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REVIEW

DVD Review: *Anarchism in America*

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Modern Pea Pod

It is, perhaps, the world's most misunderstood and most frequently misinterpreted political philosophy. Throughout American history, anarchists have been persecuted at every possible opportunity. Often scapegoats for a nation enduring a crisis, they have been jailed, deported, and, in the case of the legendary Sacco and Vanzetti, executed for crimes they did not commit. It is true that other radical groups endured similar fates, especially Communists. Yet, while most high school students in the United States are made at least somewhat familiar with the central ideas of Marx and Lenin, the names of Bakunin, Kropotkin and Goldman go relatively forgotten in the minds of the Americans. The word "anarchy" has come to represent either total disorder and destruction or foolish teenage rebellion in the American imagination, and few realize that a sound political philosophy once stood behind these words.

This was the problem that filmmakers Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher set out to rectify as they traveled across the United States in 1980. The result, *Anarchism in America*, completed in 1982 and rereleased this week on DVD, combines interviews made on that trip with archival footage to help clear up the truth about what anarchism really is, and reveal the anarchist past buried within the borders of America. The documentary blends together in-depth explanations of anarchism from experts, stories from veteran native-born and immigrant American anarchist activists, political arguments from politicians within

the United States Libertarian party, and the anarchist leanings of the everyday American worker to show the ways in which the ideas of anarchy have manifested themselves throughout the history of the nation and continue to in the present day. The film follows the movement's spark in the tenement homes of turn-of-the-century European immigrants through to the legacy that remained in the late 1970s and early '80s political and youth movements.

However, it should be noted that *Anarchism in America* does more than tell the history of the philosophy. A strong case is also made for anarchism as the proper path for the United States. While Fischler and Sucher had in their hands the opportunity to simply tell the story of one of the country's oft-forgotten historical movements, they chose instead to, in many places, advocate for their own beliefs. As a result, there are moments when the film seems to be less a work of expertly crafted documentary film, and more a piece of blunt propaganda. Part of this is simply due to the fact that, rather than let the documents and interviews speak for themselves, the filmmakers chose to cast themselves as characters. They highlight, and even show clips, of their past film works, acknowledge their journey with gratuitous and lengthy road trip scenes, and show quite clearly their interaction with the interviewees. As a result, the purpose of the film seems, in the eyes of the audience, to be less about revealing a part of history often glossed over, and more of a mission of spreading a particular doctrine.

However, this DVD is still worth a viewing by anybody interested in the history of American radicalism. Though *Anarchism* is preachy at times, the viewer is still given room to come to his own opinions, and the comparisons and contrasts between American Libertarianism and Anarchism are particularly interesting. Furthermore, the disc contains a one-hour bonus documentary by the filmmakers entitled *The Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists*, which explores the history of the Yiddish language anarchist publication of the same name. The piece takes place as the newspaper closed its doors in 1977, after 87 years of publication, and stands as a testament to the radical roots of American Jewry, a point

worth noting in an era when the Jewish citizens of the United States are, more often than not, depicted as middle and upper-middle-class voters devoted wholly to a one-issue platform of Zionism.

Fischler and Sucher have attempted to make one point absolutely clear throughout their careers as filmmakers: though often targeted as subversives against the American way of life, Anarchists have been anything but. The one point highlighted repeatedly in both of the films featured on this DVD is that Anarchy is a political philosophy devoted to the same ideals that many argue America was founded on. It is about a limited, decentralized government taken to the logical extreme. It is about the right of people to choose for themselves. It is about the ability to enjoy one's life in the way that works best for them: the ultimate pursuit of happiness. Yet, it has been repressed time and time again by the American establishment allegedly upholding these same ideals. This is the American irony at its best, and one worth acknowledging. Of course, this is nothing unique to the anarchists, and we should not forget that they have been only one of many larger groups to undergo this same treatment.

Reviewed by Aaron Kahn

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