

An Unusual Study In American Anarchism

A review

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During the last two score of years anarchism and its movements have witnessed a sort of re-discovery due to the disillusionment of the intellectual world that has for a long time supported the Marxian Government of Russia and all its allied Marxian Governments in other countries. This, in turn, has led to the appearance of quite a few volumes dealing with anarchism and its movements, along with reprints of most of the works of its theoreticians.

The study of William O. Reichert differs in many respects from most other volumes, as he justly states in the preface:

“I have been distressed to discover that the essential nature of anarchist thought has been seriously distorted not only by the press but by social historians as well...the record ought to be made more accurate, with reference to what anarchism is all about and thus I have attempted...to give as honest an account of what American anarchists have said and believed as is humanly possible...As with all liberal accounts of anarchism, the notion that formal social control through government is the bedrock of reality misleads these authors into concluding that the idea of anarchism is wholly impractical and already dead as a viable plan for human action...If a candid avowal of my own ideology sympathies would be helpful to the reader in judging the authenticity of what follows, I am quite willing to confess that I am somewhat of an anarchist myself, for I invariably find myself reacting positively to the arguments that anarchists raise concerning important social issues and I am firmly convinced that the kind of stateless world anarchists envision is the kind of world in which I would like to reside myself.”

The extent to which Reichert has succeeded in his aim, following a ten-year research and study, revealed such a huge wealth of material, covering the earliest anti-authoritarian writers down to the 1940s. True enough that some had not even as yet heard or known about anarchism or anarchists. Nevertheless, their opposition to the rulership of man over man by the church and state, placed them, even unknowingly, close to what is known as the theoreticians of anarchism, such as Godwin, Proudhon, Kropotkin and Malatesta, as Reichert points out.

What makes Reichert's study unique from all others is not only in bringing forth extensively the thoughts of the writers, but also their personal background. Many of them had college degrees and practiced law, or began by mounting the pulpits of churches in their earliest lives, only to later on abandon both for outright anti-authoritarian positions. This in itself is a vindication of anarchism that should make future social historians think twice before indulging anew in the kind of distortful reference to anarchism that so many have done in the past.

Another unique value of Reichert's study is in bringing to light sufficient detailed extracts from each writer so that the reader is enabled to form a comprehensive understanding of what they propounded.

To truly bring forth here the wealth of rich extracts that Reichert does would require many pages, and would still not do full justice to each writer. It is this treasure of anti-authoritarian thoughts that the reader of Reichert's volume will deeply appreciate, and which anarchist publications will gladly reprint—for their timeliness toward the problems we still face today.

Anarchism and its movement in the United States has chiefly suffered in being labeled by its traducers, as a foreign importation. Even if this was to be true, which it is not, as Reichert's study proves, it would still be justified—since social ideas are international in scope and aim.

Anti-Authoritarians and Anarchists

Reichert has in his volume brought forward, by far the most extensive detailed history of the lives and thoughts of many very little known as well as the known libertarians, dating as far back as the 17th century down to the 1940s.

A most regrettable omission in this study is Reichert's overlooking the score of years that Albert Jay Nock had published and edited *The Freeman* in the 1930s in New York, as well as written many anti-authoritarian volumes, the most outstanding one being "Your Enemy, the State". The Journal was, in my opinion, close to individualist anarchism, without using that term.

In dealing with the Haymarket trial at Chicago which witnessed the lawless judicial execution of anarchists, Reichert states about Lingg

"In keeping with his lust for freedom and justice, Louis Lingg... ended his life as dramatically as he had lived when he blew his head off with a dynamite cartridge clamped between his teeth the day before he was to be executed." (P. 227)

In the "Anarchist" of London, England, July 1, 1888, its editor, Edgeworth, wrote this introduction to a letter:

"Finding it to be the decided opinion of several correspondents of Chicago, in quite different circles, that Lingg's death was not suicide or intentional on his part, I have solicited from one of them, Mrs. A.C. Van Zandt, the following which shows the true unworthiness of the affair. Wrote Mrs. Van Zandt, in part:

"As to Lingg's death—consider for a moment that the public were taught to believe he was a monster, and a criminal mind, had made dynamite his god, wished to destroy society at large by its means, had made bombs. The press kept up a continual cry for the "bomber's" blood. On November 6, the jail officials said bombs were found in Lingg's cell under his stove... You see, public opinion had changed as by magic after Trumbull's and Lewis' pamphlets had been scattered about. The few in authority felt that to gain their ends, something must be done to counteract the tide of sympathy and justice. Lingg, of course, was the victim chosen... On Saturday evening November 5, Folz, head jailer, followed my daughter (who married August Spies whilst in jail) and other relatives out of jail and said insolently, "do not come near this building tomorrow, or allow any of the women to come"... Next morning the city was thrown into wild excitement by the news reports of bombs found in Lingg's cell...Louis knew all about dynamite explosions...and had he wished to destroy himself, he need not have mutilated his body uselessly...Have I no reason to conclude that he was murdered?"

