

Emma Goldman: An Appreciation

50 Years After Her Death

David Porter

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Emma Goldman (June 27, 1869-May 14, 1940) was known as “the most dangerous woman in America” by the press in such articles as those to the right which chronicled a visit by her to Windsor, Ontario, across the border from Detroit, in 1939. She certainly was this country’s most famous anarchist in the early years of this century.

David Porter, author of *Vision On Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution* and a frequent contributor to this paper, examines her life and contributions within the context in which she flourished—the building of an anarchist movement which would overthrow capitalism and the state and create in its place a society of cooperation and peace. [FE editors]

I

Every generation produces certain individuals whose vitality and clarity of words and actions reawaken among others an intense passion for growth and fulfillment. Such individuals help articulate and sustain the vision of freedom. Emma Goldman was such a person. Throughout her dramatic life, Goldman’s defiant words and actions powerfully reminded her own and later generations of the vast potentials of human existence. Because of the strength of her own visceral liberatory impulse, the biographical contexts in which that impulse showed itself, and her subsequent efforts to comprehend the implications of her own and others’ experience, Emma Goldman became one of the most prominent articulators and symbols of a whole era’s thirst for freedom.

II

“All claims of education notwithstanding, the pupil will accept only that which his mind craves. Already this truth is recognized by most modern educators in relation to the immature mind. I think it is equally true regarding the adult. Anarchists or revolutionists can no more be made than musicians. All that can be done is to plant the seeds of thought. Whether something vital will develop depends largely on the fertility of the human soil, though the quality of the intellectual seed must not be overlooked.¹

“Why do I lecture? Why do I travel through Canada? Why do I travel through those countries that will admit me?

“Because people are so burdened with their worries and troubles that they have no time to think of action to remedy them. I, and others with me, merely awaken them. We do not force any violent change upon them. The change must come from the soil and needs of the country.

“That is what happened in Spain at the time of the revolution. That was merely a bursting of forces that had accumulated.

“My definition of revolution is nothing else but the bursting point of the accumulated evolutionary forces that have preceded it.”²

Goldman spoke to the needs and consciousness of millions who found inspiration from her words and an example for their own lives. The “political success” of an anarchist speaker or writer is in reminding others of their own fundamental aspirations to freedom, to fulfill their own potentials—both in their individual lives and as members of a community. The cyclical popularity

¹ “Preface” in Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (N.Y.: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), p. 42.

² *Windsor Star*, 5-19-39. as quoted in *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution* [VOF] (ed. by David Porter) (New Paltz, N.Y. Commonground Press. 1983). p. 321.

of Goldman in the U.S. from the 1890s to the present provides a historical commentary on the culture. One can observe the openness to anarchist critiques and vision from one generation to another. Thus, the “legend” of Emma Goldman refers both to her own strengths of insight and articulation as well as to the cultural contexts receptive to an anarchist perspective (in the U.S. from the mid-1890s to World War I, and in Spain in the 1930s).

III

More successfully than any other figure in U.S. history, Emma Goldman communicated an anarchist vision to a broad audience of immigrants and native-born, middle class and workers. Goldman’s vivid imagery, critiques and perspective successfully related issues like birth control, free speech, the emancipation of women, freedom for Cuba, workers’ struggles, sexual freedom, militarism and free schools to a broader quest for freedom. When she later embraced the mass-based Russian revolution (not the Bolshevik coup) and especially the social revolution in Spain, her enthusiasm was the natural outcome of such diverse commitments.

IV

The energy Emma Goldman herself derived from speaking to large and diverse audiences was paid for in personal terms by the weariness of the road and constant harassment by police and other right-wing elements. By her early twenties, Goldman was aware of her astonishing public abilities, as well as the personal cost attached to their use. Yet from the bedrock of her instinctive and intellectual commitment to personal and social liberation, Emma Goldman defiantly carried on for her whole life—returning again and again to her public role as propagator of anarchism. Periods of self-questioning, attacks from some of her own comrades and the grief of personal tragedy or despair at developments in the broader world did not deter her. If the validity of the anarchist critique in the years of Goldman’s activism was apparent, it was nevertheless a struggle—then as today—to sustain hope that individual lives, communities and whole societies could move significantly in the direction suggested by the anarchist vision. Despite recent biographers’ emphasis on Goldman’s anxieties, loneliness, despair, broodiness and doubts (of which she herself provided abundant evidence in her autobiography and private letters), it is clear that Goldman retained her deep commitment during such times of questioning and emotional distress. Again and again, she emerged as the defiant and articulate activist the public had come to know.

