An anarchist guide to ... feminism. The Emma Goldman angle

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AN ANARCHIST GUIDE TO... FEMINISM

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STRIKE! is run on anarchist principles of democratic worker control and equality - no gods, no managers. For our Feminist Issue we wanted to look into the idea that 'you can be a feminist without being an anarchist, but you can't be an anarchist without being a feminist'.

Dr. Ruth Kinna has been the editor of the journal Anarchist Studies since 2007, and so we asked for her take on it; her contribution comes from the point of view of an anarchist who never expressly defined herself as feminist - it's the Emma Goldman angle...

Illustration by Marco Bevilaqua
Emma Goldman finds a desk in utopia. Jazz is playing on the radio. She liked jazz: it worked to different rules and you couldn’t pin it down. She flicks furtively through Proudhon’s What is Property? The man she thought of as the great French anarchist was now remembered as a misogynist and anti-feminist, she realised. She hovers over the famous dialogue:

‘But,’ as some of my younger readers may protest, ‘you are a republican.’ – Republican, yes, but that word specifies nothing. Res publica: that is, the public thing. Now, whoever is interested with public affairs, under whatever form of government, may call himself a republican. Even kings are republicans. ‘Well, then, you are a democrat?’ – No. – ‘What! You are a monarchist?’ – No. – ‘A constitutionalist?’ – God forbid. – ‘Then you are an aristocrat?’ – Not at all. – ‘You want a mixed form of government?’ – Even less. – ‘So then what are you?’ I am an anarchist.

There was a lot in this small extract that still appealed to her but she wanted to pinpoint where she and Proudhon diverged. Needing to concentrate on the text, she turned the radio off.

Proudhon was right about republicanism, she thought. Of course, he knew that politics couldn’t be reduced to ‘public affairs’, an independent realm of justice – not even where people were blessed by the leadership of a benevolent ruler. Nor, either, could it be moulded into a sphere of liberty, equality and fraternity. Power might be seized from hereditary elites by virtuous citizens, but it was impossible to resist the corruptions of power by means of participation and eternal vigilance. The public realm was based on slavery and Proudhon’s genius was to recognise that property – “robbery without risk and danger to the robber” – underpinned it. No matter how the government was constituted, property was its master. Property meant that politics had become “the reflex of the business and industrial world”, exploiting workers and inventing programmes of work that were not only exhausting, but stupefying.

What niggled? Poor dear Proudhon was too much of a home man to push this insight. He failed to see that property worked in complex ways and that for women there was a double enslavement. Like men, women experienced the effects of property in sweated workshops and domestic drudgery. However, woman was also, uniquely, ‘a sex commodity’, and marriage, the institution ‘that stands for the sovereignty of the man over the woman, of her complete submission to his whims and commands’, was the chief medium of exchange. Proudhon’s blindness made her shudder. She wrote:

“The institution of marriage makes a parasite of woman, an absolute dependent. It incapacitates her for life’s struggle, annihilates her social consciousness, paralyses her imagination, and then imposes its gracious protection, which is in reality a snare, a travesty on human character.”

On a post-it she scribbled ‘send Proudhon my copies of Ibsen’, before turning to the question of democracy.

As far as representative systems were concerned, Proudhon was right to dismiss it. “What does the history of parliamentarism show? Nothing but failure and defeat: a process of ‘wire-pulling, intriguing, flattering, lying, cheating... chicanery of every description’”. Emma thought about all those women that she’d argued with about formal emancipation, vote fetishism, the demand for rights – mere inclusion as citizens to realise an equality of oppression with men. What a waste. The struggle was for freedom. Stirner had taught a valuable lesson when he said that “man has as much liberty as he is willing to take”. Women must likewise take theirs and overcome the passivity and pettiness that sex commodification had bred in them. To Reclus’ thrilling exhortations – Ouvrier, Prends la Machine! Prends Ta Terre, Paysan! – Emma added a third: Femme, Prends Ta Corps! Refuse to manufacture children either for industrial production or war. Learn about contraception and safe abortion – not in the name of choice, ‘race purity’ or overpopulation, but to refuse the duty that government, religion and the economy
impose. Revolutionary transformation comes from flouting convention and the discovery of genuinely ‘free choice, of love, of ecstasy, of defiant passion’.

