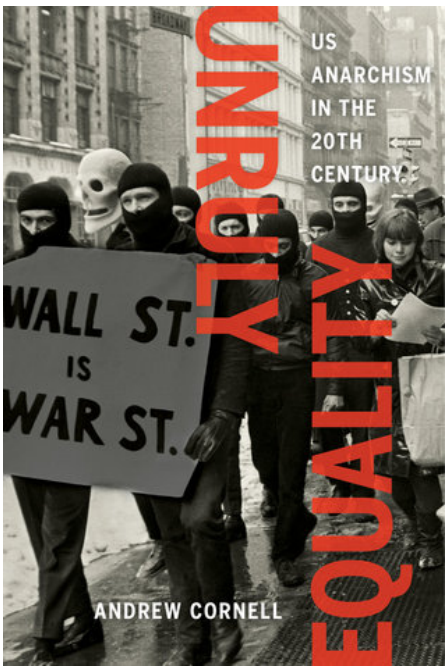


# Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century

*Andrew Cornell*

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**Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century** Andrew Cornell
**The first intellectual and social history of American anarchist thought and activism across the twentieth century**

In this highly accessible history of anarchism in the United States, Andrew Cornell reveals an astounding continuity and development across the century. Far from fading away, anarchists dealt with major events such as the rise of Communism, the New Deal, atomic warfare, the black freedom struggle, and a succession of artistic avant-gardes stretching from 1915 to 1975.

*Unruly Equality* traces U.S. anarchism as it evolved from the creed of poor immigrants militantly opposed to capitalism early in the twentieth century to one that today sees resurgent appeal among middle-class youth and foregrounds political activism around ecology, feminism, and opposition to cultural alienation.

## Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century Details

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# From Reader Review Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century for online ebook

### Joshua Buhs says

A decent attempt to fill a big hole.

Histories of anarchism have a big hole, right in the center of them, at least those that concentrate on American versions. Anarchism is traced from its nineteenth-century roots until it hits its (relative) apogee in the 1910s, before dying at the hands of war patriots and the FBI. Somehow, though, it is reborn--variously, depending upon accounts--in the late 1960s, or somewhere toward the end of the century. No longer, though, is is a revolutionary insurrectionist movement of immigrants; now it is an affected pose of middle-class white dudes.

Cornell, who grew up influenced by punk versions of anarchism, knew this history, but felt there must be some connecting links. He kept reading to find them, but could not, and ultimately decided--in the best tradition of punk DIY--to write his own. The result is this book. And indeed it does full the gap, showing that there were connecting links between anarchism at the beginning and end of the 20th century. It's not a bad first reconnaissance of this terrain, but also isn't great.

A large part of the problem is that the meat of the book--those connecting links--are mostly chapters four through six. The surrounding parts are either rehashes of well-known history (the early chapters) or descriptions of changes in affiliated groups--also a well known history--in which cases anarchists themselves are hard to see (chapters seven and eight). There are also, essentially, two very different conclusions, one about the weaknesses of contemporary anarchism, and one a rather superficial accounting of its development since the 1970s.

The early chapters concentrate on anarchism from the 1910s to the 1930s, from its height through its undoing. He breaks no new ground here--nor does he claim to do so--instead repeating what has largely been said before, though he does make the case that anarchism did not completely die in the 1920s, just continued on at a very low level. He also tries to separate different strands of anarchism.

It was certainly marked mostly by immigrants, and offered an alternative to Marxism, though it was rooted in materialist understandings of historical development and was similarly millenarian. As Cornell sees it, anarchism could be divided into insurrectionist modes, syndicalism, and Bohemianism. He attempts to illustrate these with some charts, but they are confusing, especially at the beginning of the book.

