

Book Review

Michael Willrich, *American Anarchy: The Epic Struggle between Immigrant Radicals and the U.S. Government at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Basic Books, 2023.

A salient issue in the history of anarchism in the United States during the early 1900s is how movement activists parlayed with state repression, legal and extra legal. Notable 'flash points' include the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901; America's entry into World War One; and the insurrectionary threat posed by the Mexican Liberal Party (MLP) in U.S.-Mexico borderlands during the Mexican revolution (1910-20). Many more could be enumerated.

By and in large, historians have filtered these clashes through the lens of ethnic communities and labour-inflected militancy. For example, James Sandos has examined the racializing dimensions of U.S. judicial chicanery in his study of the MLP, while Kenyon Zimmer and Travis Tomchuk focus on the repression of Jewish and Italian working-class (predominantly) anarchists during World War One, as well as threats of deportation targeting Italian-born activists before and during World War Two.¹ More recently, Mark Greutner has addressed the founding, expansion, and policing of the Union of Russian Workers in Canada and the United States during the 1910s in an invaluable history of that revolutionary organization.² Sandos, Zimmer, Tomchuk, and Greutner all conduct 'deep dives' into the cultural politics animating the communities they examine, which, in turn, throws light on how laws, in tandem with spying, harassment, and other measures, were honed. In this respect they build on Paul Avrich, whose scholarship is foundational for any study of anarchism in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century.³

What of other frameworks? Alternatively, I've discussed the targeting of anarchist visual culture during World War One and its aftermath, exploring how mounting government attacks on the movement, abetted by the law, police, Military Intelligence and the mass deputized, 250,000 strong, American Protective League, supplemented condemnations of anarchism in art and hostility toward related institutions

(notably New York City's Ferrer Center).⁴ Recent studies concerning anarchism's engagements with homosexuality and its criminalization, as well feminist activism promoting free love and birth control, offer additional insights, and the scope of critical inquiry continues to develop.⁵

In this respect, what distinguishes Micheal Willrich's informative book from other studies is his focus on anarchism's impact on the evolving U.S. legal system, pitting two "utopian ideals" – "anarchism and the rule of law" – against each other.⁶ Willrich's conclusion is refreshingly blunt.

"In the early twentieth century," he writes, "immigrant anarchists and their liberal allies engaged in a sustained and deeply revealing struggle with the American state. Out of that struggle emerged two of the enduring features of the nation's public life: the surveillance state and the modern civil liberties movement."⁷ I would liken this characterization to asymmetric 'jujitsu' in which the weaker combatant is eventually defeated, but not before changing the rules of the game. Willrich posits two adversaries locked in a battle that presupposes the primacy of the state, a positioning that is argumentatively self-serving. To wit, the reader is being conjoined to 'appreciate' anarchism for expanding the boundaries of social liberty because this breathes life into the "utopian ideals" said to undergird the United States as a polity. In sum, Willrich is an American liberal who has made his peace with the state "based on the moral argument that ensuring the right of an individual person to life, liberty and property is the highest goal of government."⁸ Thus, his lodestone is how liberalism in the era of World War One went about defending individual freedom "by limiting and checking political power,"⁹ as opposed to furthering anarchism. Consequently, and crucially, what eludes Willrich is that many anarchists during the period he examines were mobilizing liberal values to corrode the United States' viability, not buttress it.¹⁰

However blinkered, *American Anarchy* does give us plenty to work with by way of revealing the totalizing criminality of the emergent American surveillance state and the laws which rubbernecking government officials, politicians, police, and military manipulated to

align with the U.S. constitution, the font of utopianism to which they declared allegiance. Willrich's treatment of lawyered-up anarchism, pivoting on Goldman and her circle, is equally rewarding. I cannot recommend this book highly enough to anyone interested in how anarchists built and institutionalized networks of mutual aid and solidarity while facing off with the courts, or the ways in which they weaponized U.S. laws (and liberalism) to blunt state oppression and, occasionally, gum up the machinations of police, prosecutors, and the judiciary.

