

4-30-2016

Anarchism and Gender

Martha A. Ackelsberg
Smith College, mackelsb@smith.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/swg_facpubs



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ackelsberg, Martha A., "Anarchism and Gender" (2016). Study of Women and Gender: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.
https://scholarworks.smith.edu/swg_facpubs/17

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Study of Women and Gender: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu

ANARCHISM AND GENDER

Martha Ackelsberg
Smith College, Northampton, MA 01063 USA
mackelsb@smith.edu

2992 words

Anarchism is both a political theory and a social movement that aims to abolish hierarchy and structured relations of domination and subordination in society, and to create a society based on equality, mutuality, and reciprocity in which each person is valued and respected as an individual. This social vision is combined with a theory of social change that insists that means must be consistent with ends and that people cannot be *directed* into a future society, but must create it themselves, recognizing, thereby, their own abilities and capacities. For anarchists, domination in all its forms—whether exercised by governments, religious institutions, economic institutions, or gendered/familial institutions—is the source of social evil. While anarchism shares with many socialist traditions a radical critique of economic domination and an insistence on the need for the restructuring of society on a more egalitarian basis, it differs from Marxism in its critique of the state, and of hierarchical authority relationships in general. Anarchism did not develop—as theory or practice—specifically to address issues of male domination over women. Nevertheless, because anarchists recognized that hierarchical authority relations have many separate (albeit interrelated) dimensions, anarchism has provided important resources for gender-based critiques of authoritarian relationships, and for movements for gender and sexual liberation.

Major trends.

There are two major strands of anarchist theory and practice, commonly referred to as individualist and collectivist or communalist, based in the works of four founding theorists. William Godwin (England, 1756-1836), published his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1793, in which he argued the case against government and hierarchical authority based on principles of utility. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (France, 1809-1865) rooted his visions of a mutualist, federative structure for society in peasant farming and artisan communities. Both Godwin and Proudhon emphasized individual autonomy in their writings, and most of those in the more individualist tradition (e.g. the German Max Stirner, and the Americans Josiah Warren and Benjamin A. Tucker) have followed in their footsteps. Mikhail Bakunin (Russia, 1814-1876) a contemporary of Karl Marx and his competitor for the leadership of the First International, developed a collectivist, but sharply anti-statist vision. The last of the founding four was Peter Kropotkin (Russia, 1842-1921), trained as a geographer, who came to believe that Darwin's theory of the "survival of the fittest" depended on cooperation, rather than competition, *within* species, and developed his theory of mutual aid. Anarchists in the individualist tradition have had relatively little impact on social movements. But the more communalist tradition has served both as a major competitor with Marxism for the allegiance of social activists, and has provided the grounding for considerable women's activism, beginning in the late 19th century and up to the present.

France, Italy, Switzerland, Argentina, Japan, China, Russia, and the United States all saw the development of anarchist movements during the 19th and early 20th centuries; but it was in Spain during this time that communalist anarchism developed to the greatest extent, both theoretically and as a social movement. The CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, the anarcho-syndicalist labor

confederation), founded in 1911, counted close to 2 million members by the time of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (July 1936); and also provided the context for the creation of *Mujeres Libres*, an organization founded by anarchist women to address the subordination of women, both within Spain and within the anarchist movement, itself.

As did socialists, activists in all these movements recognized that *economic* organization—and structures of power and dominance based on control over the means of production—was *an* important source of power and inequality. They agreed with Marx that those relationships of power and domination dehumanize both the powerful and the relatively powerless; and also that the only way out of such relationships is through the *self*-organization of the disempowered/subordinate: the process of organizing and struggling collectively changes people's perceptions of themselves, raises consciousness, empowers, and enables people to create a new reality.

Yet, they also *differed with* socialists on a number of important points. First, they did not "privilege" economics (or class) in the way that Marx had but, rather, insisted that the tendency toward power and domination could exist (and had to be addressed) independent of economic structures. Therefore, they insisted on confronting all forms of hierarchically-structured power, not just that based in economic relations (directing themselves against the power of the state, the church, and of men over women). Equally importantly, they insisted that the relationship between means and ends in social struggles was absolutely critical: one cannot create an *egalitarian* society through *authoritarian* means. Since existing societies reinforce a sense of powerlessness, people need to come to a sense of their own power and capacities if they are to be able to participate as fully equal members of a new (egalitarian) society. The process for achieving such change is crucial: for anarchists, the revolutionary process must create an egalitarian society *in its practices*, whether in union movements or in neighborhood forms of resistance. At same time (and perhaps a bit paradoxically), anarchist theorists and activists were also aware that "you can't improvise a revolution." People had to prepare themselves for it. For some anarchists—most notoriously in Russia, the U.S., France, and Italy—direct action meant revolutionary violence, "propaganda by the deed" in the form of bombs and assassinations. Yet, in other contexts (notably Spain and Argentina, and among the IWW in the U.S., among others), even though there were assassinations and violence, direct action took on significantly different meanings.