By the 1930s, anarchism had declined almost to nothing, though there were stalwarts representing all three branches. One of its biggest problems was that the most visible anarchists stood against state intervention into the New Deal, seeing FDR as a proto-Fascist: but this left those who would be the most obvious anarchist allies--the poor and dispossessed--without any reason to become anarchists. The purity of the ideology was valued over the real needs of real people. The one boon to anarchism at this period was the development of the Catholic Workers Movement which, while not formally influenced by anarchism,. shared many of its tenets, while reaching out to the poor and reinvigorating the pacifist movement.

The real re-orientation of anarchism came in the 1940s, both from a re-evaluation of its critique of power and its revivification by Bohemian ideals. Early anarchism had, like Marxism, focused mostly on class analysis; but in the 1940s, anarchists came to focus on other forms of hierarchical authority. It also came to focus on

sex and individualism. The books thesis--indeed, the meat of its argument--is summarized in a paragraph at the beginning of chapter 5:

"During World War II, anarchist draft resisters befriended Gandhian pacifists in conscientious objector camps and federal penitentiaries, where they jointly resisted racial segregation and influenced one another's politics. Upon being released, pacifists who had embraced anarchism during the war launched new organizations to combat racism, economic injustice, and nuclear war using nonviolent direct action. Although workers' living standards were on the rise, anarchists sought alternatives to the alienating effects of early Cold War consumerist culture by immersing themselves in avant-garde cultural production, embracing sexuality and the natural world, and creating communities of like-minded individuals. During the 1940s and 1950s, then, anarchists served as a hinge linking radical pacifists with avant-garde artists and writers. They spent these years developing new political analyses, strategies, institutions, and aesthetics that shaped the Beat Generation, the civil rights movement, the 1960s counterculture, and the New Left. Writers drew on recent developments in social theory to broaden the anarchist critique of power beyond the movement's traditional focus on class oppression, while activists and artists explored nonviolent representational techniques of self- and social transformation. From this milieu arose a conception of anarchism indebted to Henry David Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy that advocated individuals focus on living their own lives in a fashion that resembled their ideals as closely as possible. These 'practical anarchists' sought to prefigure the world they hoped to live in rather than wait until after a revolution that now seemed impossibly far off."

Chapters four and five are the best in the book, uncovering what I think is relatively new information and yoking it to more standard accounts (say of the San Francisco Renaissance) though is a more complete political context. These are the chapters the interested reader will want to concentrate upon.

Subsequent chapters are less precise. Cornell wants to get to the point where anarchists recognize--and contest--a whole range of hierarchies, not just class, but race and gender and sexuality, too. In order to do so, he has to point to parallels between the civil rights, women, and gay rights movements and anarchism, but cannot draw the connections between them as tightly as one would like. As a result, in these latter chapters, the anarchists themselves disappear somewhat, before returning at the very end.

In addition to the odd structuring, the book is at times ill-served by Cornell's language. He's mostly a competent--if not graceful--stylist, but then there will be large chunks that are difficult to parse, marred not only by academic jargon, but by the love of radicals for unwieldy neologisms.

The end also ends up in a rather obvious spot, given Cornell's interests. He thinks that modern anarchism is more solidly established than its precursors, made stronger by its interest in intersectionality. But he also admits that it is hurt by some of the changes that it made to become more relevant, in particular its focus on individual changes. He doesn't come out and say it, but there's a way in which anarchism is just another consumer good, a personality to try on, rather than being a movement of any sorts. He thinks of the so-called Battle in Seattle and the Occupy movements as important markers in contemporary anarchism, and I guess they are, but it's not clear what, if any, effect they had on the development of neo-liberal globalization.

The book also could have been helped by a more extensive concern with the way that anarchism has become associated with capitalism and conservatism in the form of anarcho-capitalism. Cornell takes a few paragraphs to distinguish this tradition from what he is focusing on, in the introduction, and to also separate what was then called libertarianism from what is now thought of as libertarianism--another left-right split--but this needed to go deeper to fully understand how anarchism evolved over the course of the 20th century.

