

Movie Review

No Gods; No Masters brings the history of anarchism to video

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a review of

No Gods; No Masters: A History of Anarchism (2017) (Originally: Ni dieu, ni maitre. Une histoire de l'anarchisme) Writer/Director: Tancrede Ramonet. 156 min. Color/B&W (French, German with English subtitles) Available from Icarus Films icarusfilms.com/if-nogods

For average Americans, the word anarchy calls to mind chaos, destruction, lawlessness, and violence. Most modern Westerners know little about the people, philosophies, and history that make up the broader political and cultural movement we identify under the term anarchism.

This ignorance lingers despite the fact that in the 21st century, the worldwide Occupy Wall Street movement, the anti-austerity demonstrations in Europe, the Arab Spring, and even the Antifa forces clashing with today's neo-Nazis all share common bonds in their self-organized collectivism, their anti-capitalist stances, and their aesthetics which often include the circle-A.

"No Gods, No Masters: A History of Anarchism" directed by Tancrede Ramonet, was originally a French TV Mini-Series documentary, now available as a three-DVD collection. It illuminates the history of anarchism from mid-19th century Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who coined the term anarchist through the twin mid-century challenges of European fascism and Soviet communism.

The disc set breaks its subject down into a trilogy of historical periods and includes a bonus feature 26-minute interview with Noam Chomsky, plus an eloquent 20-page booklet packed with profiles of notable anarchist thinkers and activists. The booklet contains brief, but elucidating writing samples from various authors that trace the evolution of anarchist thought from the end of the 19th century to the modern era.

The first disc, "Passion for Destruction (1840–1906)" focuses on the disparity between the technological, medical, and cultural progress achieved at the turn of the 20th century, and the horrific conditions that defined the work and home lives of the laborers who made the Industrial Revolution possible. This chapter highlights Proudhon's tripartite attack on the state, capital and religion; the foundations of labor unionism and anarcho-syndicalism, and events like the 1886 Haymarket Square Riot which ignited the spread of anarchist ideas around the globe.

"Land and Freedom (1907–1921)" begins with the idealism, nudism, alternative education and free love of the Individualism Movement before cresting onto the waves of the Mexican and Russian revolutions when it seemed that the anarchist dream had come into its own, and appeared poised to overturn the global order.

"In Memory of the Vanquished (1922–1945)" lives up to its eulogizing title, documenting unparalleled violence against the labor movement in the United States, the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti, the betrayals of Soviet communism, the horrors of European fascism, and the crushing of the anarchist forces in the Spanish Civil War and Revolution.

“No Gods, No Masters” broad scope necessarily means that deep explorations of individuals or individual periods in the development of anarchism are off the table. Emma Goldman’s name is barely sprinkled in, and anarchistic artistic movements like early 20th century Dada are only briefly mentioned.

That said, “No Gods, No Masters” never devolves into a simple talking heads affair. Director Ramonet uses just enough animation effects to keep the archival photos, prints and paintings interesting, the well-written narration is consistently compelling, and the archival footage is often revelatory.

Anarchism has been the subject of many very good documentaries from profiles like “Emma Goldman: An Exceedingly Dangerous Woman” (2004) and “Sacco and Vanzetti”(2006), to broader studies like “Anarchism in America” (1983) and more contemporary efforts like “The Take” (2004).

That said, no films or series of films attempts to contextualize the global evolution of anarchism as a whole like Ramonet aims to do.

“No Gods, No Masters” isn’t a perfect movie and viewers who are well-versed in the events, people, and places that have informed the development of anarchist thought will inevitably find some sections lacking.

However, this film is a great first step that might inspire other filmmakers to take on anarchism as a holistic subject so that the ideas and actions of the past can continue to illuminate the philosophies and fights waiting for us in the future.

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