“Something I have been thinking about very deeply since the May events in Spain. It is whether we Anarchists have not taken the wish for the thought. Whether we have not been too optimistic in our belief that Anarchism had taken root in the masses. The war, the Revolution in Russia and Spain, and the utter failure of the masses to stand up against the annihilation in all countries of every vestige of liberty have convinced me that Anarchism...has not penetrated the minds and hearts of even a substantial minority, let alone the compact mass. Actually, there is no Anarchist movement anywhere in the world. What we have got is so insignificant, so piffling, it is ridiculous to speak of an Anarchist organized movement. In other words, everywhere the soil for our ideas has proven sterile. In Spain alone has the ground been fertile. But even in Spain the harvest is still small. In our enthusiasm we forgot the natural forces the young, tender plants will be subjected to, the storm and stress, the drought and winds. We admit all this in nature. But we

were not willing to admit the forces that beset the social growth. My dears, my dears, think of it, in a country in the grips of feudalism and the Church almost to the moment of July 19th we Anarchists imagined our ideas can be realized in one jump, rise from the depths of enslavement and degradation to the very heights of fulfillment, come to full fruition from the hard rocks of the past in Spain. It was our mistake and we are now paying for it in the agony of our bitter disappointment.

“...Anarchism is still very much ahead of its time. And I am convinced it will take more than one revolution before our ideas will come to full growth. Until then the steps will be feeble, our ideas no doubt [will] fall from the heights many times and many will be the mistakes our comrades are bound to make.

“Does that mean that I have lost faith in Anarchism, or that I think we ought to sit hands folded? Of course not. In point of truth I think now more than ever we must strain every nerve to bring our ideas before the world. Now more than ever, because we have the living proof for our claims that nothing can be gained from any association with governments or political parties. Now we also have the living proof that it is possible to build amidst destruction, amidst war and revolution, that the Anarchists have been the only ones to begin such gigantic work. However the Spanish revolution will end it has already given us marvelous material to enhance the logic of our ideas. And it should also give us greater courage to go on and on so long as there is a breath of life in us.”³

V

Goldman’s fundamentally anarchist self-identity and vision of political change are elements neglected or misinterpreted by some of her biographers. It is accurate to portray Emma Goldman as an early, courageous and articulate spokesperson for various causes. But in the effort to paint Goldman primarily as a forerunner or an especially articulate propagandist of a particular social cause or to place her within broader socialist, progressive liberal or feminist “movement” traditions whose legacies extend to the present, the visionary wellspring of Goldman’s activism is usually lost. Emma Goldman was an anarchist. Everything starts from there. Not that there is one single definition or vision of the anarchist ideal. But the deep emotional impulses of Emma Goldman’s personal rebelliousness against injustice and for liberation found their greatest clarity through the anarchist lens.

It was through a coherent, articulate anarchist perspective, not socialist, liberal or feminist frameworks, that Emma Goldman chose her particular issues of struggle. In the process, she not only followed the intellectual paths of anarchist comrades of her own time but also personally expanded an articulate anarchist critique and activism—especially in the realms of sexual freedom and women’s liberation. The centrality of her anarchism should be clear.

“It has often been suggested to me that the Constitution of the United States is a sufficient safeguard for the freedom of its citizens. It is obvious that even the freedom it pretends to guarantee is very limited. I have not been impressed with the adequacy of the safeguard. The nations of the world, with centuries of international law behind them, have never hesitated to engage in mass destruction when solemnly pledged to keep the peace; and the legal documents in America have not prevented the United States from doing the same. Those in authority have and always

³ Emma Goldman 9-10-37 “Political Will” letter to Mollie Steimer, as quoted in VOF, pp. 299-300.

will abuse their power. And the instances when they do not do so are as rare as roses growing on icebergs. Far from the Constitution playing any liberating part in the lives of the American people, it has robbed them of the capacity to rely on their own resources or do their own thinking. Americans are so easily hoodwinked by the sanctity of law and authority.”

....

“I consider Anarchism the most beautiful and practical philosophy that has yet been thought of in its application to individual expression and the relation it establishes between the individual and society. Moreover, I am certain that Anarchism is too vital and too close to human nature ever to die. It is my conviction that dictatorship, whether to the right or to the left, can never work—that it never has worked, and that time will prove this again, as it has been proved before.

...

“Anarchism alone stresses the importance of the individual, his possibilities and needs in a free society. Instead of telling him that he must fall down and worship before institutions, live and die for abstractions, break his heart and stunt his life for taboos, Anarchism insists that the center of gravity in society is the individual—that he must think for himself, act freely, and live fully. The aim of Anarchism is that every individual in the world shall be able to do so. If he is to develop freely and fully, he must be relieved from the interference and oppression of others. Freedom is, therefore, the cornerstone of the Anarchist philosophy. Of course this has nothing in common with a much boasted ‘rugged individualism.’ Such predatory individualism is really flabby, not rugged. At the least danger to its safety it runs to cover of the state and wails for protection of armies, navies, or whatever devices for strangulation it has at its command. Their ‘rugged individualism’ is simply one of the many pretenses the ruling class makes to unbridled business and political extortion.”⁴

VI

Goldman also proved beyond question that themes and writings of anarchist communism which emerged in late 19th century Europe could be meaningfully translated for appeal to North Americans of both socialist and liberal backgrounds. She was not the only one to do this. But through her frequent speaking tours and by producing *Mother Earth* for over ten years, she became by far the best known and most effective exponent of this perspective.

