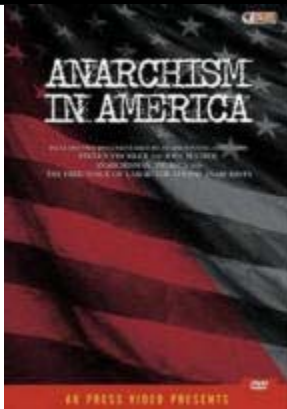


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music. politics. progression.



## video reviews:

*Anarchism in America*

*The Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists*

(AK Press Video)

*Anarchism in America* begins with The Sex Pistols. It's the sort of "anarchy" that terrifies parents when they imagine their kids being seduced by it—a philosophy of smashed storefront windows and toppled states and bad haircuts. Authoritarian figures appear on camera and emphasize the grave threat. "An anarchist seeks only ruin and destruction, and he rides a tidal wave of terror," says one.

Filmmakers Steven Fishler and Joel Sucher then cut away from the hype and show a *real* assembly of anarchists, and they look just like the crowd in the parking lot of your local coop grocery store or the faculty lounge of your local community college. It's about a million miles from dangerous, and a billion miles from sexy. A deep mistrust of government is implicit, and has been from the beginning, but nihilism had nothing to do with it for many anarchists. Musically, punk rock, of course, has been most closely associated with anarchy—and like punk, anarchy has experienced a gulf between its practitioners, each side thinking that they are true punks/anarchists and that the other side has co-opted the movement and sold it down the river.

With anarchists, there are those who are concerned largely with labor and markets, and those that are more concerned with smashing the state. *Anarchism in America* is more sympathetic toward the former, but its tone isn't about choosing or denigrating one or the other. Instead, it's an interesting perspective on a philosophy that was demonized, persecuted and eventually all but forgotten.

This newly released package from AK Press offers two documentaries by Fishler and Sucher. First is the previously discussed title documentary from 1982, which is ambitious in scope and includes a wide range of interview subjects, from Karl Hess to Jello Biafra. Second is 1980's *The Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists*, which is a more concentrated look on the Yiddish anarchist newspaper that was forced to close up shop after 87 years because of dwindling subscription numbers and rising printing and distribution costs. Despite the gloomy occasion that the documentary is centered around—the final issue of the paper—*The Free Voice of Labor* still strikes an optimistic if wisely world-weary tone.

Historian Paul Avrich narrates the second film, but Fischler and Sucher are lured into using too much of themselves during the first, which too often features narration that feels like editorializing; a filmmaker's prerogative, to be sure, but these interview subjects don't need help in getting their viewpoints across.

Their platform often sounds utopian but unrealistic, and three years of post-fascism functioning in Spain isn't much proof that it is viable or desirable. This is driven home during an especially provocative section with Hess, who talks about turning to anarchism and finding all the things that he hoped to find in the Republican Party—in a nutshell, getting the government to butt out. A long-distance trucker comes on camera to explain that he'd be better off if the government would butt out of his life altogether. This is where it would be nice to see Fischler and Sucher—who clearly

sympathize with their subjects—at least try to play devil’s advocate. Does the trucker also want the government to butt out when it comes time to maintain the thousands of miles of roads that allow him to make his living, or does he just want the government to stop slapping regulations on the trucking industry? Should the government have butted out when it was integrating schools in the south?

But considering how much scorn has been heaped upon anarchists, it’s just fine to see a documentary look at a part of the movement through rose-tinted glasses. *Anarchism in America* is a worthy reissue and an interesting combination that offers first a myth-busting general history lesson and then a peek into one specific unit from a bygone era. Even those who aren’t convinced by the tenets of anarchy should be inspired by its repeated insistence on the importance of the individual. Also inspiring is the cool conviction of one of anarchy’s most famous spokespeople.

“I will leave the country rather than deny my ideas,” Emma Goldman says in archival footage. “I prefer to stick to my guns.”

— **Adam McKibbin**

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