Tom Goyens
Beer and Revolution: Some Aspects of German
Anarchist Culture in New York, 1880–1900
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groups, it was suggested that the identities of all contact persons be kept secret. This secrecy was immediately opposed by the groups in St. Louis who argued that open information on how to set up groups could be useful for individuals outside the IWPA. Another initiative was taken by some of the leaders of the New York Group I, such as Johann Most and Carl Wölky, when they urged members to announce the meetings to their co-workers, the tactic of word-of-mouth.

Despite these efforts, the German anarchist movement was slowly being superseded by another ethnic group that was growing enormously during the first decades of the new century, the Russian-Jewish socialists. These young radicals, such as Roman Lewis, Saul Yanovsky and others, were influenced by Most and took over much of the German infrastructure to build their own Yiddish-speaking anarchist culture. Some of these Jewish anarchists were able to expand their audience and became American radicals, forging a broader radical front in which younger generation Germans also participated, such as Timmermann, Carl Nold and Max Baginski.

It seems that the barriers for extending the anarchist sphere during the turn of the century consisted of ethnic, generational and ideological conflicts. Still the anarchist movement was able, in a small way, to join the growing progressive momentum during the 1910s, where the potential for a broad-based front of liberal forces was possible, a potential repeated during the 1960s and early 1970s.

But to a large extent, it was anarchism's uncompromising critique of capitalism and parliamentary politics and its call for revolutionary measures that alienated it from the larger American society, especially liberals. In an essay on the abolitionist movement, Martin Duberman points to the powerfully engrained optimism of the American mainstream, which caused it to discard any radical attack on institutions. "And so the majority has generally found it necessary," Duberman writes, "to label 'extreme' any measures that calls for large-scale readjustment" (Duberman, 1999, p.5–6). An insight that is as relevant for the nineteenth as for our own century.

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Peter Kropotkin and Errico Malatesta. Among them was Claus Timmermann who in 1891 moved from St. Louis to New York and established his newspaper *Der Anarchist* on East 5th Street on the Lower East Side.

Timmermann's venture quickly attracted a number of young activists such as Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, both of whom had been disciples of Most. Not only did they transcend the ethnic boundaries by offering lectures in English, but also by widening the scope of issue which, they believed, anarchists should concern themselves. These issues ranged from prison reform and birth control to free speech and sexual liberation. Most importantly, Goldman was able to forge strong alliances with American liberals and progressives, especially during the first decades of the twentieth-century.

During the 1890s, Timmermann, who mastered the English language, published two more German-language anarchist periodicals, and soon realized that what was needed was English-language propaganda. He decided to devote his energy to the publication of pamphlets in English, including translations of the work of Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus, two prominent theoreticians of communist-anarchism.

The German anarchists naturally also sought to include more German workers, or workers of the same trade. Trade unionism was a cornerstone of German radicalism and a large portion of anarchists were involved in what they called progressive unions. They tended to criticize parliamentary politics and embraced a kind of anarcho-syndicalism. This branch was heavily present in Chicago where the anarchists were in the forefront of the workers' and eight-hour day movements. The trade unions with the most anarchists in the New York City area were the machine operators, the furniture workers and the cabinet-makers, all holding regular meetings, picnics, outings and get-togethers.

On the group or club level this spirit of recruitment was also visible, though members proceeded with caution. Most of the time the business meetings were conducted by the members only, whereas club gatherings with a topical speaker were often open to visitors. The Social-Revolutionary Club, founded in 1880, when advertising its meetings invariably included the postscript: "Opponents of Anarchy will have freedom of speech" (*Freiheit*, 5 February 1887). Also, when in 1887 a proposal to re-locate the Information Bureau to New York was approved by all the

aversion to any notions of leadership. The authors call for the building of an "anti-authoritarian revolutionary project" that can uplift an anarchist elite, dominated by white middle-class males, now doomed by "self-imposed isolation" (Fyke & Sayegh, 2001, p.2).

The core of these ideas can easily be traced back to the first anarchists engaged in collective action, the immigrant radicals. It was imperative, they thought, that inroads be made into the vast passivity (as they saw it) of the American workers, an ever-growing segment of the country's population. From the conclusion of the Pittsburgh Congress until 1884, not one English-language paper was included as official organ of the IWPA (there were, however, seven German and two Czech papers). When in 1884 the English-language paper Alarm joined the ranks it was welcomed as a valuable addition in the arsenal of propaganda geared towards the native-born worker. But organizing Anglo-American workers proved difficult. One reason, according to a writer in *Freiheit*, was the lack of funds, which was complicated by the fact that there was no central treasury. One speaker, associated with the Germans, who did make some inroads was Hamilton Garside who delivered several lectures on the right to rebel in the 1889. But when in June 1889 a meeting for American workers was called at which Most improvised a speech in English, it turned out that most attendants were immigrants.