Still, despite these mis-givings, it is a necessary book for anyone interested in alternative political

movements and resistance to global capitalism. It is an excellent companion to "Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow," which covered British anarchists in the same time period.

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### Camille says

I'm finally done. I'm glad this book exists but it felt more like a reference book than something that was meant to be read straight through. I kept finding myself wishing this book had been written by Johann Hari. Boy can *that* guy spin a yarn. Anyway good on Andrew for pulling all.this research together. it was ya know interesting. Not entertaining or a page turner but informative enough.

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### Greg Guma says

This accessible history is long overdue, showcasing the broad and profound influence of anarchist thinking and institutions from the Progressive era to the 1970s. An epilogue updates the story, tracing links to recent developments like Occupy. Even knowledgable readers will discover fresh connections. Cornell illustrates the movement's diversity, from the Modern School to the Diggers, along with the contributions of leading figures like Emma Goldman, Murray Bookchin and David Dellinger.

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### Jeff Buddle says

"If you look closely enough," Andrew Cornell seems to be saying in *Unruly Equality*, "you'll see the influence of Anarchism across the history of the radical left in the 20th century." And he lays out a convincing case. From Emma Goldman to Murray Bookchin, the thread of Anarchist thought runs deep, charting a path followed by civil rights demonstrators in the early 60s, anti-war protesters in the late 60s, and assorted gay-rights fighters, eco-defenders into the 70s and beyond.

Cornell limits his survey somewhat arbitrarily, confining it to the years between 1916 and 1972, but there's much activity between these bookends. Cornell is an able writer and a fine researcher. He can find the anarchist thread in protest groups that weren't explicitly anarchist, but were deeply influenced by its malleable traditions. Even more, he uncovers anarchist movements I've never heard of previously such as the Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón whose activity may have directly sparked the Mexican Revolution.

This is essential stuff for students of U.S. revolutionary movements, especially for those who may have discounted Anarchists as small fringe groups with little impact on the radical left as we know it. Cornell demonstrates that Marxism has held less sway over today's far left than the ideas of Bakunin and Prudhon. Cornell's central narrative ends before he gets to the recent Occupy movement, but his epilogue shows how the threads connect. This is a book not to be missed.

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### Michael Schmidt says

Apologies up front: this review is not of the book itself, but of the original dissertation that became the book, Andrew Cornell’s “For a World Without Oppressors”: U.S. Anarchism from the Palmer Raids to the Sixties,

New York University, USA, 2011. Any errors / dissonances created by that fact mus be blamed on myself alone!

Linking the Unchained: Articulating US Anarchist History

As an African who came of age as an anarchist within the periphery of the post-colonial Anglophone world, my early studies of and engagements with the anarchist movement abroad lead me to quickly realise that most of the Anglophone part of that movement – largely in the UK, Ireland, Canada, the USA, South Africa, Nigeria, Australia and New Zealand – suffered from an impoverished sense of its own ideological lineage compared to, say, the Francophone or Hispanophone movements.

And it also became clear that this ignorance was not merely expressed in a lack among English speakers of historical knowledge of their own region's anarchist movement continuities, disjunctions, bifurcations, triumphs and failures, but it also meant that their militants had a slender grasp of well-established debates on strategies, tactics, politics and praxis that were far more readily accessible to our Latin American and continental European comrades.

Anecdotally, when I toured Canada in 2010 promoting Lucien van der Walt and my overhaul of anarchist politics, Black Flame, it was immediately apparent that the quality of French-language reading material in an anarchist bookstore in Montreal was superior to that of a comparable English-language store in Ottawa. And this, call it intellectual, imbalance had little to do with the selections those stores made, but rather much to do with the relatively poor quality of materials available in English.

To make the point another way, when I was a young anarchist in the late 1980s, I was enamoured of The Angry Brigade, an anarcho-insurrectionary outfit that conducted a slew of sabotage and propaganda bombings across the UK, but there was only one book then available about them, Jean Weir's The Angry Brigade, 1967-1984 – and it provided very little context to the Brigade's actions and political evolution.