The history chronicled in *American Anarchy* might also go some way toward disabusing those who cling to the idea that the American constitution is going to shield them from the state when the state comes knocking, 'know your rights' being contested terrain. Willrich rhetorically queries, citing an anti-conscription speech delivered by Goldman after the U.S. joined World War One in early April 1917:

. . . what credence should we give to the anarchists' contention that the rule of law itself is a myth, perpetuated in the service of the powerful? Throughout American history, the liberal promise of 'a government of laws, not men' has often been invoked to legitimate social inequality and to thwart even modest efforts of social reform. That does not mean the rule of law is an empty ideal During periods of extreme political crisis or moral panic, the rule of law has existed only because people have willingly put their own lives or liberties at risk. Emma Goldman underscored this fact when she hollered to the huge crowd of immigrants [over 5,000] who braved arrest and bodily harm to protest conscription at the Harlem River Casino in 1917 [May 18] that 'the only people who still believe in the Constitution are you poor fools.'¹¹

Willrich would have us take Goldman at her word, but of course Goldman was caustically ironic when she suggested her audience 'believed' in the constitution. The only thing she was underscoring was lawlessness: shredding the constitutional injunction to obey,¹²

she went on to suggest if hundreds of thousands refused conscription the state would be overwhelmed, before thundering “your answer to war must be a general strike, and then the governing class will have something on its hands.”¹³ Willrich rightly notes this revolutionary call was the “nightmare scenario” spurring government preparations to repress dissent, which just goes to show that the U.S. constitution is always out to get you whether you like it or not.¹⁴

Willrich begins his story with the trial and execution of four anarchist labour activists (three others destined to hang had their sentences commuted to life in prison, and a fourth committed suicide) on spurious grounds following a confrontation in Chicago’s Haymarket Square on May 4, 1886, during which someone threw a bomb at the police.¹⁵ Anarchists condemned the trial as a farce, and eventually, Illinois’ newly elected reform-minded governor, John Peter Altgeld, concurred. In 1893, declaiming their conviction an outrageous travesty, he pardoned the three prisoners, an act which heartened labour radicals but sealed his political fate.¹⁶ This sets the stage for Goldman and Alexander Berkman to enter the narrative by way of the trial of anarchist agitator Johann Most and Berkman’s attempted assassination of the Pittsburgh industrialist Clay Frick in 1892.¹⁷ Whereas Most hired a lawyer to defend his case and got the benefit of a legal argument, Berkman imagined he could represent himself, using the court as a platform to justify his actions. Procedural routines turned Berkman’s plan into a farce and his trial wrapped up in four hours with a twenty-one year sentence.¹⁸ Lesson learned: writing from his cell, Berkman subsequently advised Goldman to hire a lawyer when she faced trial for inciting to riot during a speech delivered to an “unlawful assembly” in 1893. A sympathetic lawyer with a grudge to settle offered to represent her pro bono, and the trial lasted a week, rather than a few hours.¹⁹ Willrich enumerates the case mounted by Goldman’s lawyer and how his arguments and cross examinations proved effective, allowing the accused to read her entire speech to the jury.²⁰ Goldman came to realize courts could be tactically effective for propounding anarchism if you had the right kind of lawyer, which figured in her strategizing from this point forward.²¹

Following President McKinley’s killing by a self-proclaimed anar-

chist (and professed Emma Goldman enthusiast), numerous state legislatures enacted “criminal anarchy” laws and Congress passed legislation barring foreign born anarchists from entering the United States (with the proviso that, if already in the country, the person in question could be deported). Again, Willrich reviews how the legal-ese related to deportation evolved as bureaucrats, lawyers and police considered its constitutional implications. He then examines the legal ‘push-back’ precipitated by a group of “libertarian intellectuals, lawyers, and muckraking journalists based in New York” who form a “Free Speech League.”²² Willrich wants to anchor this organization in constitutionally-loyal liberalism when, in fact, the League was anarchist-initiated, and became the movement’s first line of defence against the repression of speakers, meetings, publications, and other forms of censorship.²³ Indicative of its mission, the League’s first move was to hire lawyers to contest the arrest and deportation of a British anarchist in 1903. The case went straight to the Supreme Court, which ruled unanimously in favour of deportation. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, government bureaucrats and police began investigating if Goldman could be deported on the grounds that she was foreign born and, furthermore, not married to a U.S. citizen (Goldman had married, briefly, in her youth, but lacked a marriage licence). Willrich deftly tracks their deliberations along with Goldman’s evasive maneuvers leading up to 1909, when she resolved to stop traveling abroad for fear of being disbarred from re-entry into the country.²⁴

