Interview with Kenyon Zimmer

Max Kaiser

June 16, 2016

Max: Welcome back to New Books in Jewish Studies. I'm your host, Max Kaiser. We have a great show for you today. With us, we have Kenyon Zimmer, who is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Texas in Arlington. He's here to talk about his new book, *Immigrants Against the State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in America*, published in 2015 by University of Illinois Press. Kenyon, thanks very much for being with us on the show today.

Kenyon: Thank you very much for having me.

Max: Fantastic. So we'll just to start off with, how did you come to write this book?

Kenyon: Through a somewhat circuitous route, I was originally interested in the politics, in the history of radicalism in the United States, and particularly in the history of anarchism. And delving into that, I quickly realized that it was really a, that history was really a history of immigrants, particularly of non-English speaking immigrants. that much of what had been written had relied almost exclusively on English language sources, which gave a very skewed picture. So that sort of launched me into the, or launched me down a path of becoming more of a historian of migration and using that as the lens to look at this radical movement. which involved a lot of sort of late in life learning in graduate school, including learning both to read both Italian and Yiddish in order to undertake this project.

Max: Great. So we'll get a bit more into the book. So the book covers a period from the 1880s through the first half of the 20th century. Can you tell us a bit about anarchist movements and anarchist ideology in this period and how it intersects with the history of American immigration.

Kenyon: Yeah, absolutely. In a lot of ways, the rise and fall of anarchism in the United States mirrors the rise and fall of mass migration from Europe into the United States. The origins of an organized anarchist movement in the United States really dates to the 1880s, initially amongst a couple different groups of immigrants, Germans, Czech immigrants, who you could sort of see as the first wave of anarchism in the United States. And then Beginning in the late 1880s, 1890s, you see the transition, just like you see the transition in the general migration streams to immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, and in particular Eastern European Jews and Italian immigrants who became both the largest groups of immigrants to the United States by the turn of the 20th century, and likewise became the two largest groups within the American anarchist movement by the turn of the century. So the sort of the story of the rise of Yiddish and Italian anarchism is one that goes from the 1880s, the very first groups and publications and organizations are founded. And they peak right around 1910, the beginning of the First

World War. Then all sorts of ideological, as well as other crises emerge with the war, the Russian Revolution, the rise of communism, repression of radicalism in the United States with the post-war Red Scare. And then on top of all that, you get massive immigration restrictions in the United States in the 1920s that sort of signaled the beginning of the end of these movements, which relied on essentially recruiting Yiddish and Italian speaking immigrants into these by now pretty well established radical cultures and communities. But they were now were essentially cut off from from new recruits, which meant that essentially the movements became stagnant. They got older without recruiting younger members. They became more and more removed from mainstream American society as they had been built upon these foreign language, these Yiddish and Italian language institutions, which became more and more marginal as you get into the 1920s, 1930s.
Max: All right, well, we'll get into, I think, a lot of those issues through this interview. Just to start us off, in the first chapter, you focus in on Jewish anarchism in New York City, and you write that Yiddish became the foundation on which Jewish anarchism was built, but it simultaneously walled off this movement from the world outside the Jewish ghetto. Can you tell us a bit about the Jewish anarchist movement more generally and also unpack what you mean by about this walling off of the movement?