Then in the 1990s, I was in constant correspondence with the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation (L&R RAF) in the USA; founded in 1989 and dissolved in 1998, it was in then the country's only nationwide anarchist organisation, with sections in Mexico too – but was astounded that almost no members had any knowledge of US anarchism after the eclipse of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the post-World War 1 oppression visited on the left.

Yet my research over the past 16 years into the ideological and organisational lineages of the global anarchist movement had shown me that the L&R RAF had predecessors such as the Libertarian League (covered by Cornell's work), established in New York in 1954 as a support organisation for the Cuban struggle against the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship: it was the closest thing to a regional anarchist organisation in the United States over the next decade, growing to embrace groups in New York City, Detroit and San Francisco.

While, as Cornell shows, the 1960s were marked by the failure of the anarchists to consolidate a coherent libertarian left caucus to challenge authoritarian left dominance within Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at their own plenary at Black River, Wisconsin, in 1969, three years later – and this is beyond the timeline of his dissertation – they finally got their act together and established the synthesist Social Revolutionary Anarchist Federation (SRAF), which networked groups across the USA.

The SRAF was not a very coherent organisation, but it proved to be a vital seed-bed of organised anarchism in a disorganised time.

In 1978, an anarchist-communist tendency split from the SRAF and founded the Anarchist Communist Federation of North America (ACF), which rapidly grew to embrace 11 collectives from the east and west coasts of the US and the plains of the US and Canada.

The ACF was the first North American transnational anarchist-communist organisation since 1939; one of its affiliates split away in 1981 becoming in 1984 the anarcho-syndicalist Workers' Solidarity Alliance (WSA) which still operates today, while the ACF itself folded in 1982. The SRAF folded in 1989, but its place was taken by the more militant L&R RAF.

Cornell's dissertation ends with the 1960s so he does not discuss these latterday movements in his

dissertation (though most are sketched in the last chapter of the book that evolved out of it), but his aims are essentially the same as mine: to restore to the US (and more broadly, the North American) movement knowledge of the roots and evolution of its ideological debates and organisational practices.

And though he doesn't discuss in depth today's US movement peculiarities, he does anticipate many of the themes of today's self-described anarchist movement in earlier eras: for example the rise of deviations laying claim to the label of anarchist such as individualism in the 1920s, or primitivism in the 1930s; but also of legitimate influences integrated into anarchism such as feminism, ecology, gay rights, and black liberation.

Cornell is careful to emphasise women articulators of the movement such as Audrey Goodfriend (1920-2013) – while avoiding the usual overweening stress on Emma Goldman (1869-1940) – in focusing primarily on the bulk of what most historians call the "short 20th Century," that is, from 1914-1989, or the First World War to the fall of the Berlin Wall, though a useful appendix covers the early movement in the late 19th Century.

His closer examination of the US movement in the 1900s and 1910s prior to the state's repressive "Red and Black Scare" of 1917-1924 is wonderfully grounded and has now been integrated into our global anarchist history which will be the companion volume to Black Flame.

To Cornell's credit, he is not merely concerned with the organisational or industrial expressions of the movement, but also its social and cultural, including artistic, engagements, and here he excels in delineating how the movement shifted from being a decisive influence on the avant-garde arts in the 1920s, retreated into a homely crafts approach in the mid-century, and then resurged to become a defining feature of the 1960s counter-culture, especially by drawing on non-Western ethics such as Buddhism.

His scope is rightly broad, and he focuses on educational initiatives such as the Modern Schools, which he argues, beyond a few individuals, signally failed to produce a new generation of anarchist militants, and the commune movement, which was ultimately a retreat from the challenges of the Depression and a rather unqualified failure as a social experiment.

