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Richard D. Sonn, *Sex, Violence and the Avant-Garde: Anarchism in Interwar France*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. x + 259 pp. Figures, photos, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-271-03663-2.

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Anarchism in France flourished as an organized movement between 1880 and 1914, beginning with anarcho-communism and its call for a social order based on small, self-sufficient communities whose members would lead cooperative and egalitarian lives. The anarcho-communist vision took shape in writings and speeches, non-violent means that were eclipsed in the early 1890s by individual acts of anarchist violence known as “propaganda by the deed.” This brief but convulsive period, when the survival of the movement was at stake, came to a close with the birth of anarcho-syndicalism in 1895. Its leaders, whose support came from the nation’s industrial working class, advocated for strikes, boycotts, and other organized forms of direct action. Revolutionary syndicalism remained strong in France until the outbreak of World War I, when it, too, weakened and died out altogether in the 1920s under pressure from communism and totalitarianism.

Scholars of French anarchism, echoing the course of the movement itself, have focused most of their attention on the period from 1880-1914, discussing anarchism either as a political phenomenon or as inspiration for avant-garde artists and writers. Little work has been done on anarchism in France after World War I, although committed anarchists continued to live and work there in the 1920s and ‘30s. Richard Sonn’s *Sex, Violence and the Avant-Garde: Anarchism in Interwar France* is therefore a welcome addition to the movement’s history.

Sonn’s book opens with a series of questions: what could be the role of anarchism in France after 1918, given its weakened condition and the disillusionment of its followers as powerful fascist and communist governments came to the fore elsewhere in Europe and the Soviet Union? More to the point, given that the violence of the 1890s and the revolutionary syndicalism of the early years of the new century had lost their relevance, how could dedicated anarchists now pursue their cause?

Sonn’s answers are the essence of this book. He focuses on the activities of individualist anarchists, whose concerns dominated the interwar years. Their calls for individual liberty, especially liberties of lifestyle and the body, grew out of a realization that revolutionary social change would not occur as the result of a mass anarchist movement. Yet one by one, they believed a way could be paved for such change through the practice of pacifism, free love, and other forms of sexual liberation. They were more pragmatic than dogmatic in their pursuits, often allying themselves with others on the left who shared their ethical ideals but who normally would not have affiliated themselves with the anarchist movement, including socialists, communists and naturists.

This is not Sonn’s first investigation of French anarchism. His *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France* (1989) explored anarchism in Paris in the 1890s, focusing on the paintings, posters, essays, poems, speeches and performances through which its followers defined themselves and promoted their cause.[1] Sonn argued that anarchism’s strong presence in avant-garde literature and art during that decade was compensation for its lack of political influence. Thirty years later, however, when anarchists

again found themselves politically ineffective, they did not turn as often to experimental art forms as vehicles for expression or catalysts for change.[2] Instead, the body and sexuality became their central concerns, as they sought real-life alternatives to monogamy, the traditional patriarchal family, and the control of sexuality by church and state.

Sex, Violence and the Avant-Garde is divided into two parts: the first, and longest, devoted to the interwar anarchists' pursuit of sexual freedom and alternative gender roles, and the second to the internationalizing of the anarchist movement in France. These are discrete subjects that do not always rest together easily. Sonn connects them by having certain anarchists appear in both parts, a strategy that works occasionally, but often seems weak or forced. For example, the Alsatian writer Yvan Goll is discussed in part one as an anarchist poet who launched a literary journal called *Surrealism* in 1924, yet the periodical had a life of but one month and Goll's poems are merely mentioned, with no evidence provided of their anarchist content or their relationship to issues of sexual freedom. Sonn admits, in fact, that Goll was only a marginally-significant anarchist in the 1920s (p. 93). When Goll appears again in part two, he is examined more fully as a Jewish poet whose work, beginning in the mid-1930s, features the character of the wandering Jew, a figure appropriate to a time when powerful centralized states--the anathema of anarchists--were turning many European Jews into refugees. Here, Goll fits well into Sonn's discussion of Paris as a home to Jewish émigrés, many of whom were anarchists, during the interwar years.

