

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard D. Sonn. *Sex, Violence, and the Avant-Garde: Anarchism in Interwar France.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. x + 259 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-03663-2.



Reviewed by Constance Bantman (University of Surrey)

Published on H-Histsex (March, 2011)

Commissioned by Timothy W. Jones (University of South Wales, & La Trobe University)

Richard D. Sonn's book picks up where most studies on French anarchism leave off (including his own classic *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Si cle France* [1989]): after the halcyon days of the belle  poque, the heroic period of French anarchism. And indeed, the introduction of *Sex, Violence, and the Avant-Garde* paints a picture of anarchism at a low ebb, struggling to attract a new generation of militants, with a reduced readership for its once-thriving press, plagued by the ideological divisions lingering in the aftermath of the First World War, the competition of Bolshevism, and a problematic incompatibility with the more state-controlled politics of the postwar era. However, as Sonn shows, even in these years of dramatically diminished influence, anarchism, through both its discourses and reception, provides a remarkable sounding board for the profound political and cultural shifts of this fascinating period. In this respect, one reproach that may be addressed to this well-researched, subtle, and entertaining monograph regards its rather misleading title: while indeed the French anarchist movement of the interwar period was about sex, violence, and the avant-garde, this is a restrictive view, and the book might more truthfully (but less eye-catchingly) have been called a social and cultural history of French anarchism—especially as it seeks to

complement/rectify David Berry's reference work on the same period, *A History of the French Anarchist Movement, 1917-1945* (2002), which focuses on the ideological and strategic debates within the organized and labor-oriented quarters of the movement.

Sonn's book falls into two parts, "Anarchist Bodies" and "French Anarchists between East and West." Part 1 explores facets of the ethical anarchism prominent in those years, emphasizing the positive contribution of anarchism to social thought rather than the negative and destructive aspects (pp. 6-7). The section opens with the account and analysis of the trial of Germaine Berton, a seductive young woman spectacularly acquitted after the murder of extreme-right activist Marius Plateau in 1923, a case that provides insights into gender politics at the time and especially the ongoing portrayal of women as irrational. The figure of Berton also pervades the following chapter, devoted to the mysterious death of Philippe Daudet, alleged lover of Berton, but also son of L on Daudet, deputy of Paris and editor in chief of the far-right *Action Fran aise*. This intriguing upshot of the Berton affair, an unresolved mystery involving anarchists, monarchists, an alleged love affair, a famous literary-political family, the police, and either a murder or a suicide (p. 55), highlights some of the tensions

that became so pervasive in 1930s and WW II France. In a chapter that maps out a fascinating world of avant-garde reviews and artistic pioneers, Sonn then recounts the brief flirtation of the surrealist and Dada movements with anarchism, which echoed but also contrasted with the love affair between belle Époque anarchists and the neo-impressionists, and preceded the better-known support of the likes of André Breton and Louis Aragon for communism. The final chapter of this section illustrates the intense politicization of the body through the theme of neo-Malthusianism, of which some anarchists were fervent advocates. There again, anarchist preoccupations chimed with those of the times, even if the conclusions reached were at odds: "For the anarchists as for the Vichy collaborators, sex, gender, and politics were necessarily interrelated, but in antithetical ways" (p. 133).

The focus then shifts to the political and geopolitical context of anarchism. Through exile, France occasionally found itself at the heart of Russian politics, for instance in 1926 when the Russian-born but Paris-based anarchist Sholom Schwartzbard killed Simon Vasilievich Petliura, leader of the Ukrainian independence struggle but also instigator of many anti-Jewish pogroms back in Russia. Other individual portraits are drawn—from Marc Chagall to the lesser-known Golbergs, father and son—in a narrative that depicts the "broader picture" and explores issues of overlapping identities and ethnicity through small touches. Looking westward, the anarchists' negative perceptions of America at the time of the Sacco

and Vanzetti execution provide a counterpoint to the pro-American frenzy of the 1920s and 1930s. An interesting chapter entitled "Renegades" looks at those anarchists who joined "the communist bandwagon," notably, Victor Serge and a number of surrealist artists, enshrining the vision that anarchism was a thing of the past, but also returning to it after WW II, when anarchism could be seen as an alternative to both capitalism and communism. This leads Sonn to conclude by pointing out the cyclical returns and modernity of anarchism, by drawing comparisons with 1968 anarchism—through the perception of sexuality as being eminently political and the symbiosis of anarchism with artistic avant-gardes and anti-Americanism (although one may question to what extent these are exclusively anarchist trademarks).

Some readers may frown at the exclusion of syndicalist developments and other tactical debates, especially over the Russian Revolution and Spanish civil war, but they have been covered elsewhere. Others will find there are too many references to the belle Époque movement, which might appear to be of limited interest. Those who may be lured in by the risqué innuendos of the title will probably be disappointed, as this is all relatively tame by anarchist standards, especially in the context of the "crazy twenties" and radical thirties. Still, Sonn's book is a very convincing and entertaining cultural and social history of the anarchist movement in the interwar decades, as well as a snapshot of some of the political and ethical fault lines and dilemmas of this tense age.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

Citation: Constance Bantman. Review of Sonn, Richard D., *Sex, Violence, and the Avant-Garde: Anarchism in Interwar France*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. March, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31868>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.