He then turns to Goldman’s epicentre, New York, and movement building at the Ferrer Center, which he rightly designates “the most important address on the anarchist map of Manhattan and a proving ground for artistic expression.”²⁵ Ferrer Center activism dovetailed with the struggles of the anarchist-inflected Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), which involved “free speech” campaigning, strikes, mass demonstrations, and other measures.²⁶ Willrich duly notes anarchists mobilized the Free Speech League to defend I.W.W. activists, and discusses a plot concocted by Ferrer Center militants, including Berkman, to bomb the Tarrytown estate of John D. Rockefeller Jr. The scheme came to nought after the bomb prematurely exploded in a Manhattan apartment, killing three of the plotters. Strangely,

Willrich does not consult Avrigh's meticulous discussion of the Ferrer Center's history in *The Modern School Movement*, opting instead to reference his compendium of interviews in *Anarchist Voices*, as well as period newspapers or journals, supplemented by tertiary scholarship.²⁷

Equally important is Goldman's collaboration with Margaret Sanger (founder-editor of the short-lived *Woman Rebel* journal, whose masthead declared "No Gods, No Masters") to promote birth control, a cause which drew them into legal dances with obscenity laws and the New York vice squad. Here Willrich's discussion of their strategizing, drawing on extensive secondary scholarship, is particularly apropos, given the current situation in the United States.²⁸ This is the juncture when 'fellow-traveller' liberalism makes its entrance in the guise of lawyer Harry Wienberger, who, summarizing his legal work on behalf of Goldman and Berkman at the end of 1917, wrote "E.G. [Emma Goldman] said she adopted me for life as her lawyer."²⁹ Willrich devotes an entire chapter to Wienberger's background and education, concluding his motivation for representing anarchists in court was attributable to his "proudly American upbringing," "staunchly individualist mindset," and "unshakeable faith in the U.S. Constitution and the rule of law."³⁰ He then launches into five chapters – "First Casualties of War" (anarchist anti-war activism and its repression); "Anarchism on Trial" (Goldman and Berkman); "Revolutionists" (the arrest and persecution of the *Freyhayt* circle); "To Build an Ark" (J. Edgar Hoover makes his appearance); and "Caught in the Juggernaut" (1919-20 'Palmer Raids' and deportations) – that offer an outstandingly comprehensive analysis of how the U.S. legal apparatus worked in lockstep with draconian repression (police, military, and vigilante driven) and expansive state surveillance from the U.S. entry into World War One (April 1917) through to the winter of 1920, when growing public unease encouraged the government to reign in the rampage (ends achieved, officials were turning their attentions elsewhere in any event).³¹ Willrich addresses anarchist resistance in the face of multiple forces targeting the movement, which he enumerates drawing on government documents, court transcripts, letters, newspaper articles, Congressional records, archival collections, as well as period anarchist publications. This is a researcher's

tour-de-force, presenting a scholarly analysis of dehumanizing crimes which many historians of anarchism have addressed, but never, to my knowledge, through the perspective of the U.S. judiciary, its courts, laws, and state bureaucracy.

In his epilogue Willrich concludes that, despite the carnage, “there were worse place to be an anarchist than the United States.”³² Indeed, upon deportation to Soviet Russia in December 1919, Goldman and Berkman encountered a Marxist dictatorship that was implacably hostile toward anarchism, and willing to go to any lengths to crush it.³³ He discusses their post-Soviet lives in exile through correspondence with Wienberger, ending with the death of Berkman (Nice, France, 1936), Goldman (Toronto, Canada, 1940), and Wienberger himself in 1944 (New York City).

Putting to one side Willrich’s overarching apologia in defense of constitutionalism, *American Anarchy* is an important contribution to the history of the United States which takes us back to a time before liberalism’s anarchist-adjacent legal wing was defanged by the American Civil Liberties Union.³⁴

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Notes

1 See James A. Sandos' *Rebellion in the Borderlands: Anarchism and the plan of San Diego, 1904-1923* (Norman Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); Tavis Tomchuk, *Transnational Radicals: Italian Anarchists in Canada and the United States, 1915-1940* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015); and Kenyon Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in America* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

2 Mark Greutner, "Anarchism and the Working Class: The Union of Russian Workers in the North American Labor Movement, 1910s," PhD. dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2018. We are also indebted to Gruetner for discovering a manuscript chronicling the history of Russian anarchism in North America compiled in the mid-1950s by a member of the union which has since been published. See Lazar Lipotkin, *The History of Russian Anarchism in North America*, Malcolm Archibald, trans. (Edmonton: Black Cat Press, 2019).

