

# REVIEW ARTICLE

## American Anarchisms?

Steve J. Shone, *American Anarchism*

Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013; 297pp; ISBN 97804251946

A. Terrance Wiley, *Angelic Troublemakers: Religion and Anarchism in America*

London: Bloomsbury, 2014; 208pp; ISBN 9781623566012

Steve Shone's book is an intriguing curate's egg collection of pen portraits of leading American anarchists and anarchists who lived in the US in the nineteenth and early twentieth century: Benjamin Tucker, Voltarine de Cleyre, Lucy Parsons, Samuel Fielden, Alexander Berkman, and Luigi Galleani, and he has chapters on Peter Kropotkin, Max Stirner, and William Graham Sumner. He claims a coherence to this assemblage by invoking the concept of American Anarchism, which is a 'specific ideology of US-based, often individualistic, anarchism of which Josiah Warren, Benjamin Tucker, and Lysander Spooner are the most obvious adherents' (pix). Thus, American Anarchism is critical of the 'trustified' and plutocratic system of the late nineteenth-century USA, of monopoly and crony capitalism and the greasy hands of the State, linked to a radical or 'unterrified' interpretation of Jeffersonian democracy, Emersonian and Thoreauvian individualism, and Proudhon's equal-liberty, all nourished by the radicalism of the Abolitionists and the most left-wing of Radical Republicans of the Civil War period. This works best in his chapters on Tucker, de Cleyre, Parsons and Fielden. On the face of it, discussions of Berkman or Galleani seem to be less appropriate because they are anarcho-communists and have little in common with collectivists or Proudhonian market anarchists. However, the 'immigrant' anarchism of Galleani or Berkman (especially Berkman whose anarchism was born and bred in the USA) was linked to the problems and zeitgeist which generated its American cousin. Galleani was always dismissive of the Land of the Yankee Dollar, whereas Berkman, especially during the anti-conscription campaigns of the First World War (with Emma Goldman) invoked the liberties of the American story to defend their rights to rally young men to resist the draft. And Berkman, although closer to the working-class

movement than perhaps Goldman, shared with her more than a touch of American anarchism filtered through Stirner and Tucker, which argued that people could only be enslaved if they wished to be so.

I enjoyed the author's dissection of anachronism and wishful thinking. Thus he questions whether the recent linkage of de Cleyre to anarcho-feminism is misplaced: in a masterful overview of First to Third Wave feminisms, his careful reading of her work places de Cleyre as an anarchist first who in fact did not prioritise issues of gender and sexuality in quite the same way as her enthusiastic boosters in the late twenty and twenty-first centuries suggest.

Shone hints at the problems of recent readings of Lucy Parsons without having all the facts. He anticipates the more recent and more richly referenced work of Jacqueline Jones. Both demonstrate that Parsons denied her African-American background and indeed Jones shows that Parsons was born a slave in Virginia, whilst later inventing a story that she was of Mexican and Native American birth. Like Jones, Shone takes Lucy Parsons's politics and political ideas seriously: she is not merely the widow of Albert Parsons. He also has interesting things to say about Tucker, stressing his criticism of natural rights through his immersion in the debunking waters of Stirner. Like the German's disenchanting Unions of Egoists, his American anarchism was grounded on fleeting and functional contracts, not the ineffable, and for Stirner, spook-like concept of justice, which inspired Proudhon's form of contractual politics. One of the most original chapters in this book is an in-depth account of Samuel Fielden, a Haymarket defendant who was not 'martyred' but pardoned after several years in prison. Here the author traces his radicalism back to his native Britain and the after-effects of Chartism, which as Shone reminds us, was not the first wave of the class conscious factory proletariat but the last wave of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century radicalism, whose enemy was the Old Corruption and the British state. Thus the concept of the State as an independent and malevolent actor rather than as purely the organising committee of the plutocrats was present in Fielden before he encountered anarchists in Chicago. His unusual reading of this legacy, filtered through disappointment with the American Republic, predisposed him to anti-electoral direct action.

Terrance Wiley deepens two of the most prominent, consistent and interrelated strands of American anarchism: religious anarchism and militant pacifism. In a finely crafted study of Henry David Thoreau, Dorothy Day and Bayard Rustin, the author investigates the Protestant and Catholic forms of radicalism which merged with the anarchist tradition, stretching from the era of Abolitionism in antebellum America to the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War. The author uses historical and philosophical yardsticks to gather these three thinkers and activists

into a tradition of anarchist pacifism. Anarchism for the author is a philosophical thesis about political authority and political obligation. The baseline of the anarchism of Wiley's three subjects is an unwillingness to attribute genuine authority to the legal regimes of the modern territorial state, and their beliefs take on a revolutionary hue because they do not accept that the state has legitimate political authority to enforce compliance with it or to penalise legitimately noncompliance. They all shared a radicalism based on moral responsibility for oppression and social suffering and opposed slavery, racism and imperialist wars (from the Mexican-American War to the Vietnam War).

