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Robyn Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*. Aldershot, England and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2007. vii-xiii + 217 pp. Illustrations, notes, biography, and index. \$ 112.00 U.S., 58 £. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7546-5711-8.

Review by Mark Antliff, Duke University.

Robyn Roslak's ground-breaking study examines the integral relationship between Neo-Impressionist representations of urban and rural France during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the ideological underpinnings of European anarchism, as articulated by its major champions, the editor of *Les Temps nouveaux* (1895-1914), Jean Grave, and the geographers Elisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin. By focusing on the work of Maximilian Luce, Paul Signac, Charles Angrand and Henri-Edmond Cross, Roslak brings much needed attention to artists whose seminal contributions to the movement have been unjustly overshadowed by that of Georges Seurat. As Roslak notes, Signac and Luce were the only artists who remained steadfast advocates of Neo-Impressionism throughout the movement's history. Moreover, Signac's 1889 book *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionisme* is rightly regarded as a *summa* of the Neo-Impressionists' aesthetic and political aspirations. Drawing on these artists' correspondence and published writings as well as those of the Neo-Impressionists' principle apologist Félix Fénéon, Roslak provides us with a synthetic study of an evolving art movement that declared avant-garde aesthetics a catalyst for anarchist social transformation.

Roslak deftly opens her study by considering the terms in which Fénéon defined Neo-Impressionism, which he described as "a great decorative development, which sacrifices anecdote to arabesque, nomenclature to synthesis, the fleeting to the permanent" (p. 2). As Roslak demonstrates, such terminology had anarchist import for the Neo-Impressionists, whose aesthetic operated as a metaphor for the anarcho-communism of Kropotkin and Reclus. Both thinkers claimed that the anarcho-communist notion that individuals could maintain their autonomy while acting in consort to their mutual benefit had a basis in natural laws, as manifest in the harmonious interrelation of atoms and molecules and the practice of 'mutual aid' among all biological species. Thus the Neo-Impressionists' claim to achieve pictorial synthesis through the scientific application of mutually reinforcing complementary colors operated as yet another metaphor within the anarcho-communist matrix. In this manner the nomenclature of pointillist technique, composed of dots of pure pigment, resulted in a harmonious synthesis that was both aesthetic and moral in import. Such ideological principles also informed other aspects of Neo-Impressionist praxis. For instance, their recourse to decorative principles was indicative of the Neo-Impressionists' declaration that their hand-crafted paintings were akin to forms of artisanal production promoted under the Third Republic (pp. 5-6). Thus the Neo-Impressionists grounded their aesthetic in scientific laws governing the material world even as they transformed its raw components into ideal images, modeled after anarcho-communist precepts. Hence Fénéon's claim that Signac and his colleagues took anecdotal subject matter and the impermanence of their historical moment as inspiration for the great decorative development that gave birth to their idealizing aesthetic.

In chapters two and three, Roslak explores both the Neo-Impressionists' use of idealization to dignify their subjects while maintaining a critical edge and highlighting the struggles faced by Parisian artisans in the wake of the economic slump of the 1880s, and the decline in demand for skilled labor due to the

economic transformations wrought by Haussmannization. Both Reclus and Kropotkin structured their vision of a future anarchist society around small-scale self-governing communes involved in agriculture, light industry and craft production. In an era when capitalist industrialization undermined the economic viability of highly skilled labor, the anarchists called for a better balance in which machines could be marshaled to fabricate objects for utilitarian use, thus freeing workers to create objects “of art or taste” (pp. 39-40). As producers of fine-quality oil paintings, the Neo-Impressionists appreciated the anarchist veneration of skilled craftspersons; moreover, through the creation of the *Société des Indépendants* and other cooperative endeavors, the group sought to fulfill the anarchist precept of mutual aid and to circumnavigate a commercial gallery system dominated by capitalist speculation.

In chapter two, Roslak focuses on the representation of such skilled workers by Luce and Signac, drawing attention to the fact that both artists were intimately familiar with the plight of Parisian artisans, both male and female. A former wood engraver, Luce lived among artisans in the 14th arrondissement and befriended the Givort brothers, who were local shoemakers and fellow anarchists. The Givorts were the subject of a series of paintings focusing on artisanal activities and domestic labor within their humble apartment. As Roslak convincingly argues, these intimate portrayals of the life of a working-class family served to dignify Luce’s subjects while acknowledging their poverty. By contrast, Signac represented female hat makers rather than male artisans and their spouses in his *Milliners: Finisher and Trimmer* of 1885-86. Roslak interprets this work—for which Signac asked his lover the milliner, Berthe Roblés, to pose as a model—as an indictment of the adverse effect of mass production and mass marketing on the millinery trade. In an insightful analysis she details how Signac’s painting ran counter to the Parisian myth of the eroticized garment worker. By focusing on a finisher and trimmer, Signac highlighted the most skilled workers within the hierarchy of milliners, yet he depicts them as alienated from one another, in angular bodily postures within a claustrophobic interior. In this way, Signac attempted to register the impact of capitalism on their bodies, their labor and their lives, which stood in stark contrast to conditions envisioned in an anarchist social order.

