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MONDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2006

### **Anarchism in America; The Free Voice of Labor (2006)**

Informative but technically-lacking documentaries on an interesting social movement

Anarchism in America; The Free Voice of Labor (2006)

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Two documentaries by Steven Fishler and Joel Sucher

Studio: AK Press/MVD AKV006

Video: 4:3 full screen, color and B&W

Audio: PCM mono, English & Yiddish

Subtitles: English

Length: 130 minutes

Rating: \*\*1/2

The first of these two documentaries deals with anarchism in general, with emphasis on its origins and history. It runs 75 minutes. The second film is 55 minutes and concerns the Jewish anarchists who were active in the labor movement and published an anarchist newspaper in Yiddish for 87 years. Its title is the same as the documentary, and historian Paul Avrich narrates this film.

Well-known anarchist writers such as Kenneth Rexroth, Karl Hess and Ursula LeGuin are interviewed or speak in the films. There is archival footage of anarchist leader Emma Goldman. Jello Biafra of The Dead Kennedys speaks about his anarchist motivations in the punk rock movement, and writer Murray Bookchin visits a Libertarian Party convention and opines that they are really anarchists underneath - even though Libertarians don't want to eliminate central government entirely (as do anarchists) - just to minimize it. There are some informative clips from Yiddish dramatic films illustrating some of the early history and struggles of the anarchists.

Some man-on-the-street interviews establish that most people connect anarchists with the image of a fat bearded man holding a ball-shaped bomb with the wick sparking. Yet those in the films who have dedicated their lives to the movement believe strictly in nonviolence and feel that anarchism is actually a peace movement. They are strongly antimilitarist and were persecuted for protesting against the First World War. The movement was founded by Russians and Europeans who came to America thru Ellis Island hoping for a better life who often found conditions as bad or worse than in their homelands. They organized, helped one another, launched protests, and worked for better working conditions. Their basic aim has been ultimate human justice for all, not just for the few. They oppose the idea of authority itself. Some anarchists refer to the state and the church the twin evils of society. There is a split

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"My relationship with cats has saved me from a deadly, pervasive ignorance." -William S. Burroughs



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among anarchists between free-market (right) and socialist (leftist) anarchists. Their Yiddish newspaper was down to 1700 subscribers and had to close because it was only charging \$7 a year subscription and just the mailing alone cost double that, but if they raised rates their elderly subscribers couldn't afford it anymore. All the tireless workers on the paper had become very elderly and no young people were interested in continuing the effort. Parents said they didn't insist because a primary anarchist rule is that people should be totally free to do their own thing and not be dictated to.

Both documentaries cover a fascinating political and philosophical area which is unfamiliar to many, and the various personalities are intriguing people. However, both are among the most amateurish documentaries I have viewed in the current spate of such films. The one of the newspaper staff is a bit better, but both seem to have been made some years ago and just now being offered on DVD. Several of those speaking onscreen have a serious and distracting sibilance in the mike pickup, and the framing of the subject speaking is often very odd. In one interview we see a straight-on view of the interviewer, who sounds off-mike because he is pointing the mike at the subject; yet the subject is shot from behind and to one side almost as if it was important to keep him anonymous. The historic stills are very dark and murky and there is much zooming in and out on shots.

- John Sunier

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