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by Samuel Hayim Brody

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Kenyon Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), x + 300 pages, $30.00 (paper).

One of the major stories of the United States presidential campaign in summer 2016 was the controversy over the comments made by the Republican nominee, Donald Trump, about the family of Captain Humayun Khan, an American soldier killed in Iraq in 2004. In a canny response to Trump's call for a temporary ban on Muslim immigration to the U.S., the Democratic National Convention featured a segment in which Khan's father, Khizr, delivered a passionate speech about his son's military service and criticized the Republican nominee, at one point drawing a pocket Constitution from his jacket and shaking it while Khan's mother Ghazala looked on.

By inviting the Khans to the stage, the Democrats clearly intended to trap Trump. Here were the bereaved parents of a fallen American soldier, who just so happened to be Muslims from Pakistan. Trump, who seems constitutionally unable to refuse bait, would face a dilemma: admit that his policy of blanket discrimination would have excluded these worthy people, or double down on the politics of slander and personal attack. To the surprise of very few, the candidate chose the latter course, wondering aloud whether perhaps Ghazala Khan had stood silently during her husband's speech because she wasn't "allowed" to speak. In the ensuing media battle, GOP politicians disavowed Trump's comments even while continuing to back their nominee. Liberals on social

media shared the Khan speech as a stirring example of a Muslim family making the "ultimate sacrifice" for the United States. Hillary Clinton won a media cycle. Coming directly on the heels of the DNC, the controversy may have even played a role in solidifying a post-convention lead for Clinton in national polls.

In the midst of the liberal delirium about Trump, characterized by a kind of desperation to find any attack that might stick and overcome his seemingly limitless ability to say anything and get away with it, only a few crotchety leftist outlets questioned the parameters of the debate over the Gold Star family. On the one side, it seemed, you had rank xenophobia and bigotry; on the other side, classic big-tent Americanism, for which the ultimate sacrifice is also the ultimate proof of belonging. A father holding up and exalting the Constitution, a fallen hero son. But how far could this tent stretch? Did it expand to reach Muslim immigrants who were less eager to conform to U.S. political norms? Who might be critical of domestic policing in New York, of drone strikes in Afghanistan, or of U.S. military aid to the State of Israel? While liberals were enjoying the opportunity to browbeat conservatives and score political points with this cognitive-dissonance-causing example, were they not also reinforcing a very old and powerful narrative about how one earns the right to be an American citizen—even an American resident?

The controversy over the Khans shows the continuing relevance, a century later, of the story Kenyon Zimmer tells in *Immigrants Against the State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in America*. Zimmer tells of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Italy who, instead of attempting to outdo born Americans in their patriotic fervor, harshly critiqued the society to which they had immigrated as well as the ones they had left. They did so even though they already faced suspicion and discrimination as ethno-religious minorities (Jews and Catholics), and they did so in the face of consistent, sometimes brutal government repression of "criminal anarchy," including the threat of deportation. And they exposed, decades before Hannah Arendt brought the issue to the forefront of consideration for political theorists, the fragility of an international system in which human rights are made dependent upon citizenship, i.e. upon recognition by states.

Zimmer's work is part of an impressive new crop of academic work on libertarian socialism, reading it not simply as Marxism's younger and less world-historically important sibling but as an important case study for anyone interested in transnationalism and post-colonialism. In this sense, its key predecessor is Benedict Anderson's *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (Verso, 2005), in which the influential scholar of nationalism turns his attention to nationalism's fiercest opponents. Anderson's focus there on Filipino writers, and on uprisings and protests in Cuba, China, and Japan, helped to counter the idea that anarchism was always a purely European indulgence, like some kind of mass-movement equivalent of a white college student with a Che poster. In that light, Zimmer now

returns to Euro-American anarchist immigrant communities, but this time seen as transnational exemplars.