These frustrations were aggravated by the massive display of patriotism at the centennial celebration of the drafting of the Constitution in May 1887. But even if Most, who criticized American hypocrisy, realized that the patriotic fervor was mostly indulged in by the elite, he nonetheless dismissed the average American as an unscrupulous egoist. "The Americans," he wrote in Freiheit, "are on average devoid of any Idealism" (*Freiheit*, 27 February 1887).

The problem of building a "non-authoritarian revolutionary project," to use Fyke and Sayegh's phrase, for the German anarchist continued during the 1890s. Such a project was still believed to be largely proletarian, and needed to include English-speaking American workers. The position and influence of Johann Most was in decline, which for some was a blessing. Younger anarchists abandoned Bakunin's collectivist ideas and embraced the tenets of communist-anarchism as espoused by

Paul Goodman once characterized a free society as the "extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of the social life" (Parisi, ed., 1986, p.26). In a similar spirit, Colin Ward thought an anarchist society existed or could be formed "like a seed beneath the snow" (Parisi, ed., 1986, p.16). Goodman and Ward are but two authors who, during the fifties and beyond, launched new ideas in the hope to revitalize the anarchist movement in the West. It is generally understood that the radicalism of the sixties heralded a new kind of anarchism, as Gerald Runkle portrayed in *Anarchism: Old and New*, published in 1972. The New Anarchism distanced itself from pre-World War I anarchism dominated by immigrant groups and seemingly preoccupied with violence and outmoded analyses of class and power.

In this sense, the German immigrant anarchists of the 1880s and 1890s, personified by the figure of Johann Most, could be said to be of the old school of revolutionaries, having little in common with the subtleties of contemporary activists and thinkers. On the surface this is true. The printed record of this movement such as newspaper accounts, anarchist editorials, manifestoes and pamphlets, clearly shows the impact of Bakunin's notion of underground groups, conspiratorial action, the need for a violent revolution to bring down the bastions of power and greed. Acts of regicide, even if not committed by an anarchist, were hailed as genuinely revolutionary statements. In short, as James Joll put it, the phrase 'propaganda by the deed' was "taking on a more sinister meaning" (Joll, 1964, p.124).

But this same record, beyond the editorial pages, also reveals the workings of an alternative "sphere of free action," maintained by German anarchists who lived and worked in the hive of the American metropolis. Admittedly, linking Goodman and Most would be ridiculous. Nonetheless, the concept of a defiantly built community has antecedents in the life and times of the German anarchists, who not all followed the ranting of Most. This is not to obscure the historical context in which immigrant radicalism operated, a context of murderous violence on the part of the elite that unquestionably drove some of the disaffected to extremism. Nonetheless, parallels exist between an immigrant anarchist community as it thrived in New York City during the 1880s and 1890s, and

the network of autonomous anarchist groups, infoshops, and grassroots activists of today.

Setting Up a Federative Network

The German radical socialists of the 1870s and 1880s were the first group to launch an anarchist movement in the United States. Of course individualist anarchists had been active in America since the 1840s, but they tended to either escape from mainstream society by setting up alternative but insular commun(iti)es, or they engaged in scattered polemic and authorial attacks on America's problems. As radical individualists they shunned collective organizing and stayed away from active involvement in the workers' movement. The Germans, and later other ethnic groups, walked a different path. It is their network of meeting places in which politics, leisure and togetherness were cultivated that deserves attention.

The groundwork for the German immigrant anarchist movement was laid in November 1880 when a number of social-revolutionaries (as the anarchists initially called themselves) formed the New York Social-Revolutionary Club after being expelled from the increasingly authoritarian Socialist Labor Party. Nearly all members of the Club were German exiles, victims of Bismarck's anti-socialist legislation which caused widespread emigration of radicals. In New York there also existed the remnant of a German section of the moribund International, most of them radical socialists. The next step was the formation of the Revolutionary Socialist Party during a poorly attended congress of revolutionaries in Chicago in 1881.