Part one opens with an account of an act of "propaganda by the deed" by the twenty-year-old female anarchist Germaine Berton, who devised a plan in 1923 to kill Léon Daudet, editor of the right-wing newspaper *L'Action Française*. Her plot was foiled, however, and she ended up killing instead Marius Plateau, another royalist sympathizer. Afterward she immediately shot herself, a suicide attempt that failed. She was acquitted at her trial, in spite of confessing to killing Plateau and admitting her anarchist sympathies. Her lawyer persuaded the jury that her crime was one of female passion as opposed to politics, arguing she was a vulnerable youth whose mother had made her emotionally unstable and thus unable to take responsibility for her actions.

Sonn uses Germaine Berton's case as a link between the anarchist episodes that follow. Several anarchists, including Daudet's son, Philippe, admired her crime as a sign of her commitment to the anarchist cause. In 1923, the young Daudet, who also may have been plotting to kill his father (Sonn wisely does not push this possibility too far, as the evidence leaves quite open the question of motive), took his own life after professing his sympathy for anarchism. The anarchist press proclaimed his suicide as the only means by which he could have extricated himself from the stifling bonds of his father Léon, who was cast in turn as a representative of the patriarchal nation-at-large. This is an interesting psychoanalytical reading of the Daudet affair that would have benefited from more analysis. In particular, Sonn might have examined further the national ideal of *patrie*, which stood for patriarchal authority in the minds of many anarchists, and how it may have shaped the nation's expectations for the political and sexual behavior of its male youth in the 1920s.

But anarchist males also understood Berton's crime and her suicide attempts (there was another in 1924) as typically feminine behavior, the 'irrationality' of which they found both provocative and inspirational. Among them were André Breton and the surrealists, who featured a photo of Berton, surrounded by images of themselves, in the first issue of their journal *La Révolution Surréaliste* published in 1924. With their calls for sexual freedom and unrestrained thought and behavior, it is little wonder the surrealists chose Berton as their muse. But her role as an anarchist is equally significant, for it reinforces Sonn's important and well-developed claim that anarchism was the basis for 'the surrealist revolution' in its earliest phase, before the group declared its support for the communist movement with which it is usually associated.

The last two chapters of part one focus on the anarchist individualists' preoccupation with sexuality and the body, in keeping with the nationwide obsession with marriage and childbirth following World War I. Sonn pays particular attention to the novel *La Liberté ou l'Amour!* by the surrealist Robert Desnos, and the essays of the anarchist E. Armand.^[3] Both writers were opposed to official calls for increasing the population of France, as well as to the idea of sexual behavior regulated by the institution of marriage. They favored instead the pursuit of sexual pleasure for its own sake. For Armand, sex ideally would take place in the context of what he called "amorous friendship," a group of like-minded individuals with shared political ideals and a common desire for sexual freedom.

In the minds of many anarchist individualists, sexual freedom went hand-in-hand with birth control. For a woman, in particular, birth control would encourage non-conformist (i.e., anarchist) behavior by allowing her to be sexually free without the risk of becoming pregnant or being forced into the role of a traditional mother. Eugène and Jeanne Humbert, publishers of the neo-Malthusian journal *La Grande Réforme* in the 1930s, were perhaps anarchism's staunchest advocates for birth control and a woman's right to control her own body, as well as supporters of nudism and a healthy outdoor life—both conducive to free love. Many of their opinions were shared by the neo-Malthusian and pacifist Manuel Devaldès and the anarchist Victor Margueritte, whose novel entitled *Ton corps est à toi* (1927) advocated birth control and abortion alike.

Part one concludes with a discussion of what Sonn calls "negative eugenics," an idea supported, at least for a time, by the Humberts and Devaldès. All three believed that the physically unfit or socially 'diseased' (alcoholics, sexual perverts and the mentally ill, for example) should be discouraged from having children in order to create a healthier population, especially a healthier working class. Devaldès also insisted that restricting births would prevent future wars, the latter of which he attributed to populations grown too large and thus forced to seek resources elsewhere to supplement their own.

Sonn explains clearly how the neo-Malthusian anarchists' support for eugenics differed from that of the fascists, insofar as anarchists believed that sympathetic doctors would merely *advise* their "defective" patients not to reproduce, rather than the state forcing that decision upon them. "Defectives" who chose not have children would be exercising control over their own bodies and acting in a rational and ethically correct manner by contributing to the growth of a healthier society. Yet eugenics did not sit well with most anarchists, especially after 1933 when the Nazis began their forced sterilization projects. By 1935, the Humberts had largely given up their support of eugenics, although Devaldès and other anarchists continued to defend it. Sonn leaves it up to the reader to decide who was right or wrong in this disturbing and puzzling debate.