Kenyon: Yeah, absolutely. So Yiddish, the first Yiddish anarchist group in the United States was formed in New York City in 1887. And the movement more or less grew pretty rapidly thereafter. And it, especially at first, Yiddish anarchism was this combination of well, college-educated, Russian Jewish, primarily Russian Jewish immigrants, many of whom actually didn't really speak Yiddish when they arrived in the United States. Most of them spoke Russian. But they were working in garment factories or cigar factories side by side with working class Yiddish speaking Jewish immigrants, some of whom were also becoming radicalized. They were being influenced by the German anarchist movement, which was based in the same neighborhood, the Lower East Side, that was slowly transforming into a primarily Jewish neighborhood. And the early years of the Yiddish movement, they drew a lot on the German movement and its ideas and its publications and so on before sort of forging their own path, which took a very different direction by the second-half of the 1890s. In particular, They established what would become the longest-lasting anarchist publication in the United States, the Yiddish Freir Arbeit the Shtima, or the Free Voice of Labor, which for 20 years was edited by a man named Saul Yanovsky, who played a very central role in sort of helping Yiddish anarchism find its own way and transforming it into a sort of more evolutionary radical movement that wasn't seeking revolution just around the corner like mini anarchists war, especially in the late 19th century, but was looking at a much more gradual long-term process, was focused on things like education on consumer and producer cooperatives, and on forming a strong labor movement amongst Jewish workers and all workers eventually, and sort of using that three-pronged approach to sort of evolve society in the direction of anarchism. And to go about this, these Jewish anarchists, especially the Russified intellectuals realized that if they wanted quite literally communicate with their fellow Jewish immigrants, they had to do it in Yiddish and they had to master that language. They had to form Yiddish education groups. They had to put on lectures in Yiddish. They had to produce publications like the Freya Arbe Dishtema in Yiddish. And they excelled at doing this. The Freya Arbe Dishtema in particular became not just an important radical newspaper, it was usually a weekly publication, but it became a central tribune of Yiddish language poetry and short stories and Art criticism, it was much more than just an Anarchist newspaper. It became a very important cultural newspaper for the Yiddish reading public in general. It published a lot of major Jewish poets for the first time. It was

sort of, if you could get published by Saul Janowski in the Anarchist newspaper as a poet or as a literary critic, that sort of made your career in many cases. So anarchists actually played this important role, not just in radicalism, not just in the labor movement where they helped pioneer a lot of the major unions for Jewish workers, but also in the larger Yiddish language culture of the Lower East Side. And all of that worked to their advantage, of course, as long as thousands of Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews kept pouring into the United States and into New York City and into the sweatshops and the tenement houses. You know, that was ready grounds for recruitment for this very strong, and over the couple of decades, well-established Yiddish anarchist movement. Of course, as soon as that immigration stream ends, then the very thing that was the strength of the movement that helped it maintain itself, which was these deep roots in the Yiddish culture and Jewish community, then that becomes the Achilles heel. As these Jewish immigrants, these radicals grow older, their children grow up speaking English, often rebelling against their parents and their parents' beliefs, which in this case were radicalism, right? So, and it really became a sort of a crisis for this generation of Yiddish-speaking anarchists, many of them didn't master English or at least we're not completely fluent in it, we're not comfortable speaking it, agitating in it, writing in it, which put definite limits on what they were able to do outside of places like the Lower East Side and especially over time.

Max: That's very interesting. So we'll move on to talk about the next chapter and the case of the Italian anarchists in Paterson, New Jersey. So tell us a bit about the place of Italian anarchists within the labor movement there, and to what extent they were maybe more successful in bridging ethnic divides.

Kenyon: Sure. So Paterson, New Jersey, is an industrial city quite close to New York, actually, just down down river. And it was the major center of silk production in the United States in this era. And it increasingly drew on skilled northern, primarily northern Italian weavers, were essentially imported as cheap labor in the 1880s and 1890s. And a few members of this labor migration from Italy had previous experience in anarchist groups in Italy. And in general, Italian weavers had a long, strong tradition of labor organizing and radicalism more generally. Once you get this sort of small nucleus of Italian anarchists in Patterson, they start a couple of different things. One is they start attracting Italian anarchists from elsewhere in Italy who are aware that there's this sort of group and community that's growing in Patterson, primarily because they start publishing an important Italian language anarchist publication, La Questione Sociale, there, which has a worldwide readership. And then they also, of course, like any good anarchist, they are agitating in their workplaces, in the silk mills and dye houses, in their neighborhoods. right, trying to convert their fellow Italian migrants to their way of thinking, which they do with pretty great success. By 1900, the anarchist paper La Questione Sociale, about a thousand copies of it circulate in Patterson in 1900. And the Italian population of Paterson is only about 5,000 in 1900. So you can see they've got quite a local audience, quite a bit of strength. And they ceaselessly are trying to organize Italian silk workers and others into unions or what they call societies of resistance to fight for better conditions, better wages, shorter hours, and so on. But they're not, of course, the only workers in the silk industry. They're not the only immigrants in Patterson. There's older groups of German and French immigrants in particular, which also have some histories of anarchist organizing, and they're able to often cooperate with each other, in particular with the French-speaking immigrants. Northern Italian immigrants from places, from silk production centers in northern Italy actually had a long history of temporary and seasonal migrations into France to work in French silk factories. Northern Italian dialects like Piedmontese