But the event that energized and publicized this tiny rather obscure German movement was the arrival of Johann Most in New York in December 1882. Much has been written about Most and his impetuous fervor for revolution in word and deed. His emphasis on violence and terrorism in order to overthrow the established order has been rightly criticized, though he never committed acts of violence himself. However, Most had built a solid reputation as an electrifying speaker and first-rate

It was clear that much of this community life was carried by elements of ethnicity such as a common language, and a love of beer and music. But the solidarity among multi-ethnic radical workers should not be underestimated. Anarchists did not view national identity as un-anarchistic, but rather as a celebration of pluralism. An event such as the remembrance of the Paris Commune, often organized under German leadership, attracted French, Italian, Bohemian and Russian groups, who, at the end of the evening, could all stand up and sing the Marseillaise accompanied by Sundersdorf's music ensemble.

Extending the "Sphere of Free Action"

Despite the community of spirits among immigrant radicals, the glaring absence of English-speaking workers was painfully visible. Why was it that the large majority of socialists and anarchists were from European descent? This typical pre-WWI phenomenon has been food for thought for many scholars, but it is significant to realize that it also troubled the German anarchists during the last two decades of the nineteenth-century. In a larger perspective, this brings to light the question of how inclusive an anarchist organization should be without compromising too much its own principles — an issue still relevant today.

To some extent, the anarchist groups that were formed in the wake of the Pittsburgh Congress possessed some exclusivity in the sense that they were based on card-holding membership and a near-underground status. This can partly be explained by the rampant repression after the Haymarket incident, which produced a veritable Red Scare. For fear of infiltration, the admission of new members was subjected to identity checks and even a two-week surveillance of the newcomer.

But even more essential was the forging of a constructive relationship with the larger body of American working men and women as well as with American middle-class liberals. Again, nineteenth-century anarchists faced the same issues that contemporary organizers need to tackle. In an article published in November 2001, Kim Fyke and Gabriel Sayegh attempt to put this crucial issue at the forefront. They rightly criticize modern anarchists for their lack of broad-based organizing and their

If propaganda was the main activity of the anarchists' public campaign, the need to practice anarchist ideals almost went without saying. It is this internal club life in all its manifestations that has been so neglected by historians, yet it rendered a meaningfulness to an otherwise dreary and frustrating life of the proletarian activist. One could argue that the participation in a fellowship of anarchists offered more satisfaction (for the rank and file members) than a Nechaev-esque commitment to the cause as it was outlined in the public expressions of anarchism (by mainstream and radical media alike).

Nothing can illustrate this camaraderie better than the frequency with which the German anarchists (often in collaboration with other ethnic groups) organized picnics and outings. Not only did the neighboring parks offer a welcome retreat from the slums of Manhattan, but these occasions embodied anarchism itself. Invariably, beer drinking, music and target shooting formed the cornerstone of these family gatherings in which women and children were as involved as the men (children's games and a raffle never failed). Usually the red or black flag was carried along, and speeches by Most and others clarified their mission once again.

The importance of vocal and instrumental music to the anarchist community cannot be overstated. Nearly every union that was organized along anarchist principles had its own singing society or concert band. In December 1886, the independent singing society Vorwärts (Forward) was formed. They held regular meetings every Friday evening at Lauda's Hall, and it was advertised that only "revolutionary-minded workers" were admitted (*Freiheit*, 11 December 1886). In Newark alone no fewer than four German anarchist singing societies were active in the Spring of 1887, with names such as "Liberty" and "Teutonia" (*Freiheit*, 19 March 1887). Singing and dancing were always part of a large meeting. "Women and youngsters fond of dancing," reported the *Freiheit* after a large Communefest, "were not a little happy when after the winding up of the actual Program, a section of the older attendants with their wives withdrew from the festivities thus creating some space for the well-represented youth" (*Freiheit*, 26 March 1887). Other activities generously sponsored by the German anarchists were theater, Midsummer Night and Christmas celebrations, as well as discussion and mutual aid groups.

editor. These qualities he eagerly lent to the project of building a collective (and visible) anarchist movement. After a highly effective lecture tour throughout the Northeast and Midwest, Most championed a newly proposed congress in Pittsburgh in 1883. This convention and especially the resulting manifesto constituted the first relatively successful attempt at non-authoritarian organization; an honor that has been overlooked by many scholars. Despite clauses advocating violent revolution and a few inconsistencies, the Pittsburgh Manifesto outlined a blueprint for the formation of autonomous groups, an Information Bureau and the endorsement of anarchist papers as "official" mouthpieces of the movement (among them *Freiheit*, edited by Most). Key objectives included equality regardless of gender and race, cooperative production and exchange, and the federalist principle (no central authority) exemplified by the newly formed International Working People's Association (IWPA).

