

ANARCHISM IN AMERICA

Two Films by Steven Fischler & Joel Sucher

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&

The Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists

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EXCERPT FROM FILM TRANSCRIPT

Murray Bookchin

My background and how I have become an anarchist is a long, long story. I had entered the communist children's movement, an organization called the Young Pioneers of America, in 1930 in New York City. I was only nine years old. And I'd gone through the entire Thirties as a Stalinist, initially—and then, increasingly, as someone sympathetic to Trotskyism. By 1939, after having seen Hitler rise to power, the Austrian workers' revolt of 1934 (an almost forgotten episode in labor history), the Spanish Revolution, I finally became utterly disillusioned with Stalinism and drifted increasingly toward Trotskyism. By 1945, I finally also became disillusioned with Trotskyism and, I'd say now, with Marxism and Leninism.

But the essential thing as far as I'm concerned, as I reflect on all of this now, is that I had gone through a period of Marxism which is almost unknown today to many American radicals: a period when Marxism was a workers' movement to a very great extent, when it was a movement in the streets, in which hundreds of thousands of people at times could be brought out in massive demonstrations throughout the country, under red flags, both communist and socialist. And, by the end of the Second World War, in particular by the end of the 1940's, I literally saw this movement disappear, and disappear from history, at least as far as the United States is concerned. And I have no belief whatsoever that it will come back again. Mainly what I'm saying is that I saw the end of the classical workers' movement. And I had to ask myself why this had come

about? What did this mean?

The conclusion I came to is this: that the workers' movement never really had a revolutionary potential; that the factories—and I had worked in factories for ten years, partly as a labor organizer in the old CIO, when it was still very militant—that this workers' movement had never really had the revolutionary potential that Marx attributed to it. That, in point of fact, the factory, which is supposed to organize the workers—in Marxist language “mobilize” them and instill class consciousness in them based on the conflict between wage labor and capital—in fact had created habits of mind in the worker that served to regiment the worker, to assimilate the worker to the work ethic, to the industrial routine, to hierarchical forms of organization. No matter how compellingly Marx argued that such a movement could have revolutionary consequences, in fact it could have nothing but a purely adaptive function, an adjunct to the capitalist system. And I began to explore what movements and ideologies really were liberatory, that really freed people of this hierarchical sensibility and mentality, of this authoritarian outlook, of this complete assimilation by the work ethic. I began to turn very consciously toward anarchist views. Because anarchism posed the question, not simply of a struggle between classes based upon economic exploitation...anarchism was really posing a much broader historical question that goes beyond our industrial civilization, includes not just classes, but hierarchy. Hierarchy as it exists in the family; hierarchy as it exists in the schools; hierarchy as it exists in sexual relations; hierarchy as it exists between ethnic groups. Not only class divisions based on economic exploitation. It wasn't concerned only with economic exploitation, but with domination. Domination that might not even have an economic meaning at all. The domination of women by men, in which women are not economically exploited; the domination of ordinary people by bureaucrats, in which you may even have a welfare, so-called socialist, state; domination as it exists today in China, even when you're supposed to have a classless society, you see. So there are these things that I noted in anarchism and, increasingly, I came to the conclusion that if we were to avoid the mistakes made in over 100 years of proletarian socialism, if we are really to achieve a liberatory movement, not simply in terms of economic questions, but in terms of every aspect of life, we would have to turn to anarchism—because it alone posed the problem, not merely of class domination, but hierarchical domination. And it alone posed the question not merely of economic exploitation, but exploitation in every sphere of life. And it was that growing awareness, that we have to go beyond classes into hierarchy and beyond exploitation to domination, that led me into anarchism and to a commitment to an anarchist outlook.

REVIEWS

ANARCHISM IN AMERICA

From: The New York Times

Review by: Janet Maslin

The Public Theater's latest free film program, to be shown Saturdays and Sundays at 2 P.M., is an exceptionally lucid and interesting documentary. It's a successful attempt to provide a capsule history and explanation of its subject. Beginning with footage of a new-wave band that mentions anarchy in its lyrics, and proceeding to interviews in which people on the street are asked what they think anarchy means ("I would say that it's a person trying to push his views down everybody's throat"), the film - "Anarchism in America" - proceeds to offer a cogent definition and to dispel as many misconceptions as it can.

As directed by Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher, the film touches quite a few bases. It presents newsreel footage of key figures in the history of American anarchism, among them Sacco and Vanzetti, and Emma Goldman. ("What is your opinion of Italy?" a reporter asks her. "Beautiful country minus Mussolini," she snaps in reply.) And there are contemporary interviews with figures including Mollie Steimer, Emma Goldman's girlhood friend, and the poet Kenneth Rexroth, who reads his Sacco and Vanzetti poem. There is also some discussion of what the film makers take to be anarchism's practical applications, such as food co-ops and town meetings.

Karl Hess, formerly a Newsweek writer and speechwriter for Barry Goldwater, discusses his evolution from Republican to anarchist. And the writer and teacher Murray Bookchin gives an exceptionally articulate description of his own ideological development. He explains why he finds anarchism more all-embracing than Marxism, because he believes it addresses "not just classes but hierarchy." Anarchism can be broadly applied, he says, to forms of domination "which may not have any economic meaning at all."

Mr. Bookchin, like many of the others interviewed, presents a far more serious and provocative side of the subject than the Dead Kennedys, a punk band whose members the directors also interview for an effective contrast. Asked what his group is trying to do, the lead singer says little more than "We like people to think for themselves." While the more thoughtful interviewees certainly reflect the same view, they reflect it in the kind of depth that is ill-served by the glibness of anarchism's pop manifestation. While the film never aims at a particular conclusion, striving to explain rather than to polemicize, this closing footage of the Dead Kennedys cannot help but suggest how grossly anarchism is trivialized in many such current incarnations.