are very similar to French, so they're able to communicate pretty effectively. between one another. With the Germans and some of the other groups a little bit, it's a little bit more sporadic, but they do successfully collaborate particularly during times of strikes. And there are strikes are pretty endemic to the silk industry because it's a very erratic industry and there's lots of periods of unemployment, of underemployment, lots of times wages are cut and so on. And eventually what ends up happening is this growing and increasingly influential group of Italian anarchists in Patterson, in part drawing on their connections to French radicals and to what's happening with the growth of syndicalism in France, is they start introducing and articulating a more clearly defined ideology of syndicalism, of this idea that labor unions can function not only to win better wages and so on in the short term, but can also be the instruments in the long term of revolutionary change by using their power, and in particular, the weapon of the general strike, right, where all workers simultaneously go on strike and in theory bring a city or a country to a halt in doing so, that that can be the, the, the real pivot of revolution. You just have to organize, right, all the workers into one big union to do that. So they organize locally in Patterson on this idea. And then they find in 1905 in the newly created American Syndicus Union, the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW, They find a lot of what they've been articulating already, what they've been arguing for already, and they form some of the earliest locals of the IWW. Patterson. The leadership there is firmly anarchist. They lead a whole string of strikes up to and including a famous 1913 strike, a general strike in the silk industry in Patterson, which is relatively well known in American labor history, but the role of these Italian anarchists in being essentially the backbone of that strike is completely unknown, in part because previous researchers haven't used the Italian language sources that really sketch out the important and prominent role that the anarchists played there. So really in Patterson, much more so than in New York, these immigrant anarchists, they are the labor leaders. They are at the forefront of organizing and leading and articulating the ideas of the labor unions that are active in that city.

Max: Great. So the third chapter of your book looks at immigrant anarchists in San Francisco. And you suggest that by the First World War, the city had become a major nexus of global radicalism, linking the networks of the anarchist Atlantic and the emerging anarchist Pacific. and revolutionary and imperial anti-imperial struggles throughout Europe, Asia and Latin America. Tell us about how San Francisco became this major nexus point.

Kenyon: So San Francisco is particularly interesting because it's in part just geographically, right? It's on the Pacific coast, but it's linked, especially by a railroad to the East Coast. So you have these same groups, right, Italians and Eastern European Jews who are able to get to San Francisco pretty easily by, right, by the time we get to the 1880s, 1890s. But also, of course, you have immigrants crossing the Pacific from Japan and China and India and so on. So, But they're all in smaller numbers, right? So there's an Italian community, there's a Yiddish speaking community, there's a Japanese community and so on. But amongst this diversity, each individual group is relatively small. And the Italian immigrant population is concentrated in this neighborhood of San Francisco called North Beach. But it's not just an Italian neighborhood. It's actually a very mixed neighborhood of Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, French, and a couple other groups on top of that. What they have in common is somewhat like in Patterson, they speak similar languages. They speak Spanish, French, Portuguese, and they begin organizing on that basis. So initially you have a couple small Italian anarchist groups, Spanish anarchist groups, French anarchist groups, But then they start cooperating. They start forming groups together, performing radical plays together, producing trilingual, right, Italian, French, and Spanish anarchist newspa-

pers together. And they start calling themselves not just Italian, Spanish, and French, but Latin radicals. And they form what they start calling Latin anarchist groups, right? They have a Latin radical bookstore, a Latin anarchist theater troupe. And what this eventually leads to is the formation of Latin labor unions that are often led by anarchists. Because these French and Spanish and Italian-speaking workers in San Francisco are largely outside of the orbit of the main labor union there, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, concentrated in things like construction and so on, which generally are neglecting these Latin immigrants. So they also, as in Patterson, gravitate towards the IWW and they form Latin locals, which are often led, the leading personalities are these Italian and French anarchists. who start organizing cannery workers, bakery workers, laundry workers, all these sort of these industries where these Latin workers have specific occupational niches and actually are fairly successful in that. And then the IWW, usually through anarchist intermediaries, begins to reach out to and connect with some of these Asian radicals. from Japan, from India, eventually from China. You have these sort of either immigrants or visiting radicals from Asia who become involved in these local anarchist groups, become involved in the IWW, and carry some of those ideas, incorporate some of those ideas back into their own radicalism, form their own right Japanese anarchist group in Berkeley, form their own or incorporate anarchist ideas into the growing Indian anti-colonial movement, the God or movement that's based out of San Francisco. And on top of this, you also have in particular Mexican immigrants who are pretty small in number at this point in time in San Francisco, but there's enough interchange and enough concern with what's happening in Mexico that you there are some pretty strong links formed between anarchists in San Francisco and Mexican revolutionaries in both Mexico and the United States and a number of these anarchists from San Francisco end up actually participating in the Mexican Revolution in 1911.