In the first half of the book, Zimmer focuses on the establishment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of communities of Yiddish anarchists in New York, Italian anarchists in Paterson, New Jersey, and a multi-ethnic anarchist scene in San Francisco. The second half then follows the fates of these communities as they encounter the challenges of the First World War, the Red Scare, the Russian Revolution and Spanish Civil War, and finally World War Two and the Cold War, where the story ends. The terms "Yiddish" and "Italian" are paralleled in the book as they are in the title. Yiddish, of course, means Jewish, but it also doesn't; the vast majority of the Yiddish anarchists were not just secular but actively opposed to Judaism, with all the psychological tension and contradiction that position implies (e.g. even if one dedicates the day of Yom Kippur to drinking and dancing at the Yom Kippur Ball rather than fasting and prayer at synagogue, one is still making a *holiday* out of Yom Kippur). Moreover, one could be a Yiddish anarchist without even having a Jewish ethnic background, as the famous example of Rudolf Rocker (1873-1958), a German-born activist who learned Yiddish in London and later became active in the U.S. as well, clearly shows. Meanwhile, Italian anarchists nurtured their own variety of militant anti-clericalism, and defined their *italianità*, or Italianness, in a way that closely paralleled the *yidishkayt* of their comrades—a simultaneously cosmopolitan and anti-nationalist sense of nationality that de-couples "nation" from "state," seeing the true embodiment of one's own group in the striving for universal freedom and brotherhood.

Major figures like Emma Goldman (1869-1940) and Sacco & Vanzetti appear here, but this is a social history with a huge cast of characters and many varied protagonists. Zimmer focuses on these communities because they "constituted both the largest two groups of foreign-born workers in the United States and the largest two segments of America's anarchist movement" (2), making a solid case that one has to understand these stories to understand American labor history, and not just because of one's pre-existing interest in either Yiddish or Italian ethnic particularity. There is a lot of labor history here, as Zimmer delineates the relationships of the different factions of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Industrial Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), and the various strikes and propaganda campaigns undertaken by these and other anarchist-influenced organizations. All this will be familiar to labor scholars, but Zimmer's emphasis on the American *origins* of militant anarchism is distinctive. In Zimmer's telling, it is the contact between the immigrants and the American conditions that creates anarchists, contrary to narratives of the "importation" of radical ideology from abroad. These newly-created American anarchists in turn then *export* their ideas around the world: to Mexico in 1911, to Russia in 1917, to China and Japan, etc. This exportation is sometimes, perhaps ironically, facilitated by the U.S. government, in its determination to deport anarchists *en masse*. Zimmer shows that

even where radical movements did already exist in the homelands of these immigrants, the immigrants themselves were more frequently radicalized by American conditions than prior to immigration.

In addition to emphasizing the American birth of the Yiddish and Italian anarchist movements, Zimmer devotes significant attention to the internal workings of ethnic enclaves, frequently discussing gender practices, newspaper publishing, marriages, and local issues. The central tension between these intensely insular linguistic-ethnic communities, concentrated both geographically (in immigrant neighborhoods) and industrially (in the needle trades), and the radical cosmopolitanism to which they adhere, is also the central tension of *Immigrants Against the State* itself, and Zimmer offers it as one explanation for the failure of these movements to endure past the immigrant generation: "Yiddish and Italian anarchism were deeply embedded in specific ethnic and linguistic communities and therefore could not be transformed into component parts of a generic, English-speaking 'American' movement. Doing so would have destroyed the bedrock on which American anarchism rested" (175). Indeed, the anarchists faced the same difficulty as all immigrants in transmitting their culture to their own English-speaking, American children. Sometimes the second generation created their own independent second-generation radical groups, but just as often they seemed embarrassed by their parents' radicalism, as other children of immigrants might have been by their own parents' cultural conservatism or religiosity. In the end, assimilation and Americanism seem to win out as surely and inevitably as the passage of time itself. And from this, one can perhaps understand the confidence of contemporary liberals when it comes to anti-Muslim bigotry on the Right: just give it one more generation, they think, and South Asian and Middle-Eastern Muslims too will be assimilated, robbing the nativists of the ground on which they stand and reducing opposition to the fringes of the KKK and the fetid swamps of the alt-right. Another pretty and culturally inoffensive patch will be added to the American cultural quilt, even as exploitative economic structures remain in place. All that depends, of course, on the immigrants keeping their end of the bargain—but despite nativist fears, history provides little reason to expect they will do otherwise.

