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Anarchism and Gender

Jesse Cohn

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Contents

Precursors	5
A “Grand Domestic Revolution”?	6
“The Capacity of Women”	7
From Tendency to Movement	9
“No God, No Boss, No Husband”	9
Eco-Feminism aAnd “Virile” Anarchism	11
References and Suggested Readings	12

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producing activists such as Milly Witkop-Rocker and “Rebel Girl” Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, leadership was overwhelmingly male, and at best cautious with respect to feminism, while the culture of revolutionary unionism frequently appealed to images of “virility.”

The problem of “virile” anarchism continues. Despite the history of anarchist women’s involvement in armed struggle, a masculinist emphasis on violent confrontation has at times seemed to alienate women otherwise drawn to anarchism. Accordingly, just as their forebears in late nineteenth-century Spain sought alternative routes to women’s involvement in the anarchist movement, contemporary anarchist feminists have invented forms of activism such as the Radical Cheerleaders, which allow them to voice feminist concerns within the confrontational milieu of anarchist protest – a playful alternative to the imagery of an intransigent, mainly male “black bloc.”

SEE ALSO: Anarchism and Education ; Anarchosyndicalism ; Bakunin, Mikhail Alexandrovich (1814–1876) ; Day, Dorothy (1897–1980) ; Flynn, Elizabeth Gurley (1890–1964) ; Godwin, William (1756–1836) ; Goldman, Emma (1869–1940) ; Kollontai, Alexandra (1872–1952) ; Kropotkin, Peter (1842–1921) ; Michel, Louise (1830–1905) ; Mujeres Libres ; Paris Commune, 1871 ; Proudhon, Pierre Joseph (1809–1865) ; Winstanley, Gerrard (1609–1676) ; Wollstonecraft, Mary (1759–1797) ; Woodhull, Victoria (1838–1927) ; Zasulich, Vera (1849–1919) ; Zetkin, Clara (1857–1933)

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Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1809–65), the first to write the words “I am an anarchist” in 1840, was at the same time a convinced anti-feminist, regarding women as intellectual and moral inferiors and dedicating an entire book to attacking feminism as a form of modern decadence or “pornocracy” (1858, 1875). These arguments led feminist radical Jenny d’Héricourt (1809–75) to reply not only that his accounts of women were contradicted by historical and scientific fact, but that “you contradict your own principles” (1864: 117). Joseph Déjacque went further, admonishing Proudhon either to “speak out against man’s exploitation of woman” or “do not describe yourself as an anarchist” (1857/2005: 71); he went on to denounce the patriarchal family, “a pyramid with the boss at its head and children, woman and servants at its base.” The inference made by both – that the egalitarian and anti-authoritarian principles which Proudhon opposed to the domination of church, state, and capital must also be consistently applied to relations between men and women – did, in fact, become the preeminent interpretation of anarchism *vis-à-vis* gender, in theory if not always in practice, from the late nineteenth century on.

Precursors

Well before Proudhon, proto-anarchist thinkers such as Gerrard Winstanley (1609–76) laid down some notable precedents for anarchist feminism. A radical Christian, Winstanley suggested that God’s “universall law of equity” required not only the abolition of inequities of wealth and power, but also the establishment of egalitarian relations between men and women. From a secular perspective, William Godwin (1756–1836), later the partner (and then husband) of pioneer feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), included in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* a reconsideration of “the institution of marriage” in light of the value of “independence.” Nonetheless, Godwin was unable to imagine an egalitarian

system of childrearing; even in the absence of possessive bonds, “the personal cares which the helpless state of an infant requires... will probably devolve upon the mother.”

A “Grand Domestic Revolution”?

Even before Proudhon’s death, leadership of the nascent anarchist movement in Europe had been taken up by men such as Mikhail Bakunin and James Guillaume, whose views on marriage, family, and gender roles in general were distinctly feminist. In 1866, Bakunin declared “absolute equality of political rights for all men and women” to be a revolutionary goal – and, more concretely, specified that “adult men and women have the right to unite and separate as they please, nor has society the right to hinder their union or to force them to maintain it.” Moreover, the ability of women to retain or reclaim their independence from men was to be ensured by concrete economic guarantees, such as community support for pregnant and nursing women, as well as some collective structures of responsibility for childcare and education. Likewise, Guillaume looked forward to the abolition of “paternal authority” within the family, arguing that “a free egalitarian society should obliterate what still remains of this authority and replace it with relations of simple affection.”