Max: Great. So moving on, how did the First World War and its aftermath impact on anarchist movements worldwide and also in particular in the United States?

Kenyon: Well, the First World War was essentially a huge crisis on a number of fronts. One, it split the movement somewhat. You had, more so in Europe, you had a number of prominent anarchists who began to argue that anarchists ought to be supporting the Allied forces against German militarism. They were arguing essentially it was a sort of, you know, lesser of two evils that had to be supported in order to save Europe from German imperialism. Most anarchists in the U.S. rejected that argument, though there were some who held it. Eventually, Saul Yanovsky of the Friar Arbitishtima came to that position once the Russian Revolution had occurred and overthrown the Czar. So, you know, oppressive, imperialist, Czarist Russia was no longer represented amongst the Allies. Yanovsky began to argue along those same lines. But he was definitely in the minority. The vast majority of these immigrant anarchists were opposed to supporting either side in the war, which they saw as a capitalist and imperialist conflict. But in doing so, in opposing the war, they then became targets of federal and local repression, which did some serious damage. In Patterson, most of the major local anarchists were arrested, although eventually released. In San Francisco, the IWW was repeatedly raided, members and leaders arrested, a number of them sentenced to prison, some of them deported. So, in that sense, the war also seriously disrupted local organizations. And then, of course, the Russian Revolution, which emerges out of the context of the war, brings on a whole new crisis once the Bolsheviks seize power, and then it's a question on what stance do anarchists take towards the Bolshevik Revolution and right this new international communist movement then emerges and initially they're actually very very supportive of the Bolsheviks and they sort of they sort of see what they want to see in in

the Bolsheviks they see it as an essentially anarchist or syndicalist revolution but they by 1921–22 begin to realize that it's a very different sort of thing that's happening that is not not very anarchistic and in particular they're they're relatively well-informed about that because of the number of Jewish and Russian anarchists who returned to Russia either because they're excited by the revolution in 1917 or because they're deported in 1919 or 1920, so they essentially have a lot of friends and comrades who are in Russia who by 1920, 1921 are being arrested, exiled, or in some cases killed by the new communist regime there, which very quickly, as you might imagine, turns the vast majority of these anarchists into strident anti-communists, opponents of the new Soviet regime.

Which kind of marginalizes them on the left and in the labor movement where there's still a lot of very pro-communist, pro-Bolshevik sentiment for quite a while. And this leads to factional fighting between anarchists and communists in the Jewish garment workers unions, in some other places, and essentially helps marginalize them even further, and then you get the immigration restrictions that come after that in 1921 and 1924, which, as I mentioned, sort of guarantee that the movement's going to wither away over time. So the First World War is definitely, from the point of view of the anarchist movement, a terrible, not just a terrible time, but a terrible moment of transition that creates all sorts of new problems. that lasts through the next decades.
Max: There's definitely a few more issues in your book to unpack here, but unfortunately we're running out of time. But, would you be able to tell us just a bit about what the ongoing legacy of these anarchist movements and ideas is?

Kenyon: Sure, so anarchism in the US and elsewhere globally is typically seen as sort of this brief lived thing that failed, as this great failure. And obviously, anarchists did fail to bring about the revolution that they hoped to. But, I think there's they did more and accomplish more and have more of a legacy than they're usually given credit for in a few different ways.

One is they were, with some exceptions, but very few, they were consistently far, far ahead of their time, and in some ways ahead of our time, in terms of combating notions of racial difference and racial inequality, in overcoming nationalism, which of course was at its peak in events like the First and Second World Wars. In many cases, were quite progressive when it came to gender and women's rights, although not always consistent in practice, still far more so than just about any other movements of their era. And in opposition to a lot of this, formulating what I call a radical cosmopolitan outlook, which really valued cultural and linguistic and racial difference, and did so in a way that did not lend itself towards nationalism, was very much about crossing borders and cross both physical and territorial borders, but also borders of ethnicity, race, language, and so on. Although, of course, always within constraints and within limits, and always imperfect in practice.

