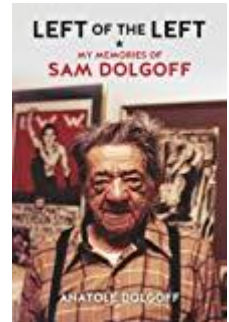


Anatole Dolgoff. *Left of the Left: My Memories of Sam Dolgoff.* Chico: AK Press, 2016. 400 pp. \$22.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-84935-248-2.



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Anarchist Memoirs

In the closing moments of *Left of the Left: My Memories of Sam Dolgoff*, Anatole Dolgoff, son of the famed anarchist Sam Dolgoff, recalls a conversation he had with Marianne Encknell of the International Center for Research on Anarchism. She tells him, “Shadows, shadows, ghosts.... That is what anarchists leave their children. Tales of things that happened, may have happened, maybe not!” (p. 383). Such a statement is equally applicable to the historiography of American anarchism. As Andrew Cornell notes in his introduction to the *Left of the Left*, the history of anarchism in mid-twentieth-century America has remained “frustratingly opaque” (p. 1). *Left of the Left*, however, renders it less so. In telling the story of Sam, as the author affectionately calls his father, Anatole Dolgoff brings Encknell’s ghosts back to life, rendering his father’s lifetime of political organizing concrete. At the same time, he brings an entire radical milieu back to life, mapping anarchist culture of the twentieth century. Anatole’s memoir is a valu-

able contribution to the literature on American anarchism.

Left of the Left sheds light on a leading but understudied American anarchist. Sam Dolgoff was a towering figure in leftist communities. A housepainter by trade, he was active in anarchist circles for nearly seventy years, taking on the role of militant organizer, soapboxer, publisher, and radical intellectual at various points throughout his life. Born in Russia in 1902, Sam eventually moved to the United States, where he found a political home in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an organization he remained committed to throughout his life, even after its effective collapse in the 1950s amid the pressures of the Second Red Scare. Anatole describes how his father kept its anarcho-syndicalist beliefs alive in organizations like the Libertarian League and publications like *Views and Comments* throughout the following decade, ultimately forging links with new generations of anarchists that took inspiration from the ideas he

helped sustain. For instance, Anatole recounts how his father arranged a meeting between elderly Italian anarchists and the raucous “street gang with analysis” Up Against the Wall Mother Fuckers in 1968. In that sense, *Left of the Left* reveals how the anarchist movement of the first half of the century carried over into and influenced the movement of the second half.

However, *Left of the Left* is not only concerned with political history. Anatole lays out his father’s beliefs about anarchism, as well as his attitudes toward other political groups, such as the Communist Party, but he also spends a significant amount of time exploring the vast network of radical activists, artists, and intellectuals that Sam moved through. The elder Dolgoff crossed paths with too many well-known figures to count. He was friends with Lucy Parsons, one of the founders of the IWW. Famous Russian anarcho-syndicalist Gregorri Petrovich Maximoff mentored him. He got into public arguments with Dorothy Day. Anatole also dives into his father’s relationships with figures lesser known today, including IWW labor organizers like Carlo Tresca and Ben Fletcher. *Left of the Left* is about more than the politics of such figures: it is a record of the diverse ways they lived those politics, an exploration of the way their anarchist beliefs infused their everyday actions and relationships. Anatole describes the musty union halls they met in and the gossip they shared. He maps his father’s world and, by extension, that of his peers, clearly identifying the transnational contours of anarchist culture across twentieth-century America.

Anatole was raised in this culture. Sam’s anarchism shaped his family’s life. Anatole’s mother Esther, herself a committed anarchist, is as prominent a character as his father. His brother Abe makes frequent appearances. Anatole details how their lives were shaped by their father’s politics and often gruff personality. At times, this story is charming, such as when Anatole recounts his youthful encounters with elderly labor organizers

in the Five-Ten Hall, an old IWW meeting place on New York City’s Lower East Side. At others, it is tragic, such as when he describes the lasting impact of his father’s alcoholism, as well as his tendency to privilege his political organizing over his family. Anatole’s discussion of such material illuminates the everyday lives of American anarchists and the people in their orbit, creating a sense of what it felt like to live in a world defined entirely by such radical commitments. The book is the author’s attempt to make sense of that world.

Left of the Left sits comfortably alongside recent works committed to expanding understandings of American radicalism and the cultures that sustained it in the twentieth century. It is a powerful and compelling complement to Andrew Cornell’s *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century* (2016). Anatole lays bare the lived experience undergirding the anarchist trends, organizations, and ideologies Cornell examines from a scholarly perspective. *Left of the Left*’s exploration of anarchist culture recalls Alan Wald’s studies of American communist culture, especially his trilogy of books exploring the mid-century American literary Left—*Exiles From a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (2002), *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (2007), and *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (2012)—which similarly map the contours of radical culture by tracing leftist networks of association. Unlike Wald and Cornell, however, Anatole is not a scholarly historian: though he strives to tell a true story, he notes throughout the text that he has pretenses toward objectivity. This is not a weakness though. It is, after all, a memoir.

Left of the Left: My Memories of Sam Dolgoff is a compelling account of a prominent anarchist whose life and work warrants further study, as well as a touching remembrance of the world that anarchism helped make for his friends and family. Anatole is a compelling storyteller. As circuitous as this expansive work can be, often digressing to

explore yet another dimension of Sam's world, it is never boring. It should be of interest to scholars of American radicalism and general readers simply curious about the history of American anarchism, a topic that remains otherwise opaque in public discourse.

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