Understandings of gender and gendered relationships.

The particular ways in which strategies of direct action were understood had profound implications for women, and for gendered relations more generally. Even within a movement that was, in theory, committed to overcoming the domination of men over women, and in which there was some attention to the unionization of women and to equalization of wages, the dominant understanding in virtually every country was that "workers" were men, whose wives were at home looking after their children and households.

There was, in fact, a divergence among anarchist writers, both about the place of women within working-class organizations, and also about the nature of women's subordination. One stream of thought, drawing on the works of Proudhon, treated women essentially as wives and mothers, whose major contribution to society would come through their domestic roles. A second stream, which had its roots in the works of Bakunin and Kropotkin, argued that women and men were equals, and that the key to women's (as well as workers') emancipation lay in women's full incorporation into the paid workforce on equal terms with men. Nevertheless, there were also those within the movement (Emma Goldman, for example, in the U.S.; Soledad Gustavo and Federica Montseny, in Spain) who argued that, even if it were possible to incorporate women into unions and the workforce on equal terms with men, that would be insufficient to assure their emancipation. On this view, women's subordination was as much a *cultural*, as an *economic*, phenomenon, and would require specific attention to their education, and

their treatment within home and family: women would have to undertake an *internal* emancipation to come to know their own value, to respect themselves, and to refuse to become psychic or economic slaves to their male lovers. And many writers argued that women's subordination was also rooted in the double-standard of sexual morality: that, too, would have to change if women were to become equal partners in the creation of a new society.

While some anarchists followed Proudhon in insisting that, even in anarchist society, the authority of husband/father within the family must be preserved, others insisted that this authority must be resisted, and replaced by more egalitarian relationships. Some advocated asceticism, chastity, and monogamy; others advocated gender equality and free love.

Both male and female writers argued that control of fertility was critical both to women's full development and emancipation *and* to the empowerment of workers as a class. A variety of anarchists in the U.S., Spain, Argentina, France, and Italy argued that individual women and working class families, in general, suffered from the creation of more children than they could readily support. Access to information about sexuality and birth control could free women from the fear of unwanted pregnancy (thus enabling them to enjoy sexual relations more fully) and from the burdens of bearing and rearing large numbers of children; and could enable the working class to escape the downward pressure on wages that resulted from high levels of reproduction.

Nevertheless, while there was a great deal of writing about the value and importance of sexual emancipation for both sexes, it is also clear that more traditional expectations of chastity and monogamy continued in force, particularly for women. Relatively few anarchist men actually practiced what they preached in relation to sexual freedom for "their" women. Even in the midst of revolutionary changes, relatively few women in any of these contexts were willing to risk the social ostracism that followed from flouting more traditional sexual mores. Finally, with relatively few exceptions, early 20th-century anarchist writers assumed the normative character of heterosexuality. While some Spanish anarchists writing in the 1920's and '30s argued that strictures against homosexuality should be loosened, these were minority voices, which found ever fewer opportunities for expression once the Civil War began.

Women anarchists and anarchist women's movements.

While women have been involved in many working-class movements, anarchist understandings of the multi-faceted operations of power, and of the *multiple* grounds for resisting it, have provided particularly fertile ground for the development of explicitly women's, and feminist, activism. In the U.S., France and Spain, the communist/collectivist anarchist focus on direct action opened important spaces for women's participation and engagement. While there were substantial numbers of women in these countries who worked for pay outside their homes, union organizations (including anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist unions) tended to focus primarily on male workers, seeing women as temporary workers who would leave the workplace once they married, and who would be particularly difficult to organize. Thus, in situations where working-class organization focused almost entirely on workplace-based, union organizing, women tended to be ignored.

However, women *did* take active roles in community-based activism, whether in "quality of life protests" (challenging the rising costs of coal, food or housing) in many Spanish cities, in the Paris Commune of 1870/71, and in providing critical community support for workplace strikes, e.g., in Lowell and Lawrence, MA, [USA] in the early years of the 20th century. In each of these contexts, anarchist understandings of social change provided a framework for the incorporation of women as active participants in ways that more traditional, workplace-based, strategies for social change did not.

