



Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America (Unabridged)

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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.

Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America (Unabridged) Details

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Erica says

Didn't quite finish this one - lots of good stories in here but not exactly a book I wanted to read straight through - some of the interviews were not that interesting.

Eric says

Very interesting collection of interviews of people who were in some way involved with Anarchism in the United States. Really quite good and worth getting into. Excellent stuff.

River says

This is a very important book with lots of information about the anarchist movement in the U.S. It's particular helpful for the interviews that deal with the post-WWI era anarchist movement as there aren't many sources dealing with the topic. Good coverage of the 1930s-1950s (or at least some general ideas for directions to pursue for the interested scholar or whatever).

ael says

all of the gossip about classical anarchists you wanted to hear. still doesn't beat the Bookchin cheese fries story, though.

James says

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.

Ryan Mishap says

Oral histories are always good. This one, the short version of a much larger book, gives a good feel for anarchist immigrant communities in the big east coast cities during the beginning of the twentieth century. It does not deal with any modern anarchists.

Benjamin says

Anarchism, warts and all... real people, and not the Big Name Heroes and Sheroes, but the people who set the type on the newspapers, who cleaned up the hall after the meeting, who worked the land at the commune, and marched in the picket at the strike...

These people are not always ideologically correct Über-Anarchos, and some of the choices they made or movements they supported are surprising. They gossip about each other; for example, Emma Goldman comes across as a different character than in her own *Living My Life*.

Most of the interviews took place in the 70s and 80s, and the people interviewed were mostly active in the "golden age" from the turn of the century up to the second world war... in other words, a bunch of alter kackers, uh, senior citizens. It is also interesting to see how a lifetime of activism looks in hindsight, or to learn why some people leave the movement, or switch streams, and why some stay hardcore.

The movement in the 20th century was largely divided along ethnic lines, and how some ethnic groups lean towards certain kinds of tactics or philosophies begs the question if there is something cultural there, or if it is just coincidence that the best speakers and writers in a particular language lean a certain way and inspire others.

Reading this, I came across a cast of characters I didn't know about as well as a rounder picture of some others I only knew by name, like the totally awesome Sam Dolgoff. That kind of thing makes me go hunting after other books, which I love to do.

The best books make you think, and this'll do that. I only wish I'd got the unabridged edition.

Brian says

I came to this book hoping to learn more about the development of anarchist thought in America. I didn't get as much on the theoretical side as I'd hoped. However, this is "oral history" is an immense achievement: 53 interviews with American anarchists compiled over 30 years! It delivers a very human portrait of the various movements that occurred under the general rubric of anarchism (at times a bit too focused on "I knew this person" and "I knew that person", which out much substance; but, then, Avrich couldn't completely control what his interviewees wanted to say). I'm determined to get Avrich's "Anarchist Portraits" next, in hopes that it will develop the theoretical side a bit more for me.