Zimmer writes sympathetically about anarchism, and tries to introduce a note of hope at the conclusion even after three straight chapters of piling defeat upon defeat. In the U.S., the anarchists were obstructed in speaking and publishing by outrageous censorship laws; they were arrested on flimsy charges; they were harassed, followed, beaten, shot, and exiled. And yet even given all this, anarchists still fared better in the U.S. than they did in the U.S.S.R., where approximately 90% of those repatriated from America wound up murdered by the Soviet state (160). The bitter enmity of anarchism not just to American capitalism, but to Soviet-style communism, accounts for its marginalization and isolation for most of the twentieth century, for the sense that, as Alexander Berkman (1870-1936) put it, anarchists had "no right to exist anywhere on this earth" (195). Zimmer eloquently and elegiacally describes the impossible choices

faced by anarchists when confronted with WWII and the Cold War, titanic battles in which there seemed to be no good options and no side to take. Most, it seems, had to sacrifice their principles and more or less passively support the lesser evil (the U.S.), a painful reality that drained anarchist activism of the apocalyptic energy and vitality it had once had.

As for Yiddish and Italian themselves, the two languages are in different positions today with respect to politics, let alone anarchism, in the U.S. During World War II, Italian immigrant communities underwent a full-bore Americanization comparable to that experienced by German communities at the start of the First World War. Previous support for Mussolini and fascism were thrown into the dustbin of history, and U.S. military aims wholeheartedly embraced; a grimly satisfying situation, perhaps, for Italian anarchists who had been waging anti-fascist campaigns for a decade, but not a sign of the increasing influence of anarchism. After the war, Italians, like Jews, largely assimilated into the generic "white" identity that would allow them to share in the prosperity of the 1950s. The Holocaust, meanwhile, wiped out the Yiddish-speaking communities that were the source of the strength of Yiddish anarchism, and together with the rise of the State of Israel turned American Jewish minds and hearts towards a Zionist ideology they had previously kept at arm's length. Jewish education accordingly placed a new focus on the teaching of modern Israeli Hebrew (although most American Jewish students proudly embraced the grand Anglo-American tradition of stubborn monolingualism). Thus it seems that these days, at least in some quarters, there is a political connotation to the conscious embrace of Yiddish by a new generation. Regardless of how one feels about the so-called "Yiddish Revival" (this publication declared it a success and gave us all permission to stop talking about it), it seems clear that it frequently involves elements of non-Zionism, diasporism, and transnationalism that recall the cosmopolitan heyday of Yiddish radicalism. These are radical political coordinates in the current context, but they seem unlikely to form the basis of a mass movement—the politics, class positions, and linguistic competence of contemporary American Jews are just too different from those of their ancestors a century ago. Not only that, but the focus today in Jewish leftist circles on centering the narratives of Jews of color and Mizrachi Jews militates against any kind of return to former years' naïve identification of *yidishkayt* with Jewishness *tout court*. Nonetheless, it constitutes an important aspect of the contemporary Jewish scene, resisting an imposed monoculture and pointing towards transnational possibilities, both in the past and in the future.

Indeed, at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, a transformed and diffuse anarchism still seemed capable of motivating activists in the alter-globalization and Occupy movements. In the U.S. and Europe, this is an anarchism that passed through the filter of the New Left, that concerned itself with environmentalism, animal rights, and the nuances of discourses on race and gender, and that long since ceased to be a mass movement of unions and labor even as it remained anti-capitalist (here Andrew Cornell's *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the*

Twentieth Century [University of California Press, 2016] may be read as a kind of sequel to Zimmer's work). Many anarchists of the old guard, like Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), a second-generation Russian-Jewish anarchist who grew up working-class and committed to syndicalism, considered this latter-day anarchism a pale, "lifestyle"-focused imitation of the force that once shook the world. Nonetheless, we may find that anarchist history and anarchism itself continue to hold our attention, especially as new movements outside the Global North, such as that of the Syrian Kurds fighting ISIS from their autonomous canton, Rojava, draw inspiration from it. (It's amusing to imagine a stupefied Bookchin, who died in obscurity, reacting to images of Rojava featuring graffiti stencils of him, Bookchin, shaking hands with the imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, with both names streaking across the wall in heroic all-caps.)

It would be easy to argue that the only reason that contemporary anarchism lacks what Zimmer calls the "poisonous legacies" (212) of capitalism, communism, and Cold War anti-communism alike is that it never succeeded for long enough to betray itself. But one doesn't have to fetishize defeat to recognize and value the principled cosmopolitanism, anti-authoritarianism, and transnationalism of this movement, especially in a moment when virulent nationalism seems on the march again across the world and an exploitative neoliberal globalization seems to be the only thing standing against it (see: the Brexit vote). If we find ourselves dissatisfied by such parameters of debate, if we feel like we cannot choose either of those sides, a very different "Third Way" still offers us its example of the possibility of solidarity both within and across nations.