is the involuntary ethnic limitation of German anarchism. The one political movement that aimed at transcending nationalist, denominational, and ethnic boundaries found itself seriously impaired on many occasions by the linguistic limitations of its publications and its very membership—in this respect, the Chicago anarchists appear to have moved further in the direction of trans-ethnicity.

The book traces the contradictory effects of the Haymarket judicial murders of 1887, which won many sympathies and converts to the anarchist cause, but undoubtedly also deterred many others. It also shows the gradual retreat of anarchist groups into their own, half-sheltered communities, under the impression of legislature like the Anarchy Act of 1902, and constant police surveillance and harassment. In the process, it becomes evident how anarchism turned from a largely artisan-based political agenda into a philosophical playground dominated by bohemian intellectuals, eroding its own foundations in the communities. This erosion becomes visible in the drop in membership of anarchist singing clubs and theatrical groups.

Goyens makes the most out of his limited resources. Most of his material is provided in numerous yet clandestine German anarchist publications, ranging from Most's *Freiheit*, which existed from 1879 to 1906, to *Der Anti-Autorität* and other papers that saw only one or two issues before they folded. The limited availability of these sources is indicative of how content scholars have been so far with the above mentioned image of the anarchists: years ago, plans to digitalize the papers lying in the University of Michigan's Labadie Collection were unceremoniously shelved again, ostensibly because there was not enough material (e-mail correspondence). The very existence of Goyens's remarkable book proves this contention wrong.

Goyens also sets the stage for further research. On a contemporary basis, Goyens's material indicates a number of attempts at trans-ethnic solidarity and cooperation, and it would be interesting to see whether other ethnicities showed the same tendencies toward the

"chummy" and performative, with picnics, song festivals, and theatrical presentations (p. 123). In chronological sequence, one would have to look into the relations between the Kropotkin wing of "communist-anarchism" and the syndicalism of the IWW, as well as other groups. The fighting between labor unions and their sympathizers on one side, and police, Pinkertons, and occasionally the army on the other side claimed more lives and saw more use of violence than Alexander Berkman's shooting of Henry Clay Frick—the "only truly anarchist-inspired act of violence against a member of the elite," as Goyens claims (p. 131). Of course anarchist newspapers imply their own limitations; it is impossible to gauge their impact without further evidence, resources, and material, such as police records and personal documents. It would have made sense for Goyen to expand the parts on the repression that ultimately destroyed the anarchist communities, or drove them underground before World War I. After the war, the lure of communism with its deceptively attractive propaganda led a new, more thoroughly Americanized generation to submit itself to the rule of the almighty party. Anarchism has always been less attractive than all sorts of political belief systems based on party for putting more demand on individuals' abilities and willingness to think and decide for themselves. Goyens recognizes this problem.

There are few recognizable shortcomings. Sometimes the chronology does not seem to match, and a number of repetitions indicate that the chapters were probably written rather independently of each other. "Vienna" sausage is a mistranslation—the inventor's name was Wiener. The listing of groups founded in and around New York remains somewhat ineffective since the reader only learns that they existed, and where, but not why they folded. Since we are dealing with thorough individualists, the assumption might well be that there were individual reasons behind every increase or decrease in membership in these groups. But these are minor quibbles. What is more important is Goyens's depiction of anarchy as a socio-geographical and sociohistorical phenomenon rather than the usual philosophical analysis, and with it the recognition that besides radicals like Most, who saw anarchy as the social form of the future, there were also many "immediatist" activists who tried to live their ideals in their everyday lives within the limited geographical range of their New York quarters (p. 123). Their practical form of anarchism, based on a spirit of independence and cooperation, had a lot to do with their artisan background—this aspect would also warrant further research—and preceded Gustav Landauer's con-

tention that “an anarchist society is always present and can be perfected at any time” (p. 197). That this was possible not only in reclusive rural communities but also right in the midst of New York is one of the truly enlightening news and insights Goyens is able to share with his readers.

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