How history repeats itself when revolutionists are jailed by Governments! West Germany's Nazi-like government has within the last few years murdered a score of the most sensitive thinking youths who became revolutionists, their latest victims being Andreas Baader, 34, Gudrin Ensslin, 37, Jan-Carl Raspe, 33, and Ingrid Schubert, 32. In each instance the Government had the brazen audacity to claim that they committed suicide! These four courageous revolutionists withstood years of degradation, beatings and vilifications in the system's media. Why then should they have wanted to end their lives before exposing the Government's misdeeds that they were being subjected to?

Critical Remarks

Reichert states in his preface that he "attempted throughout" his "study to report what anarchists said...with as little interpretation...as possible". This is very true as to the first part, but not so with some of his interpretations.

Writes Reichert:

“To argue that the anarchist has historically placed himself against state socialism is not the same thing as saying that the anarchist rejects socialism. In point of fact, as Daniel Guerin points out, ‘Anarchism is really a synonym for socialism. The anarchist is primarily a socialist whose aim is to abolish the exploitation of man by man.’” p. 9

Guerin is not known as an anarchist, and his attempt to make a union of the two philosophies has been, and still is being rejected by anarchists. Both do aim at abolishing capitalism, but totally differ as to what is to replace it, as is most strikingly exemplified wherever marxian socialists replaced capitalist governments.

Reichert’s pro-marxian leanings is further evidenced when stating:

“Tucher’s inability to find a place for Marx in his libertarian philosophy and his tenacious loyalty to Proudhon tells us more about his age than it does about his basic values.” p. 255

“...Graham was resolute in his opposition to Marxism, holding that Marx has made the gravest of blunders when he accepted the idea of conventional political action as a possible means of social transformation. Graham...might be criticized for failing to see the crucial distinction between Marxism and Bolshevism, for it was Lenin and later interpreters of the Marxian idea who actually held to the idea of the state, not Marx, although Marx, of course, might be criticized for failing to make himself critical On this point.” p. 434

Reichert’s attempts to absolve Marx is not borne out by the volume: *The First International: Minutes of the Hague Conference of 1872*, (edited and translated by Hans Gerth, published by the University of Wisconsin Press in 1958). This book shows not only how Marx and Babel arranged to have a majority support by paying for phony delegates in order to oust Bakunin and James Guillaume from the International; but how they railroaded through a motion to adopt political action; chose the General Council, and moved the Council to New York—where it was, as planned, to end the life of the First International, in which most of the affiliates were anti-marxian, pro-Bakuninists.

Reichert’s attempt to absolve Marx and blame Lenin, of not being “critical” as to political action, is therefore incorrect.

Jesus, Christianity and Anarchism

Reichert’s inclusion of quite a few who became anti-authoritarians from a Jesus-Christian point of view is puzzling since the very belief in both is a contradiction to their rejection of authority, and one would have expected Reichert to point this out. Instead, one finds him also believing in the Jesus-Christ idea, when writing:

“Like Christ, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed because the simple message of love and order which they tried to articulate.” (p. 473)

Is it possible that Reichert is unaware of the many volumes that have been written disproving the very existence of Jesus? The eminent literary critic George Brandes made a thorough study of most bibles, and in his volume *Jesus—A Myth*, concluded his findings, in the final paragraph, as follows:

“In his ‘Address of Gratitude to Lessing,’ Soren Kierkegaard voiced his passionate agreement with the... writer’s assertion that incidental historic truths can never be—used as evidence of the perennial truths of reason...in the book he named ‘Training in Christianity’ he put the question: ‘Can history tell us anything about Christ?’ And his answer to his question was: ‘No.’”