From the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, a growing number of women were attracted to the anarchists’ rejection of “universal suffrage” as a goal, seeking instead a radical transformation of social relations that could be prefigured here and now. They and their male counterparts imagined and created concrete, material alternatives to the traditional family. In close association with pioneering feminist Victoria Woodhull, individualist anarchist Stephen Pearl Andrews applied his liberal principles to the condition of women and family structures. For Andrews, this meant not only “abolition of the institution of

Eco-Feminism aAnd “Virile” Anarchism

Resemblances, affinities, and analogies, of course, work both ways, and feminists’ spontaneous reconstruction of anarchist practices raised the question of whether anarchism might not “resemble” feminism. Indeed, male anarchists had frequently been stigmatized as feminine – as when Marx ridiculed Bakunin as “Hermaphrodite Man” and “Madame Bakunin,” or in the rape of Ben Reitman by a gang of patriots (Stevens n.d.; Goldman 1931/1970: 1.500–1). Might not anarchy, as a practice, be something like a feminine ethics? Conversely, might not hierarchy be an essentially masculine conception of order? In feminist communities of the 1970s and 1980s, increasingly popular arguments that patriarchy had served as the historic prototype for other forms of domination, including the domination of nature, encouraged a confluence of feminism not only with anarchism but also with the ecology and peace movements. “Eco-feminism,” a term coined in 1974 by Françoise d’Eaubonne (1920–2005), daughter of a Christian anarchist and comrade of Daniel Guérin, was from the first imbued with a libertarian spirit, influencing actions from the anti-nuclear campaign of the Clamshell Alliance (1976–9) to the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp (1981–2000) as well as the formation of the German Greens (1980). Speculations of this sort drew criticism not only from “third-wave” feminists, wary of any talk of “essences,” but from other eco-anarchists and anarchist feminists.

Meanwhile, where the male leadership of the eco-anarchist Earth First! movement had demonstrated a macho “cowboy” style, feminists such as Judy Bari were making inroads, uniting eco-anarchism not only with feminism but also with revolutionary syndicalism. Women had traditionally been somewhat marginal to anarcho-syndicalism, in part because of the gender politics of wage labor in general. While female wage-workers did find their way into anarchist movements from Mexico to Germany,

the patriarchal biases of male Communist Party leadership; Marxist theorists from Friedrich Engels (*The Origin of the Family, the State, and Private Property*, 1884/1909) and August Bebel (*Woman Under Socialism*, 1891/1904) to Catharine MacKinnon (*Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 1989) and Teresa Ebert (*Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism*, 1996) have long argued for a Marxist feminism. Where the differences lie between anarchist feminism and other feminisms is in the logic – both theoretical and practical – that serves to link struggles.

Whereas, from the perspective of Marxist theory, the consciousness of the exploited must be deduced from a theory of history and society as a whole, anarchism has traditionally affirmed that members of *any* oppressed group can organize on their own. This is the anarchist paradigm of “direct action.” Nor, for anarchists, is there such a thing as a political center. For Marxists, the center of power is capitalism; for radical feminists, it is patriarchy; for anarchists and anarcha-feminists, even to ask *where* power is located, as if it were “a thing” rather than a *relationship*, is to fall into an error. Thus, instead of reducing revolution to a single event aimed at a single goal, anarchists see revolution as plural and perpetual.

The logic linking one struggle against dominatory power to another, then, could be called “affinitary.” That is, instead of referring each particular struggle to a central category, such as placing housewives in relation to wage-workers by conceptualizing women as a “vertical class” or housework as part of a “social factory,” it operates by making direct “analogies” between situations and experiences. Thus, Bakunin’s slogan “no gods, no masters!” could become, in the phrase of a correspondent in *La Voz de la Mujer*, “No God, No Boss, No Husband” (Molyneux 2001: 24).

Marriage as a legal tie to be maintained and perpetuated by force,” but also the creation of alternative arrangements for cohabitation, housekeeping, and childcare – a “grand Domestic Revolution” (see Hayden 1981: 93–5). Similarly, Déjacque’s utopian tract, *L’Humanisphère* (1858/1898), had described life in a built environment that allowed women, men, and children a range of voluntary relationships, from independence to interdependence, while dissolving the nuclear family, the cornerstone of patriarchy and capitalism, into “the great family” of humanity (124). The anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin, while apparently unable to imagine men cooking, anticipated that housewives might choose from a range of options concerning housework, from the private to the communal – implicitly treating “women’s work” as part of the general continuum of labor.

