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# Emma Goldman: A Love for Revolution

David Porter

2013

a review of

*Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets* by Kathy E. Ferguson. Rowman ft Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Maryland, 2011, 362 pp, \$35.

In her fascinating book on Emma Goldman, Kathy Ferguson focuses on Goldman as a dynamic anarchist thinker whose differing social activist contexts and personal challenges produced constantly evolving theoretical perspectives.

Ferguson reminds us of Goldman's whirlwind energy for the cause—writing 200,000 lifelong letters, delivering over 10,000 public speeches, making frequent cross-country speaking tours, writing numerous articles and books, editing an important anarchist journal, *Mother Earth*, for over a decade and constantly immersing herself in anarchist networks, including various passionate long and short intimate relationships.

Additionally, she endured numerous arrests, spent over three years in prison, lived many years abroad, and directly experienced the Russian and Spanish revolutions.

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To gain a dramatic sense of her central political stature, Ferguson asks us to imagine in today's context a powerfully articulate and defiant "young working-class immigrant woman from a despised racial group," consistently and charismatically electrifying for decades huge crowds and networks of liberals, radicals, and anarchists across the country while constantly being demonized by capitalist elites, the government, and the media. Goldman's reputation and her writings have made her still an icon, generations later, especially for anarchists, feminists, and civil libertarians.

Ferguson nevertheless insists on addressing more recent writers who have criticized Goldman's weaker emphasis on racism, her self-admitted compromises in sexual relations and her alleged unoriginal political theory. In chapter 5, she makes clear that Goldman made numerous denunciations of racial oppression in the U.S. and abroad. But Ferguson also explains how and why she failed to account for the deep negative legacies of slavery as well as the nature and power of institutional racism.

Essentially, she writes, Goldman understood racism primarily through the experience of Jews, failed to encounter more than a few African American radicals and was too deeply committed to a "European class/state lens" and a focus on patriarchy to comprehend or analyze the crucial dynamics of racism in the American setting.

In Chapter 4, Ferguson creatively and complexly analyzes Goldman's privately self-described erotic dependency struggles through a prism different from that of her feminist critics. By examining Goldman's attraction to theater and disdain for film and her embedded literary aesthetics of 19th century "romanticism/realism" versus overly analytical and elitist modernism, Ferguson emphasizes Goldman's preference for didactic and inspiring imagery in her dramatization of struggle, at personal and broad social levels both.

She parallels Goldman's passion for erotic fulfillment with her love for revolution, each with enormous transformative power and each involving tension between gratification and consistency. Though experiencing disappointments in each realm, she refused to give up the ideal. "She insisted on our power to change the world" and she applied that expectation to her own erotic politics as well as to the revolutionary movement.

Finally, it was Goldman's refusal to accept any limiting orthodoxy of anarchism and her constant learning from personal and political challenges that led her to develop her own "political theory in the streets," a lively dynamic between her passionate activist engagement and generalizing reflections on successes and failures.

Ferguson cites many aspects of Goldman's evolution and uses analytical tools from contemporary critical theorists, such as Foucault, Deleuze, Butler, Panagia, Warner, Bourdieu and Rancière to better understand their significance. In doing so, she emphasizes the generic nature and importance of "place-based theory" and discursive networks of power.

In less technical terms, she's referring to theory emerging from direct engagement in specific political contexts as well as the manner by which powerful elites frame political discussion to create a dominant false social consciousness that protects their own interests. She thus provokes readers to consider as well the evolution of their own political theorizing, anarchist or otherwise.

Ferguson's intent is to demonstrate "a different manner of political thinking, one that is located specifically in a radical political space, articulated passionately amidst intense personal relationships in response to an immediate set of questions about oppression and possibility." She specifically describes the contexts of, and Goldman's contributions to, "anarchist time" (a temporality of periodic and special actions encouraging the expansion of anarchist space and

potentials of revolution) and “anarchist space” (the extensive daily encounters and conversations among activists, writers, correspondents and audiences receptive to the anarchist message).

These as well as the broader realities of multi-dimensional social oppression and violent repression all fueled Goldman’s passionate political engagements. In portraying the anarchist milieu, Ferguson draws richly from her impressive research, much in the Berkeley-based Goldman archive, into the well-developed movement of Goldman’s era, including the previously neglected strong presence of anarchist women.

Chapter 2 is devoted to profiling the early anarchist movement and chapter 6, supplemented by an expansive and useful website, to the role of women within it.

These two chapters help to place readers within the social imaginary of anarchist consciousness in Goldman’s era and help to explain Goldman’s powerful linkage of feminism and anarchism. As well, chapter 1 vividly conveys the extent of anti-labor political violence and the overall contexts of social oppression that encouraged and justified her revolutionary rhetoric.

Beyond the state’s direct coercion, Goldman was well aware of, and often discouraged by, the power of the media and of religious, political and sexist conditioning in clouding consciousness and inhibiting liberatory action. But she believed in the eventual ability and desire of everyone to work toward personal and social emancipation if only they recognized the various hypocritical glues of the “social order.”

Goldman was thus committed, prophet-like says Ferguson, aggressively to make people think deeply and radically, to rupture “acceptable reality” through exposure to and acceptance of an alternative anarchist vision and then to act accordingly.

A great value of Ferguson’s book is to help people think about the real shaping influences on Goldman’s politics as well

as Goldman’s methods of shaping the political world (personal and broadly social) herself.

However commendable her vision, courage and influence, Goldman is still better understood and more easily related to by contemporary readers, not as a distant icon, but as a woman constantly struggling with, learning about, and reassessing issues important to us all.

David Porter is a retired SUNY professor of history and political science and the editor of *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*. He is the translator and author of *Eyes to the South: French Anarchists and Algeria*, a grassroots history of the past six decades of Algerian history from the perspectives of the French anarchist movement.