Reichert’s inclusion of Tolstoy and his followers as anarchists is, likewise, most questionable, especially that of Catholics like Dorothy Day and Ammon Hennacy, the latter being baptized by the first!

Peter Kropotkin's Pro-War Position

Writes Reichert:

"It was characteristic of Joseph Ishill * that he clearly understood what so many others misunderstood concerning Kropotkin's endorsement of the Allies during World War I. Ishill's ability to reconcile apparent inconsistencies was an indication that anarchism had reached maturity..." p. 453

"The many others" that Reichert refers to who opposed Kropotkin's inconsistency in supporting the allied governments was, in actuality, the anarchists' spokesmen and adherents throughout the world, for the very reason of having reached maturity!

In writing about the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* (Free Workers Voice) Reichert states:

"...thanks to the freethinking editors who have given its guidance, has served reason and truth first and only secondarily concerned itself with ideological consistency." (p. 365)

Ideological consistency is of the utmost importance to the basic idea upon which the philosophy of anarchism rests, and to find Reichert justifying inconsistency is regrettable.

Relying upon the information given to him also by Ishill, Reichert states about Joseph Bovshover, that:

"...his affiliation with...Benjamin Tucker's "Liberty" was more a literary farce than a forthright act of ideological transcendence...Tucker printed "To the toilers" along with paeans of praise for the author's ability...Unhappily, the story has a sad ending, for Joseph Bovshover went insane a few years after the publication of his poem..." pp. 362-63

In Jewish literature Bovshover was and still is considered one of its outstanding poets. Shortly after arriving in the United States, he mastered the English language so swiftly that he was able to render a masterful translation of Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" into Yiddish that the then living great actor Jacob Adler played in with great success. Bovshover's sole interest in life was creating poetry. It was the poverty of Jewish speaking comrades that could not materially support him, and their opening a small candy store for him lasted but a few weeks, as he handed out the goodies to every kid that came, an incident that undoubtedly caused his going insane. In a free moneyless society this tragical end could not have happened.

Writes Reichert about Carlo Tresca:

"Perhaps the most well-known of the Italian-speaking anarchists was Carlo Tresca who edited 'L'Avenire' and 'Il... It remains for some historian proficient in the Italian language to write a history of the Italian speaking anarchists in America." p. 474

Regretfully, once again, Reichert was given by someone wrong information. Tresca was the most disliked personality among the Italian speaking anarchists due to his inconsistencies in association with communists and the IWW. They most devotedly supported *L'Adunata dei Refrattari* that appeared for four score of years, and only suspended publication a few years ago due to the editor's illness.

Reichert devotes a great deal to the Ferrer School founded in New York City, that afterwards moved to Stelton where a colony was formed. It is therefore strange that he left out the long existence of the Home Colony, whilst also writing about the Sunrise Colony in Michigan. At Puget Sound, where the Home Colony was, also published an anarchist paper *Why*, whose editor was Eugene Travaglio and who years later published a most interesting magazine, *The Dawn*.

Reichert seems to have been overwhelmed by the individuals he deals with and instead of letting the names stand by themselves, he added superlative titles that are uncalled for, such as: Stephen Pearl Andrews: Pedantic Libertine or Prophetic Libertarian; William B. Green: Prince of American Proudhonians; "Corrupters" of American Youth:

Randolph Bourne and Paul Goodman. These are but a few examples of the many superlatives Reichert has used throughout the volume.

There are quite a few typographical errors, and a serious one regarding Abraham Isaak: On page 265 is stated "After Abraham's death in 1907-..." whilst in Note 13 on page 275 it states that Harry Kelly wrote an obituary on Abraham Isaak in the December, 1938 issue of *Man!* which was the year he died, and on page 363 Isaak's surname appears as Isaac.

On the Creditable Side

Having pointed out some critical points, in no way lessens the significance of the main contents of Reichert's achievement in bringing to light the anti-authoritarian thoughts of our forbearers. It can only serve as an inspiration to those who now carry on, as well to those in the future, in the furthering of anarchist thoughts and action. It is to be hoped that a paperback edition will eventually be issued, thereby gaining the wider circulation it deserves.

Last, but not least, are the most fitting illustrations that Reichert's son William Robert, the artist, made for each section, the most striking ones being about Sacco and Vanzetti in chains, and the bloody law of injustice that murdered them.

*Joseph Ishill (1886–1966) a co-founder of the Modern School at Stelton.

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