Attempts to practice non-authoritarian family life and cohabitation, in anarchist colonies or *milieux libres* from the end of the nineteenth century on, as well as in the personal lives of individual anarchist men and women, were not infrequent. In the course of her own experiments in non-possessive love, Emma Goldman (1869–1940) encountered Mary and Abraham Isaak, advocates of “sex equality” in *The Firebrand*, and was struck by “the consistency of their lives, the harmony between the ideas they professed and their application... ‘If you can’t establish freedom in your own home,’ [Abraham] Isaak often said, ‘how can you expect to help the world to it?’” (1931/1970: 1.224).

“The Capacity of Women”

“The capacity of women to bear arms,” noted the editors of the feminist *Woodhull & Claflin’s Weekly* in 1871, “was fully tested in Paris during the late reign of the Communists” – alluding to the Paris Commune that had been crushed just months earlier, during which women such as Louise Michel (1830–1905) and André Léo

(a.k.a. Victoire Léodile Béra, 1824–1900) had indeed taken an active and at times aggressive role, coming to embrace anarchist identities as a result. Indeed, for Léo, the direct participation of women in armed struggle for their rights, as demonstrated by Michel, was of greater importance than participation in the ephemeral or irrelevant “government” of the Commune. The female *Communardes* set perhaps the most direct precedent for the entry of women into the militias of the Mexican Revolution and the Spanish Civil War – and, at the same time, for the establishment of the Agrupación Mujeres Libres (the “Group of Free Women”) as an autonomous organization of anarchist women fighting for its own revolutionary objectives. After the Commune, a generation of working-class female anarchist leaders and intelligentsia sprang up, quite often achieving real prominence as organizers: Lucy Parsons (1853–1942) in the US, Charlotte Wilson (1854–1944) in England, Teresa Claramunt (1862–1932) and Soledad Gustavo (a.k.a. Teresa Montseny Mañé, 1865–1939) in Spain. A second generation would prove to be as influential in the early twentieth century, particularly in the nations of the colonial periphery, where appeared such luminaries as Luisa Capetillo (1879–1922) in Puerto Rico, Juana Belén Gutiérrez de Mendoza (1875–1942) in Mexico, Virginia Bolten (ca. 1870–ca. 1960) in Argentina and Uruguay, and Belén de Sárraga in Uruguay and Chile (1873–1951), but also in the metropolitan centers, where Federica Montseny (1905–94) and Emma Goldman rose to prominence.

The resistance which these women and their cohorts met in every context – working-class, intellectual, bourgeois, and anarchist alike – was instructive, and the lessons were not encouraging for the project of class-based social transformation. Rather than supporting the demands of their female counterparts out of solidarity in oppression, as their ostensible ideals would seem to demand of them, in practice many male workers and anarchists seemed all too happy to have someone to be superior to. The response anarchist women made – creating autonomous associations of their

own, such as the Gruppo Femminile Luisa Michel (formed in the mining community of Spring Valley, Illinois in 1901), while continuing to protest and struggle against sexist tendencies within the male-dominated movements – was itself a model of direct action.

From Tendency to Movement

Anarchist feminism existed as a tendency, even a conscious movement within the anarchist movement, with its own associations (e.g., Las Hijas de Anáhuac, or Anáhuac’s Daughters, in Mexico, ca. 1907–8) and publications (e.g., *La Voz de la Mujer: Periódico comunista-anárquico*, or *Woman’s Voice: A Communist-Anarchist Journal*, Argentina, 1896–7) before the “first wave” of the women’s movement won suffrage rights (US, 1920; Spain, 1931; France, 1944; Japan, 1945) and before the anarchist movement was eclipsed by the Bolshevik and fascist victories of 1917–39. However, it appears not to have attained the status of an ideology until well after. In the 1960s and 1970s, “second-wave” feminists in the US, UK, and Canada reinvented and rediscovered – often in that order – libertarian ethics and tactics, subsequently giving themselves the name “anarcha-feminists.” Spreading to Western Europe by way of translations, anarcha-feminist discourses acquired the strength of a movement within the movement, and in 1982 and 1984, at anarchist congresses in Norway and Italy respectively, an “Anarkofeministiske Manifest” (“Anarcha-feminist Manifesto”) was endorsed.

“No God, No Boss, No Husband”

At the same time as their anarchist counterparts, various organizations of the authoritarian left sponsored women’s organizations and fielded militiawomen during the Spanish Civil War; libertarian Marxists like Alexandra Kollontai and Clara Zetkin challenged