From Research on Anarchism
Review by Pietro Ferrua

Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher's *Anarchism in America* extemporaneously asks, "What is anarchism for you?" The meaning of the word changes depending on who's being asked - politicians, common people interrogated on the street, or believers in anarchism, such as Murray Bookchin who is interviewed several times (although not about ecology, his specialty).

The best answer comes not as a conclusion to the film but early on from the Grande Dame of Anarchism: writer Ursula Le Guin, who is resplendent in a close-up shot at the First International Symposium of Anarchism. The event took place in Portland at Lewis and Clark College in 1980, and that is where Fischler and Sucher inaugurated the filming. Some viewers will recognize the famous solo cabaret actress Lee Grandville, Eva Lake (the youngest speaker), Prof. John Braun and some other now-disappeared participants. Among these are Arthur Lehning from Holland (who was born in 1899 and died in 2000, thereby living in three centuries), Prof. Allan Kittell from Portland, and Annette van Dongen from Belgium.

We find pearls here and there throughout the film, such as the late Kenneth Rexroth reading a poem dedicated to Sacco and Vanzetti and an interview in Mexico with Mollie Steimer, an active and courageous militant in the Russian Revolution as well as in American unions. Archival footage shows us Sacco and Vanzetti still alive and then the impotent funeral and the demonstration that followed their legal assassination. Then we have Emma Goldman, allowed in the United States for 90 days after decades of exile, declaring that she would "leave the country rather than deny my ideal" if blackmailed by the authorities. Commentary gives the viewer details about worker-owned enterprises and descriptions of Borsodi-inspired cooperatives. We learn that Fischler and Sucher sipped tequila in Mexico with the late Luis Buñuel. We may regret that some outstanding anarchists are not interviewed, such as Noam Chomsky (listed among the advisers), Lawrence Ferlinghetti (although we hear from Philip Levine and John Cage), The Living Theater, the IWW, the Catholic Worker Anarchists, and, last but not least, Paul Avrich (perhaps because he was already present in their previous film) ... but, then, it would be "our" film and not "their" film. Individual rights and choices are also a lesson contained in an already rich slice of American anarchism.

The Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists

From: The New York Times
Reviewed by: Richard F. Shepard

"Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists," made by Pacific Street Films, is a wonderful evocation of the radical political past and what has become of its activists in their old age. It takes its name from the Yiddish anarchist newspaper, which finally died

in 1987 at the age of 87. The film is an oral history, given by those who lived through the era. It's more than merely that, however. It uses clips from old movies, in Yiddish, that dealt with the ugliness of the sweatshop. You hear the Yiddish songs and poems inveighing against oppression and calling for the people to rise up.

But the joy in the film lies in the people who belonged to the movement. They have aged gracefully, with their sentiments unchanged, but with their world different in ways they would never have dreamed of years ago. They speak with humor of demonstrations, picket lines, battles of long ago. They speak as Jews, but secular Jews whose visions were of an unbossed universality. They are grandmas and grandpas, as sunny and mellow as any others, but their courage, intelligence and social concern still shines in their faces. They were a movement, mostly nonviolent, unlike the caricature anarchist bomb-thrower, but their families have grown into middle-class America. They no longer fight, but they still think.

Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher directed this attractive bit of Americana and they have taken their subject seriously, but not so seriously that they could not recognize the humor and humanity of the single-minded people they studied.

From: Research on Anarchism
Review by Pietro Ferrua

This wonderful documentary has a particular meaning for Portland because its world premiere happened here, at The Movie House, during the First International Symposium on Anarchism, held at Lewis and Clark College in February 1980. At this important event, both directors were present, as well as their assistants Maria Gil and Erika Gottfried and the two consultants, Paul Avrich and Ahrne Thorne. The first part of the film's title, *The Free Voice of Labor*, is the translation of the Yiddish-language title: *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, founded on July 4, 1890, and published until 1977. The newspaper was directed by a series of editors, including Sol Yanowsky, Joseph Cohen and Ahrne Thorne. One of the interviewees in the film explains to us that the adjective "Jewish" here has no religious connotation - most of the "Jewish anarchists" were atheists or secular Jews. But it was because American authorities treated Jews as a "nationality" that they were labeled as such. In fact, there is no racial connotation either, for the German anarchist Rudolf Rocker was not a Jew but had learned Yiddish and lived among the Jews all his life, influencing many of them, including, by his own admission, the eminent thinker Noam Chomsky.

In *The Free Voice of Labor*, Avrich leads us through the history of the newspaper and the union organizing aspects of the multifaceted activities of the militants involved. We see the Jewish anarchists of America present in all struggles and in solidarity with their Russian comrades, before the Revolution, organizing benefit balls for the prisoners of the Czar; during the Revolution, when many returned to Russia hoping to build a new country (250 of them had been deported for having opposed the war and military compulsory service); and also after the liquidation of the anarchists by the Bolsheviks, when they founded the Anarchist Black Cross.

The following anarchists are interviewed in the film: Franz Feigler, an IWW member who had smuggled Eastern European Jews to Palestine; Fanny Breslow, a union activist; Sonia Farber; Sara Rothman; Charles Zimmerman; Irving Abrahms; Abe Bluestein; Clara Larsen; James Dick Emma Cohen; Sam Dolgoff; and Joe Conason. Each one of them contributes to the reconstitution of almost a century of incessant political, cultural and syndicalist action. With beautiful music, excellent cinematography, accurate research, and well-chosen archive footage, the film is a great contribution to the history of Yiddish culture - poems by David Edelstadt and Mani Leib are recited and we are told that all the famous Yiddish writers started out by publishing in the columns of the Freie Arbeiter Stimme - and to the development of political ideals.