They also left a legacy in the labor movement. They helped found some very important organizations like the IWW, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the successor of which still exists today.

They avoided a lot of the traps of the Cold War of having to side with either the Soviet Union or some of the worst excesses of US domestic and foreign policy. They essentially refused, for the most part, to throw their lot in with either of those. And a lot of their critiques, essentially, of centralized power, of nationalism, of nationalist projects of the Soviet Union, as well as of the US government, a lot of those critiques still resonate today.

And I guess If I have the time, I'll just close with, I think, one anecdote that I talk about in the conclusion of the book that I think illustrates the sort of enduring power of this alternative vision of the way the world might be.

And that is, after World War II, an anarchist named Rose Posada, who's a longtime organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and a longtime anarchist activist. She's sponsored by the union to help, it's largely a Jewish union, she's sponsored by the union to help Jews in post-Holocaust Europe. She's on a tour of Poland. She's in the Lodz ghetto in Poland in 1946. what remains of the Jewish ghetto there, what had been a Nazi ghetto for the Jewish population.

And she's surprised when a guy runs up the street calling her name, waving a copy of a newspaper. It turns out it's a copy of the *Fraye Arbeter Shtime*, the Yiddish Anarchist newspaper published in New York, which had a worldwide readership, including here in the Lodz ghetto. And the guy turns out to be a member, a surviving member, of what had been the Yiddish anarchist group there in Lodz, Poland, a number of whom had been killed during the Nazi occupation. But he knows who she is because of these transnational links, because of this newspaper, right, knows she's a comrade, introduces her to the other surviving members of this small anarchist group.

"Curiously enough," she reported, "none of them asked for help for themselves, or for visas, but all they wanted was moral support, literature, a printing press and a linotype machine in Polish."

And Posada writes back to her union headquarters. She says, "curiously enough, none of them asked for help for themselves, or for visas", because a lot of these Jewish survivors were trying to get out of Europe, out of places like Poland. "None of them asked for help for themselves, or for visas, but all they wanted was moral support, literature, a printing press and a linotype machine in Polish.".

So here they've survived the Holocaust, in which more than a few of their Polish neighbors had participated. And all they want is a way to help publish and disseminate their ideas about anarchism, about a cosmopolitan, anti-nationalist, cooperative society with their Polish neighbors that they can print in Polish here in the remains of a Jewish ghetto in Lodz.

They're able to still hold on to their belief in that possibility even after living through World War II and the Holocaust, which I think is a pretty amazing testament to the endurance and the power of some of those ideas.

Max: That's great. Thanks very much for that great anecdote, Kenyon. Just before we let you leave, would you be able to tell us a bit about what you're working on next?

Kenyon: Yes. I'm working on a number of things, but the next big book project that I've started working on and researching sort of grew out of some of the research for this book, actually. I'm writing a collective biography of the political deportees of America's post-First World War Red Scare. So there's about a thousand, roughly, people who are deported between 1917 and 1925 because they're political radicals. It's the first and only time there's a mass deportation from the United States based on political ideology. And they're, you know, they're deported to Russia, to Italy, Germany, Scandinavia, all over the place. The largest groups are to Russia and Italy, respectively. So I'm looking at essentially the effect that this mass deportation had on these radicals themselves and on the places where they got deported to because of course the story their story doesn't end with their being deported from the United States. They carry on usually their radical activity just in a new setting. And it's so I'm examining the sort of unintended ways

in which the U.S. government helped to expand radical networks and to sort of throw a bunch of radicals out into a very tumultuous world wherein that in fact they often made more tumultuous and more radical in ways that the US government did not anticipate and often did not appreciate.

Max: Well that sounds like a really great project. Thanks very much for joining us again Kenyan.

Kenyon: Thank you so much for having me.

Max: You've been listening to new books in Jewish Studies. We've been talking to Kenyon Zimmer, who is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Texas in Arlington. He's been talking to us about his new book, *Immigrants Against the State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in America*, published in 2015 by University of Illinois Press.

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