He stresses the long-lived influence of language in somewhat ethnically compartmentalising the movement, though by the late 1950s, most long-lived "ethnic" titles were extinct, except for the Yiddish-language Freie Arbiter Shtimme, founded in New York City in 1890 which was remarkably maintained by a group of increasingly ageing Jewish anarchists until 1977.

Cornell is fascinated about how an immigrant worker movement morphed into a middle-class subcultural movement. And this social sea-change, with the dying off of first-generation immigrant anarchists, aided and abetted by a raft of anti-immigration laws in the 1920s, helps sate his curiosity, seeing the movement initially become more socially ghettoised and isolated, and later struggle, then manage to establish an English-language presence, which opened its potential appeal to the broader Anglicised community – albeit then as a minority political movement within an entirely different social class.

Cornell is commendable in taking a transnational approach, particularly regarding the US South-West and West, and the organisational presence there of the revolutionary anarchist Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) and of its resilient press, but also regarding the international solidarity between US anarchists and the movements in countries such as Russia, Italy, Spain, and France – though he does neglect to look laterally north to examine linkages with the movement in littoral Canada, especially the IWW-styled One Big Union.

Conceptually and politically, Cornell draws directly on Black Flame in distinguishing two broad currents in the movement, the mass anarchists and the insurrectionists, teasing out these distinctions as they played out between the syndicalists of the multiethnic IWW, the Union of Russian Workers, and the strongly Jewish International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) on the one hand, and the largely Italian, Russian and Lettish insurgent movement on the other.

Cornell more than adequately discusses the devastating role of the interwar anti-left repression in gutting the movement of its most able leadership – militants were jailed for up to 20 years under laws that criminalised merely holding anarchist or syndicalist views – but is strangely silent on how the attempts by the Communist Party of the USA to hijack the IWW, and the complex tensions between, very roughly, centralist and decentralist tendencies within the IWW, lead to its fatal split into two organisations in 1924, from which it

never recovered. Also, the Depression, perhaps an even more serious challenge to – and opportunity to re-establish – anarchist and syndicalist legitimacy, is unfortunately merely glossed over.
The unintended result is that while Cornell is rightly concerned with tracking changes in the movement's fixations and priorities (often distracted by the threats of Fascism, Nazism and Communism abroad, he argues), he too often follows the defectors down their rabbit holes, as with the commune movement, rather than examining the rearguard actions of those who stuck to their guns in the IWW, as with its honourable stand in defending even Communist labour leaders against McCarthyism in the 1950s.
He does, however, note that the IWW's General HQ in Chicago provided the locale for a new generation of syndicalists who emerged around the journal Rebel Worker, published there from 1964.
Unfortunately, Cornell admits he had no linguistic access to Russian-language materials, so entirely missing in his account is the influential ????????? A?????-K?????????? ? ???????? ??????? ? ?????? (Federation of Anarcho-Communists in North America and Canada), founded in 1919, splitting in 1924 between anti-organisationist svobodniki and pro-organsationist burevestniki; the latter rebuilt the Federation after the split, the tendencies merged in 1939 and the Federation was active until at least 1950.
It is however likely (though I am unsure), that outfits like Boris Yelensky's Free Society Group, active in Chicago over 1923-1957, that Cornell discusses, were affiliated to this Russian-language Federation. Being a key articulator of the "classic" interwar movement with the post-war era, and a transmitter of intergenerational ideas in North America, the absence of the Federation is a critical loss to Cornell's attempt to reconstruct the connecting tissue between the eras.
Although this review is of Cornell's original varsity dissertation and not the book that resulted from it, Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century, University of California Press, Berkley, USA, 2016 – which has an epilogue on the period from the 1970s until today which does discuss the SRAF (but not the ACF), the L&R RAF and more recent federations – a scan through its index suggests the book also has no reference to the Federation.
Thanks to Cornell, while I am reconfirmed in my distaste for the US's anarcho-flavoured dilettantism of the 1960s – the deleterious aftereffects of which still poison the movement today – I now have a new appreciation for some of the tendencies of the immediate post-war era, especially the brave stand of the anarcho-pacifists against global war and its genocidal nuclear expression, and of the pro-organisational tendencies such as those around David Thoreau Wieck who tackled desegregation seriously and directly in the South, anticipating the Civil Rights Movement.
Cornell has, with this valuable dissertation, and it seems, in the subsequent book, achieved in one stroke what I have attempted to over 16 years of (as yet unpublished) research. It is the only work to my knowledge that makes a bold attempt to trace US anarchist ideological and organisational lineages across most of the short 20th Century, so is well worth the read, especially for those in the Anglophone movement who take so many of their cues from US anarchism.