Back to democracy: the important point that Proudhon overlooked was that there was power in the mass resistance campaigns that had forced rulers to grant limited rights of participation. Would-be citizens had wrongly confused democracy with a single process and a set of matching institutions. It really meant direct action, resistance, illegality and the exercise of ‘integrity, self-reliance, and courage’. In my day, she thought, the syndicalists embraced this democratic idea, combating authority, servility and elitism through education, mutual aid, sabotage and strike. And although she was sad and frustrated by her confinement in utopia, she was comforted to know that these democratic principles survived, and immensely cheered to see so many women involved. If I was on earth again, she thought, I’d go with Sasha to join the Indignados, the Greek comrades, the friends in Gezi park. I am the ‘Spirit of Wall Street’.

“Hey Sailor Girl!” a familiar voice called. Alexander Berkman broke the spell of her imagining. “Am I a MANarchist?”, he asked, looking anxious. “You can be a bit of a puritan, dearest, but of course you know that I don’t think that. Isn’t that funny, though, I was just thinking about how things have changed in the movement since we were active. Were we naive to treat our love as a model for anarchism?”

“IT’s true that not everyone thinks about relationships the same way we did”, Sasha replied. “But whichever way you cut free love, the problem you identified all those years ago, ‘how to be one’s self and yet in oneness with others, to feel deeply with all human beings and still retain one’s own characteristic qualities’– still holds, I think. With you it was never philosophy, but love that provided the resolution”. He continued: “you told me once that you always wanted to give me more than you expected in return. Isn’t that Kropotkin’s anarchist principle, giving without expectation of reward?” “Yes Sasha. It is. And because of you, I also knew that anarchism was the freest possible expression of my latent powers”.

“It is! You never said that the love you had in mind was only for straights, or that it was constrained by nature – motherhood, witchery, nurturing. Only that love was natural and that human nature, driven by defiant passion, is fluid, plastic, responsive to new conditions and that it can be changed”.

“That’s true”. But Emma only rallied momentarily. “I don’t understand why some anarchist women hate men and want to escape patriarchy by living apart. I never wanted estrangement. I wanted to break down the walls of superstition, custom and habit – just as Edward Carpenter did”. “It’s a bit late for you to get downhearted by disagreement”, Sasha said softly. “You have to cling to your ideals. That means believing that people are capable of finding the love within themselves and using it to extend anarchist values and practices”.

Sasha left, leaving Emma to mull over some of the bitter disappointments of their lives. She re-read a letter she had written to him in 1931:

“The still voice in me will not be silenced, the voice which wants to cry out against the wretchedness and injustice in the world... I know there is no place where I can or will gain a footing and once more throw in my lot with our people who continue the struggle of liberation.”

More than seventy years since she’d arrived in utopia, she couldn’t see much progress on earth. But loss was part of the struggle and she could see that thousands of women felt the same as she had done, and lived life as passionate revolutionaries, with partners of their choice, resisting commodification, the pressures to conform to markets and imposed morality; organising safe spaces for each other and each other’s children, fighting FGM, working in no-border campaigns, against sex-trafficking; all this resonated with her. Emma picked up the pen and re-wrote Proudhon’s exchange:

‘But,’ as some of my younger readers may protest, ‘you are a republican.’ – Republican, yes, but that word specifies nothing. Res publica; that is, the public thing. Now, whoever is interested with public affairs, under whatever form of
government, may call himself a republican. Even kings and queens are republicans. ‘Well, then, you are a democrat?’ - Yes, but not a parliamentarian. - ‘What! You are a monarchist?’ - No. - ‘A constitutionalist?’ - That’s madness. - ‘Then you are an aristocrat?’ - No. - ‘A Dionysian, perhaps?’. - ‘You want a mixed form of government?’ - Even less. You want no government? Yes! - ‘So you are so then, what are you? I am an anarchist?’ Not that alone! ‘What are you then?’ I am an anarchist, feminist.

Ruth Kinna is a professor of Political Theory at Loughborough University, where she specialises in political philosophy. Since 2007 she has been the editor of the journal Anarchist Studies. She is the author of the book Anarchism - A Beginners Guide and also William Morris: The Art of Socialism.