In chapter three, she shifts her attention to Angrand, Luce, and Signac’s portrayal of “Paris’s old streets, its tawdry *petit boulevards* and unpaved roads in the upper reaches of working-class Montmartre” (p. 63), which she rightly sees as indicative of the Neo-Impressionists’ hostility towards the large avenues created by Haussmann as commercial emporia for the French middle and upper classes. She notes that Luce’s seemingly anachronous choice also to paint panoramic cityscapes of the center of Paris likely indicated his awareness of Reclus’ pragmatic admiration of Haussmann’s slum clearances for the health benefits that subsequently accrued for the common Parisian. Economic desperation was also a motive: at the time Luce created his nocturnes featuring the Louvre and *Pont Neuf* in 1889-1891, he was an impoverished vagabond living with friends in an effort to save money, reduced to illustrating sentimental novels and painting decorative boxes for sustenance. Roslak also examines these nocturnes in terms of the possible impact of symbolist poetry and Émile Zola’s novel, *L’Oeuvre* (1886), on Luce, noting that the darkened metropolis was frequently used as a metaphor for despair and in Zola’s case, as a sign of hope for a fictional figure close to suicide. Such speculations are indicative of Roslak’s efforts to avoid a reductive reading of Neo-Impressionist paintings without losing sight of the political motives that animated the artists.

In chapter four and those that follow, her study considers the impact of Reclus’ cultural geography on the Neo-Impressionists’ concept of landscape painting, as manifest in their images of the Paris *banlieu* during the 1880s and their idealized paintings of agrarian Provence and the Mediterranean coast from the 1890s. While Reclus and Kropotkin were critical of urban development under capitalism, especially suburbanization, both geographers ultimately sought to integrate the best aspects of urban and rural environments into their vision of a future society composed of decentralized cooperative communities or *communes*. In chapter five, Roslak argues that depictions of the gritty outskirts of Paris by Angrand and Luce “avoided the impressionist theme of weekend suburban leisure, opting instead to represent suburban industry and its employees in landscapes that eschew the distant and aestheticizing points of

view of ‘outsiders’ and flirt instead with the more mundane perspectives of suburban residents” (p. 115). In the same chapter, she suggests that Signac “pumped exuberant life” into his depictions of the “exhausted landscape” of industrialized Clichy as a decorative “remedy” to the degraded condition of this environment (p. 133), a reading that warrants debate when measured against works like Signac’s *Gas Tanks at Clichy* of 1886.

In chapter six, Roslak turns to representations of southern France to consider the idealized images of Provence created in the 1890s by Signac and his compatriot, Henri-Edmond Cross. Such work is considered in light of Reclus’ celebration of the inhabitants of the Midi as having preserved the proto-anarchist ideals of the “Greek era” (p. 147), and as an environment and culture eminently conducive to the creation of a future anarchist society. She also draws attention to the anarchist praise of Provençal viticulture, which at the time was dominated by winegrowers who operated as independent peasant producers, working in consort during the harvest season in an age-old form of collectivism (pp. 146-147). The anarchist grounding of such idealization in contemporary social realities accounts for the synthesis by Neo-Impressionists like Cross of decorative principles with contemporary subject matter in works like his *Grape Harvest (Var)* of 1892. Similarly the anarchists’ claim that modes of social organization in contemporary Provence retained the same anarchist spirit that animated life during the ancient era of Greek colonization accounts for the classicizing elements to be found in Signac’s celebrated mural *In the Time of Harmony: the Golden Age is not in the Past, it is in the Future* (1894-95) or Cross’ *Evening Air* (1893-94). Roslak’s argument in this regard is indebted to that of Anne Dymond who reached similar conclusions in her seminal article of 2003 on the impact of anarchist cultural geography on Signac’s depictions of Provence.[1]

In her final chapter, Roslak breaks new ground by probing the Neo-Impressionists’ interest in Gothic architecture. Pointing to Luce’s ten paintings of *Notre Dame Cathedral* in Paris (1900-1901) and Signac’s comparable series focused on *Mont Saint-Michel* (1897), she reveals their debt to Kropotkin’s published eulogies to the medieval craft guild as a model for industrious cooperation among contemporary anarchists. Signac was painting Mont Saint-Michel at the same time that he was avidly reading John Ruskin—a key influence on Kropotkin’s thought—which Roslak perceptively argues accounts for the creative liberties taken by Signac in representing this Gothic monument. The anarchist artists’ decidedly secular interpretation of France’s Gothic edifices—viewing buildings like Notre Dame as living monuments to the cooperative and productive spirit of France’s working class—owed a debt to Monet’s Republican-inspired *Rouen Cathedral* series of the mid-1890s and stood as a model for subsequent avant-garde movements wishing to associate left-wing values with the Gothic tradition.[2]

Roslak’s book constitutes the first synthetic study of Neo-Impressionism to consider the anarchist import of this movement, free of the distorting lens of traditional Marxism. For many decades now, study of the impact of anarchism on the European avant-garde has been programmatically short-circuited by the dominant voice of Marxists in the American and European academy, but in the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union and with the resurgence of interest in anarchism among a new generation of intellectuals, their influence is starting to wane.[3] There is no need for leftist art historians to continue to caricature a version of nineteenth-century anarchism on the model of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and Vladimir Lenin. Roslak’s volume therefore takes its place among a series of books that are enabling us to look again at the historical evolution and artistic impact of the anarchist movement in all its complexity.[4]

NOTES

[1] Anne Dymond, “A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the cultural geography of Mediterranean France,” *The Art Bulletin* 85(2003), pp. 353-370.

[2] Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 106-134; and Robert L. Herbert, *From Millet to Léger: Essay in the Social History of Art* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 79-90, 143-151.

[3] For evidence of renewed interest in anarchism among academics and activists, see the journals *Anarchist Studies* (founded 1993) and *Post-Anarchism Today* (founded 2010).

[4] Notable English-language publications include Patricia Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989); Richard Sonn, *Anarchism & Cultural Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Theresa Papanikolas, *Anarchism and the Advent of Paris Dada* (Burlington, Vt., Ashgate, 2010); and a forthcoming volume, Patricia Leighton, *The Liberation of Painting: Modernism and Anarchism in Avant-Guerre Paris* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press).

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