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The Marvelous Dance of Anarchy & Individuality

On the occasion of Emma Goldman's 150th
Birthday

Ron Sakolsky

2020, Winter

“There is no individuality without liberty, and liberty is the greatest menace to authority.”

—Emma Goldman, *The Individual, Society and the State* (1937)

The figure of Emma Goldman still looms large on the anarchist horizon, not least because of her passion for proclaiming the liberty necessary for individuality to flourish as an essential ingredient of any social revolution worthy of the name.

In recognition of the 150th anniversary of her birth and the 100th anniversary of her deportation as an “undesirable alien,” The Surrealist Research and Development Monograph Series has issued a new pamphlet which showcases her 1937 essay, “The Individual, Society and the State,” along with illuminating introductory essays by Penelope Rosemont, Gale Ahrens, and my own essay appearing here in abridged form.

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Since her essay, “The Individual, Society and the State,” was written only three years before her death, we can assume that it reflects her lifelong thinking about and acting to achieve a social revolution that does not threaten the sanctity of one’s individuality.

In that essay, she critiques what she considers the artificial dichotomy between the individual and community, and instead seeks to affirm their compatibility. She explains that individualism (especially the peculiarly American “rugged individualism” of the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches mythology) is an abstract ideology. It designates what one is expected to believe by society, and is repressive of individual liberty if one’s way of living does not serve or subversively challenges those expectations.

The miserabilist nature of such an arid conception of individual freedom is supportive of social uniformity and constituted authority. Individuality, on the other hand, defines who we are as individuals and can be indicative of how we live our lives as self-creating human beings within a larger context of fluid and convivial forms of mutuality.

Instead of the rigidity of fixed ideas and moral edicts, Goldman envisions a reciprocal dynamic between the individual and society. Her fervent embrace of the magnificent dance of life has most widely been manifested in recent times in the emblematic (non)quote, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.”

While there is actually no proof that she ever said those exact words, the “quote” might better be understood as a paraphrase of one of the most dramatic defenses of her own indomitable spirit of individuality of the many which can be found in her 1934 autobiography, *Living My Life*.

Early in the book, she tells us that while in the midst of organizing a strike in New York City as a young woman, she attended social events sponsored by her anarchist comrades at which she refused to deny the free reign of her pleasure or constrain her individuality in order to satisfy either the conformist

expectations of mainstream society or the prudishness of the leftist milieu. (see sidebar)

In terms of the poetic truth of that story, the dance incident in question can be seen here as a metaphor for all of Goldman's countless battles with not only the authoritarian nature of the larger society but with some of her own comrades' finger-wagging strictures over the course of her lifetime.

Unfortunately, not all anarchists have understood how the Goldman who is typically associated with anarcho-communism could also be the Goldman that was deeply influenced in her thinking by individualist anarchism. While many anarcho-communists and anarcho-syndicalists viciously attacked the egoism of Max Stirner as a form of selfishness (seeming to confuse it with bourgeois egotism), Goldman championed his emphasis on the autonomy of "the unique one" as necessarily relevant to anarchists and intrinsically connected to her own endeavors.

Rather than being a heretical diversion from the principles of anarcho-communism, she understood the lively ideas found in Stirner's 1844 book, *The Ego and His Own*, to be an essential complement to Peter Kropotkin's subsequent 1902 treatise, *Mutual Aid*.

In Goldman's anarchist synthesis, Stirner's idea of a "union of egos" offered a miniature example of Kropotkin's later more communitarian discussion of mutual aid as an anarchist social process. Similarly, Stirner's concern with a loss of individual agency meshed with her own opposition to the mass tyranny of what she referred to in the essay published in the pamphlet as a "subdued and hypnotized" populace.

The latter being in thrall to that consenting oligarchy known as democracy in the USA of her time and which, within the fortified walls of Trumplandia, today reeks of a fetid patriotic flatulence and smacks of a triumphalist fascism on the rise. For Goldman, cultivating the self-expressive consciousness of the

masterless individual was an antidote to such self-imposed subservience and socially-reinforced compliance to authority.

Better yet, it did not necessarily exclude the cooperative possibilities of “voluntary association” for mutual benefit and was not predicated on a sacrifice of one’s individuality at the altar of collectivity. Indeed, as Goldman would note with reference to egoism in the context of the International Anarchist Congress of 1907, “Collective activity in no way denies individual action; on the contrary, they complete each other”.

Ultimately, though not naive about the practical problems involved in achieving such a completion, it was the search for anarchic confluences between individualism and communism that animated Goldman’s life.

In the preface to her 1917 book, *Anarchism and Other Essays*, Goldman would distinguish the anarchic nature of Stirner’s individualism from the bourgeois individualism that she contrasted unfavorably with individuality. As she glowingly stated therein, “Stirner’s individualism contains the greatest possibilities” because in her mind the anarchist essence of his individualism resonated with her own insistence upon individual liberty.

Similarly, to Goldman, Nietzsche’s concept of “beyond good and evil” encouraged one to assert their individuality rather than succumb to the debilitating slave mentality demanded by social conformity. Here, her invocation of Stirner’s notion of “ownness” joins with Nietzsche’s conceptualization of the individual will outside the confines of what she mocked as the “lie” of conventional morality. It is with this philosophical conjunction in mind that she insistently raised her concerns about the necessity of including a frank exploration of free love and sexual radicalism (including queerness) in anarchist discourse and practice.

Goldman was imprisoned by the state for her opposition to the First World War and then deported to her native Russia in 1919 during the early days of the Soviet revolution. That makes

2019 the 100th anniversary of the use by the US government of that ignominious Red Scare tactic of scapegoating, incarcerating and repatriating immigrants deemed to be undesirable for political reasons (the ICE-y fingers of which still crawl up the racist spine of the American body politic today).

Once exiled there, Goldman quickly became disillusioned with the Soviet police state which brutally persecuted Russian anarchists as counter-revolutionaries and sought to repress individual liberty in the populace as a whole. To Goldman, the state, even a revolutionary one, was not to be worshipped as a deity but needed to have its authority contested at every turn.

As she posited, “The state has no more existence than gods and devils. They are equally the reflex and creation of man; for man, the individual is the only reality.” Here she was not only building upon Stirner’s denunciation of ideological “spooks” or “phantasms,” but his understanding of the individual as a creative process that is always in a transient state of becoming wherein freedom must be taken and cannot be given by any institutional entity.

In this sense, she also drew upon the German anarchist Gustav Landauer’s corresponding idea of “the state as a social relationship” and his championing of “organic reciprocity” between individuals as an organizing principle for society. Moreover, she was enamored by the sense of willful defiance found in Nietzsche’s Dionysian dance of iconoclastic individuality.

We need her words now more than ever when anarchy has too often become rife with factionalism between individualists and communitarians rather than being synonymous with an appreciation of the many-splendored spirit that inspires the marvelous dance of anarchy and individuality.

The pamphlet *The Individual, Society and the State: In Celebration of Emma Goldman’s 150th Birthday* is available from Charles H. Kerr Publishers, Chicago.

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