[ENDS]

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### James says

Cornell argued that, while it is commonly thought that Anarchism in the United States largely went away following the First World War and reemerged in the 1960s in youth movements, it in fact is a continuously tradition from 1880 to the present. He illustrates why the Anarchist movement in the United States transformed from a labor-focused immigrant based one to a largely middle class white youth-based movement, influenced by punk rock by the 1980s.

The book is divided into two sections: 1) the history of the old Anarchist movement that arose from immigrant communities in the US and continued, though in continued crisis and infighting, until it largely disintegrated at the dawn of WWII, especially after the defeat of the Spanish Revolution. Still, groups like the Catholic Workers and small IWW and other publications. By the end, infighting and the deaths of the 19th century generation helped spiral the movement downward. 2) the WWII connection with anarchists and pacifists who opposed the war and met in jail (though many anarchists served in the military during the time to defeat fascism), during which many anarchists abandoned labor struggles and switched to prefigurative communities, art and intellectual circles, and increasingly youth culture during the 50s and 60s. It traced the anarchist influenced Civil Rights tactics and the rise of the New Left, whose antiauthoritarianism often had anarchist thought and circles. Anarchism had by then, become heavily influenced by Gay Liberation, Black Power, and Feminism, as well as the growing ecology movement, whose circles were largely white middle class youth and rebellious, but had also evolved to criticizing social power at large instead of just economic class. Cornell than traces the emergent Anarchist traditions to the anti-globalization movement, punk music, and the recent Occupy movement, and shows efforts by Anarchist to reconnect to class struggles in the past twenty years.

Key Themes and Concept
-Anarchism is a continuous movement in the United States from 1880-present, though it can be divided into the Old Anarchist and New Anarchist movements. It helped shaped much of the history of the US Left, more than commonly given credit for.
-It has been anti-capitalist, socialist, and radically democratic, arguing for putting values into practice in the here and now. It often prefigures culture that one wants to live in, builds counterinstitutions, and argues movement organizations should exist according to principles, with the idea that these organizations will eventually become dominant institutions.
-During the mid 20th century, it lost sight of mass organizing as it separated itself from the poorest because of the New Deal, eventually abandoning labor as it disintegrated into a few circles. Still, by the 1950s, it was very small but very influential in Civil Rights and art avante-garde cultures.
-There have always been rigorous debates on organizational support, mass organizing versus conspiratorial insurrection, and when to critically support institutions they oppose, if ever (such as the New Deal, US military effort during WW2, Castroist movement etc.)
-Anarchists have been consistent in arguing for: 1) conceptualizations and critiques of power 2) theories of human nature 3) visions of a better society 4) strategies to achieve these visions 5) forms of movement organization need to carry out those strategies and visions 6) understanding what sorts of people constituted the movement.
-Often groups would not call themselves anarchists but use anarchist principles in organizing and were heavily influenced by anarchists, or called themselves (depending on the time period) libertarian socialists, left-libertarians, or libertarians (until the free market fundamentalists co-opted this term in the 1960s.)
-While the study is focused on the US, it notes that anarchism is very influential in Latin America, Europe, and specifically in Kurdish resistance in the Middle East.

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