Each group possessed complete autonomy. In cities where more than one group existed, such as in New York and the New Jersey industrial belt, it was proposed to form a General Committee to coordinate joint actions. The Information Bureau, stripped of executive powers, functioned as a means for communication between the often polyglot groups, and also served as an archive. Ultimately though, the center of activity was located within the group with memberships ranging from a dozen to about one hundred each. The Pittsburgh gathering had thus, for the first time, clearly defined the line between Socialism and Anarchism in America.

One has to zoom in to the group level to appreciate the kaleidoscopic character of this early Anarchist movement — a perspective often absent from the myopic studies of the "formal" embodiment of anarchism in this country. The strength of this German anarchist community in New York City, as estimated in *Freiheit*, was about 2500, with another 5000 anarchists living in Chicago, and some 1700 in other cities (*Freiheit*, 6 December 1886).

Saloons and Picnics: A Micro-sphere of German-American Anarchists

In his social history of the Chicago anarchist movement, Bruce Nelson came to the conclusion that they had created and maintained a "self-consciously visible, vital and militant movement culture." "Without its club life, press, unions and culture," Nelson asserts, "the ideology of that movement is unintelligent" (Nelson, 1988, p.240–1). Much the same is true for the movement on the east coast, particularly in New York.

Despite the staggering growth of industrial capitalism, the brotherliness between business and politics, and the ubiquitous parade of police power, the German immigrant anarchists succeeded in building a "sphere of free action" in which they could move and expand. Even though this program of group building was conceived as a means toward the realization of Social Revolution, and not so much as a revolutionary act in itself, it is worth examining this "sphere," for it illustrates the need for an autonomous space, a concept still (if not more) relevant today. As will be seen, this "sphere" was not entirely static or insulated; it showed quite some initiative to organize and educate non-anarchists.

The German working-class saloon was the most characteristic meeting place of German anarchists. Owned by Germans, these saloons dotted the streetscape of the Lower East Side, New York's immigrant ghetto. They served the famed lager-beer with hot meals and were different from the traditional American saloons in that women were allowed to enter (quite to the astonishment of reporters). As a radical meeting place, the saloon or bierhal had its origin in the German socialist movement of the 1860s and 1870s, but the dens frequented by anarchists in New York quickly became distinguished from those chosen by socialists. Typically, each group or club conducted its regular bi-monthly meetings in its own pub. New York Group I, of which Most was a leader, gathered at Frederic Krämer's place, and later at Paul Wilzig's saloon, whereas Group Newark invariably met at Edward Willms' place, to name but a few.

The most famous saloon of all, the "*gathering-place for all bold, joyful, and freedom-loving spirits*," as its owner advertised, was Justus Schwab's place on First Street (Avrich, 1984, p.50). In popularity, Schwab was

seconded only by Most. He had been in New York since the 1870s and became quite well-off, but never relinquished the spirit of rebellion and solidarity with the less-fortunate. Schwab's place was not just a taproom, however, but functioned in every sense as the foremost infoshop of New York radicals. Besides billboards and a piano it featured a library of no less than 600 volumes (of which Emma Goldman made ample use). The backroom, as in all saloons, served as a forum for discussion. Schwab, a close friend of Most, also acted as primary agent for *Freiheit* in the New York area. It is perhaps no surprise that the death of Justus Schwab in 1900 was seen as another blow to the declining German anarchist movement. His funeral brought together some 2000 people in a procession through the streets of the East Side, as it was witnessed by one *New York Times* reporter (NYT, 21 December 1900).

Oratory was a central community-building instrument as well as an effective weapon against tyranny and oppression. Perhaps less so today, lectures and speechmaking were as much part of the anarchist community as group meetings and socializing. Lectures were given in saloons, but more importantly, mass meetings were frequently organized to address the entire anarchist (and others) community. These gatherings took place in large halls such as Cooper Union or Germania Assembly Rooms, to name a few. Johann Most was of course the most respected speaker, and his monthly schedule, as gleaned from the anarchist papers, was truly impressive. He spoke at occasions such as the anniversary of the Paris Commune or the commemoration of the 1887 execution of the Chicago anarchists. He addressed general protest meetings attended by thousands of men and women as well as smaller meetings of the Russian Progressive Union or the Pioneers of Liberty, the first Jewish anarchist organization in the 1890s. Such congregations significantly contributed to the bonding of radicals in the urban centers. As many now believe, anarchism is essentially about building relationships, engendering a feeling of solidarity among like-minded people, a feeling that surely must have inspired many attendants. But mass meetings also enabled the movement to demonstrate, even flaunt, solidarity by way of filling a large hall to voice protest. They knew that these rallies were not only attended by workers, but also by plainclothesmen and a legion of reporters.