Though she died in exile in 1940, in the mid-1960s she re-emerged as a fascinating and powerful influence in both the women’s movement and among radicals. Because of her mastery of the North American idiom, her familiarity with the activist milieu, her perspectives and even much of her actual phrasing seem absolutely contemporary and relevant. She was also well-versed in the European movement, personally acquainted with many European anarchists, and experienced with living, observing, lecturing or political organizing in several European countries (the Soviet Union, Germany, France, Britain and Spain), and Emma Goldman’s influence on that continent was also significant and has had a revival since the 1960s.

⁴ Emma Goldman, “Was My life Worth Living?” (1934), in *Red Emma Speaks: An Emma Goldman Reader* (ed. by Alix Kates Shulman) (N.Y.: Schocken Books, 1983), pp. 435. 438. 442-3.

VII

“I insist that if we are willing to be critical of our opponents we should be even more critical of our own comrades. I admit it is harder to find fault with our own than it is with our enemies. But is this not the principal trait of Anarchism which differentiates us from other political groups?”⁵

“I have learned through experience that ideas are one thing and life another. Whether we want it or not life imposes certain changes in our outlook or simply passes us by.”⁶

“Whatever the price our comrades are paying in Spain they evidently had to have their own, they had to act according to their own lights and not according to ours. However I am not so sure that we in their place would have been wiser and more consistent than our comrades. Don’t you agree that there is a large amount of vanity in every one of us to think that we would have acted otherwise? We insist on our superior knowledge and understanding for events in private life as well as for large social issues. We are never willing to admit that we actually do not know how we would act were we in the place of those we so readily hold up to scorn and condemnation until some emergency arises. The older I grow the surer I become that it is extremely difficult to decide a mode of action for either ourselves or others. All that we can really be sure of is that we mean to try honestly to act in keeping with our ideas and our faith.”⁷

“I believe that Anarchism can not consistently impose an iron-clad program or method on the future. The things every new generation has to fight, and which it can least overcome, are the burdens of the past, which holds us all as in a net. Anarchism, at least as I understand it, leaves posterity free to develop its own particular systems, in harmony with its needs. Our most vivid Imagination can not foresee the potentialities of a race set free from external restraints. How then can anyone assume to map out a line of conduct for those to come? We, who pay dearly for every breath of pure, fresh air, must guard against the tendency to fetter the future.” [8]

While Goldman was well aware of how “movement superstar” status fatally seduced many of her contemporaries, her own talents and public role—constantly made more spectacular by the paranoia of politicians and the sensationalism of the press—objectively placed her at the same level of attention. But Goldman’s anarchist commitment to non-hierarchical organization and free speech, to the need to criticize oneself as well as others, meant that any budding “Goldman cult of personality” was doomed to failure. The present-day proliferation of “Emma Goldman” collectives, cooperatives and bookstores, as well as the various recent biographies and anthologies of her work, would have pleased her to the extent that her anarchist principles are propounded and have become better known. Beyond that, however, she was no more prepared herself than she was to allow others to be reified or deified by movement status or popularity. Goldman refused to “protect” her influence in the anarchist movement by refraining to criticize her own comrades. She also defiantly pursued topical issues (as female sexuality or the defense of motives of Leon Czolgosz—the assassin of U.S. President McKinley), love affairs (as with non-anarchist Ben Reitman), and projects (as the *Mother Earth* magazine) which brought strong criticism from other anarchists.

As her anarchist perspective constantly evolved through new insights and experience, she insisted on her own right to discover and articulate fresh themes and refinements without total consistency with the past. Her awareness of others’ “feet of clay” applied to herself as well.

⁵ Emma Goldman 6-1-37 letter to Max Nettlau, in VOF, p. 294.

⁶ Emma Goldman 1-25-38 letter to Abe Bluestein, in VOF, pp. 272-3.

⁷ “Preface,” *Anarchism and Other Essays*, p.43.

By its very nature, anarchism must continually renew and re-define itself. Throughout her life, Goldman exemplified this demand. Admirers of Emma Goldman in generations to come should remember her healthy balance of commitment without fanaticism, her denunciation of authorities while resisting efforts to install “liberationist authority” in their place. She searched endlessly for the best words to clarify individual subjugation, to suggest alternative paths to freedom and ways to strengthen one’s resolve to engage in the struggle. Her ultimate goal was to help us carry out our own emancipation.

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