3 For studies focussing on anarchism in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, see Paul Avrich, *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

4 Allan Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics, and the First American Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), chapters 7 and 9.

5 See, for example, Terence Kissack, *Free Comrades: Anarchism and Homosexuality in the United States, 1895-1917* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2008); Kathy Ferguson, *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2011); and Angeline Durand-Vallot, *Margaret Sanger et la croisade pour le contrôle des naissances* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2012).

6 Micheal Willrich, *American Anarchy: The Epic Struggle between Immigrant Radicals and the U.S. Government at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2023), 11.

7 Willrich, *American Anarchy*, 16.

8 I am citing Jeffrey W. Mieser, "Liberalism" in *International Relations Theory*, Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters, and Christian Schenipflug, eds. (Briston, UK: E-International Relations Publishing, 2017), 22.

9 Mieser, "Liberalism," 22.

10 I discuss how liberal values (tolerance of differences, free debate, a wel-

coming attitude toward new social movements, etc.) were rhetorically mobilized by journalist, art critic, and Free Speech League advocate Hutchins Hapgood to promote anarchism in Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism*, 30-52.

11 Goldman cited in Willrich, 275. He refers to a rally organized by the anarchist No Conscription League held on May 18, 1917, just as Congress passed the Selective Service Act declaring all male citizens aged twenty-one to thirty, as well as all male “aliens” within this range, could be called up for military service.

12 A federally sanctioned pro-war ritual was pledging allegiance to “The American’s Creed”: “it is my duty to my country to love it; to support its Constitution; to obey its laws; to respect its flag; and to defend it against all enemies.” See “The American’s Creed,” *Washington Herald*, Sunday May 4, 1919, 8.

13 Goldman, cited in Willrich, 207.

14 Willrich, 207.

15 Willrich, 42.

16 Willrich, 47.

17 Willrich, 64-67.

18 Willrich, 73-4.

19 Willrich, 80-81. Goldman’s attorney, A. Oakey Hall, told her he was defending her “partly out of sympathy” and “partly because of his antagonism with the police.” Hall was a former district attorney and New York mayor who had been indicted twice for corruption (and exonerated).

20 Willrich, 82.

21 Willrich, 91.

22 Willrich, 103.

23 Founded in 1902, The Free Speech League’s president, Leonard D. Abbott, was an anarchist, and Hapgood was its most prominent spokesperson. See Allan Antliff, “Divine Fire: Alfred Stieglitz’s Anarchism” in *With Freedom in Our Ears: Histories of Jewish Anarchism*, Elena Torres and Kenyon Zimmer, eds. (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2023), 183, and 191, note 71.

24 Willrich, 108-118.

25 Willrich, 126.

26 The I.W.W. was founded in 1905 on a platform that countenanced parliamentary socialism, but anarchist-syndicalist unionists struck this proviso from its platform in 1908. See Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism*, 6.

27 Willrich, 124-134.

28 Willrich, 135-158.

29 Harry Weinberger cited in Willrich, 158.

30 Willrich, 161.

31 Willrich, 376-9. Willrich highlights the institutionalization of the federal government's "domestic surveillance bureaucracy" with the founding of the Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I) in the early 1920s.

32 Willrich, 380.

33 Primary sources include *To Remain Silent is Impossible: Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman in Russia*, Andrew Zinnoveld, ed. (Atlanta: On Our Own Authority Publishing, 2013); P.G. Maximoff, *The Guillotine at Work: Twenty Years of Terror in Russia (data and documents)* (Chicago: The Chicago Section of the Alexander Berkman Fund, 1940); Voline, *The Unknown Revolution, 1917-1921* (Detroit: Black and Red/Solidarity, 1974); *The Tragic Procession: Alexander Berkman and Russian Prisoner Aid, 1921-1931* (London: Kate Sharpley Library, 2010); and Peter Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement, 1818-1921* (Detroit: Black and Red/Solidarity, 1974). See also Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2005) and Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

34 Willrich discusses the process whereby lawyer Roger N. Baldwin connived to sideline Weinberger and his anarchist collaborators before founding the American Civil Liberties Union, chartered to defend civil rights under the American Constitution, in 1920. See Willrich, 220-23; 354.