Part two of *Sex, Violence and the Avant-Garde* explores anarchism as an international phenomenon during the interwar period, with Paris as one of its centers. Gender, sexuality, and the body are not issues here. Instead Sonn examines the impact of Russian émigrés upon Paris anarchism. Some of those émigrés were anarchists who had assisted the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution, but found themselves persecuted under the new Soviet Union (the French anarchist periodical *Le Libertaire* had taken up their cause well before they arrived in Paris). Once resettled, Russian anarchists attempted to make up for the failure of the movement in Russia by working to create an 'anarchist international' that would unite smaller, less organized factions of the movement under one political umbrella. Their efforts, however, were not successful.

Most of the Russian émigrés to Paris were Jews, who fled antisemitism in Russia during and after the Revolution. Among them were Russian nationalists and monarchists, and Ukrainian separatists, a fair number of whom also were anarchists. The conflicts these émigrés would have had on Russian soil often were played out in their new homeland. Sonn tells the story of Sholom Schwartzbard, a Ukrainian Jewish anarchist living in Paris, and his murder of a Ukrainian antisemite there. At Schwartzbard's trial in 1927, his attorney linked his terroristic act to his status as a persecuted Jew rather than to his

anarchist beliefs, an example of the way in which anarchists' repugnance for religion often caused them to separate their religious from their political beliefs. Sonn's larger point is that violence against antisemites, some of it perpetuated by Jewish anarchists, was not uncommon within the immigrant community in Paris; nor, in turn, was violence against Jewish émigrés uncommon, some of it perpetuated by anarchists who stereotypically condemned Jews as capitalists.

While Russian anarchists looked to France as a safe haven, French anarchists looked to the new Soviet Union for inspiration after 1927, when it became clear that anarchism was not destined to become a mass revolutionary movement. The surrealists, for example, embraced Soviet communism, even as they maintained libertarian ideals in their work. When communism became more authoritarian in the 1930s, they redirected their political energies again, cooperating with other intellectuals in attacks on Stalin's purge trials.

French anarchists also looked for inspiration to the United States and its anarchists in the late 1920s, Sonn's discussion of which is disappointing. He focuses on two events in 1927 that resonated deeply in France: Charles Lindbergh's flight from New York to Paris, and the execution of the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in Massachusetts. Sonn's effort to connect anarchism and Lindbergh's flight is unconvincing. He notes that French authorities were concerned that anarchists might be planning to use airplanes as terroristic weapons, but those fears existed in 1912, not during the interwar years. He also mentions a statement made by Louis Lecoin, a member of the French committee formed to stop the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, saying that Lindbergh had been willing to sign a petition to stop the execution, but no evidence exists to support Lecoin's claim.

Better is Sonn's discussion of the French response to the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, when thousands of people, including many anarchists, protested in the streets of Paris. The anarchist participants objected not only to the deaths of men they considered their comrades, but also to the materialism and intolerance they perceived in American culture in general.

Sex, Violence and the Avant-Garde is an illuminating study, the eclectic nature of which seems to reflect the individualism so prevalent in the interwar anarchist movement and the personal liberties its followers held dear. The book's strength is in its discussion of anarchism in relation to sexuality, gender roles, and familial relations. While French anarchists continued to use violence as a catalyst for change, it was their embrace of sexual and other bodily freedoms, and the possibilities for social renewal those freedoms offered, that made interwar anarchism so compelling. Sonn's discoveries in this regard are important. They undoubtedly will suggest new avenues of research into a phase of the anarchist movement scholars have only begun to explore.

NOTES

[1] Richard D. Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

[2] This is not to suggest that anarchism lost its currency altogether in the visual and literary arts in interwar France, a point Sonn also underscores. See, for example, Carole Reynaud Paligot, *Parcours politiques des surréalistes, 1919-1969* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1995); Alain Pessin and Patrice Terrone, eds., *Littérature et anarchie* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1998); and Theresa Papanikolas, *Anarchism and the Advent of Paris Dada: Art and Criticism, 1914-1924* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010).

[3] Sonn notes that Armand, whose real name was Ernest Juin, never used a first name; he referred to himself only as "E. Armand" (p. 217, note 10).

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