At times they were all bound by forms of unanimous direct democracy based on the ethics of prefiguration. But in order to accommodate Rustin who travelled from firm Gandhian to becoming a cheerleader for Lyndon Baines Johnson, he calibrates anarchism into weak and strong varieties. Weak anarchists deny the legitimacy of the existing territorial state but argue for policy-driven pragmatism: one could obey the law but not accept its status as legitimate law. Strong anarchists, have a moral duty to oppose and so far as possible eliminate the state. I am not quite convinced that this division works. If we take the decidedly non-pacifist Spanish anarchists for example, the CNT-FAI argued for their supporters to vote for the Popular Front in 1936 in order to get thousands of their members released from prison. They built a counter-power in the streets of Barcelona in July 1936 but then agreed (largely) to cooperate with the Republic in the fight against the Spanish right in coordination with the Republic's reconstructed state structures.

The author argues that Day and Rustin shared the anarchist ethics of Thoreau, based on the concept that each individual had a divine immanence within him or her. A moral awakening and the recovery of this self is accomplished by a process of non-cooperation with the evil and unjust practices (slavery, imperialist war, etc.) of the state. These Thoreauvian ethics inspired and fed into the complementary traditions of Tolstoy and Gandhi, and inspired Day, Rustin and even the New Left activist historian Howard Zinn. In a similar fashion Day (a Protestant convert to Catholicism, and also a convert from the secular left of the socialists, Wobblies and communists) understood Thoreau's divine immanence within the concept of Christian Love, reinforced by her reading of Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. In her organisation of Houses of Hospitality in the Catholic Worker movement she embraced a lifestyle of poverty because asceticism laced with Christian love was liberating, and thus the centrality of the *Sermon on the Mount*, was translated into the radical existentialism of the Catholic influenced philosophy of Personalism. Her form of radicalism was based on a journey from self-reform to social reform, a non-electoral, non-violent anarchism, which challenged the

emergent and then all conquering American national security state (the welfare/warfare state) and sought its replacement by decentralised peaceable communities founded on mutual aid and participatory democracy underwritten by an attachment to the loving 'mystical body of Christ'.

Rustin was a Gay African American Quaker public intellectual, who played a major role in the Civil Rights movement, Starting out a firm Gandhian pacifist in the War Resisters' League and influenced by the libertarian and pacifist direct action politics of A.J. Muste, Rustin was fundamental to the would-be March on Washington on the eve of America's entry into the Second World War and essential to the historic March on Washington in 1963. He was a key strategist for Martin Luther King Jr and the Southern Christian Leadership Council. Previously he had braved prison in the Second World War, because his strict Thoreauvian ethics barred him from requesting Conscientious Objector status. Wiley's work here anticipates and deepens other overviews by Carissa Honeywell, Andrew Cornell and Benjamin Pauli of this key aspect of the New Anarchism of the Anglo-American world from the 1940s to the 1960s. But by the middle of the 1960s Rustin pivoted to the state. Only a strong state had the means to eradicate poverty and fight racial oppression. But Wiley insists that Rustin remained a 'weak anarchist' because this was a pragmatic pivot, since he 'maintained a commitment to perpetual civil disobedience'; and the author argues that his life-long emphasis on moral autonomy, non-complicity and responsibility entailed 'a rejection of the claims of the authority characteristic of modern territorial states' (p11, 13).

Rustin did not openly self-identify as an anarchist even when his was a militant Gandhian but he was an anarchist in practice. Like many other African American radicals he had an ambivalent attitude towards the state: from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement, the federal state was a (reluctant) protector of their lives and promoter of their fortunes, albeit it was the direct action of enslaved people during the Civil War or civil rights organisers and locals who started the ball rolling in the 1950s, which forced the state's hand. In this respect, although Rustin's early consensual democracy had much in common with Day's or the younger comrades in SNCC, he and the SNCC could also read decentralisation as an escape route for white supremacists and for Rustin formed part of his criticisms of the community control stance of black nationalists in the urban North, which threatened to undermine a strategy of class-based 'Rainbow Nation' organising. There is a bigger issue here too: during the heyday of classical American anarchism and industrial syndicalism before 1920, although the IWW did pioneering work recruiting whites and African Americans (as well as Mexicans, Japanese and Indians), there was a lack of in-depth discussion about the migration

of African Americans from the South to the burgeoning North, the divide and rule policies of employees or (with all its dangers) anarchist speaking tours south of the Mason-Dixon Line. As much as the anarchists and even Wobblies talked about wage slavery and as much as American Anarchism finds one of its sources in Abolitionism, in-depth discussion of the political economy and cultural dynamics of Jim Crow America would be developed in parallel by African American intellectuals such as W.E. Dubois who, it must be said, were attracted to the legacy of the Paris Commune or the concept of the general strike, but lived in a separate and segregated space from the American Anarchists and their immigrant comrades.

There is much food for thought in both these volumes.

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