Aside from engaging in largely male-led anarchist organizations, some anarchist women also developed specific analyses of women's subordination—whether within the larger society or within

anarchist organizations. Soledad Gustavo, Teresa Claramunt, and Federica Montseny in Spain; Emma Goldman, Lucy Parsons, and Voltairine de Cleyre in the U.S.; Madeleine Pelletier and Louise Michel in France; María Roda and others in Italy and the U.S.; He Zhen in China; Fumiko Kaneko in Japan; Josefa Martínez and other members of the editorial group of *La Voz de la Mujer* in Buenos Aires were among early anarchist women writers who explicitly addressed the situation of women. Goldman, for example, collaborated with Margaret Sanger to offer birth control to working women, and often spoke and wrote about what would be necessary to overcome women's subordination. The group of women in Buenos Aires—largely immigrants from either Spain or Italy-- that published *La Voz de la Mujer* in 1896-7 recognized a double oppression of women, as workers and as women. They criticized the hierarchical structure of traditional marital relationships (even among anarchists) and the oppression of women as workers. They advocated for free love; though (as was the case in Spain and the U.S. as well), leaving aside virtually any attention to questions of domestic labor.

Although there were strong and active anarchist women addressing men's domination of women in a variety of locations, it was in Spain that women's anarchist organizing achieved its greatest popular reach and effect. There, building on years of writing and organizing, women within the anarchist movement began explicitly addressing what they termed the "triple enslavement" of women—to ignorance, to capital, and to men. Between 1934 and 1936, groups of women anarchists formed in Barcelona, Madrid and elsewhere; in April, 1936, one of these groups published the first issue of *Mujeres Libres*, a magazine written and edited by women, and addressed to working-class women (there were to be 14 issues before the end of the Civil War in February, 1939). In August 1937, the organization *Mujeres Libres* was officially founded. It eventually mobilized between 20,000 and 30,000 women to address that triple enslavement.

Both the magazine and the organization were by and for women. This was the case not because they didn't trust men; nor because there were no men ready to commit themselves to women's equality; but because of their (anarchist) commitment to *direct action*: only through their *own*, autonomous, self-directed, actions could women come to recognize their *own* capacities. As Lucía Sánchez Saornil, one of the founders of the organization, wrote in 1935: "It is not he [the male compañero] who is called upon to set out the roles and responsibilities of the woman in society, no matter how elevated he might consider them to be. No, the anarchist way is to allow the woman to act freely herself, without tutors or external pressures; that she may develop in the direction that her nature and her faculties dictate."

In the context of the Spanish Civil War, *Mujeres Libres* had two major goals: *Capacitación* (roughly translated as empowerment, or coming to awareness of one's capacities) and *captación* (mobilization of women into the anarchist/libertarian movement). *Capacitación* was at the center of virtually all their programs, and clearly followed from the long-standing anarchist commitment to "preparation" and direct action. They offered education and literacy programs, at all levels; employment/apprenticeship programs—in both rural and urban areas.--as kind of *practical education*; consciousness-raising and help in the context of unions (education for "critical consciousness," even vis-à-vis their movement comrades); education and support around motherhood and childrearing; education about sexuality, birth control, anti-prostitution, and opposing the sexual double-standard; education of the young; and public relations/media: they created a magazine, and had an extensive program of publications (books, informational pamphlets, and exhibitions), a radio program, and a public speaking program. They understood organizational autonomy to be critical to all these activities, because only through their own *self-directed* action could they come to see themselves as capable and competent—and could the men, as well, recognize the women as equal partners. As had been the case in Argentina, however, while male anarchists might have been supportive of women's organizing and mobilizing in theory, major anarchist movement organizations were rather less supportive, *in practice*, of the activities of women who wished to define their own priorities. Thus, most

movement organizations were more interested in Mujeres Libres' activities to mobilize women than in their educational/empowerment work. As the Spanish Civil War progressed, Mujeres Libres' activities were increasingly limited; and, at the end of the war, most activists went into exile to escape Francoist persecution. Although a small group continued "Mujeres Libres in Exile" in southern France and even published a few issues of a journal, the end of the war effectively put an end to the activities of Mujeres Libres.

The Contemporary Moment

Anarchist emphases on direct action, and on creating change through putting into practice new forms of social organization, have been inspirational to many contemporary movements, most notably the communes and collectivist activism of the New Left, "participatory budgeting" in Latin America, anti-globalization/WTO protests starting in the late 1990s through the "Occupy" and Indignados protests of 2011-12, the Zapatista movement in Mexico, but also, perhaps most dramatically, to the civil rights movement, the Second Wave women's liberation movement and the gay and other liberation movements that have grown out of them. In fact, although much left-wing feminist activism in the U.S. and Western Europe drew, officially, on Marxist socialism for its theoretical grounding, anarchism's multi-faceted understanding of oppression/domination and the emphasis on self-direction, in reality, provides a more accurate reflection of what Barbara Epstein has termed the "prefigurative politics" that characterizes these movements. Many of them, wittingly or unwittingly, have adopted the anarchist perspective that "we make the road by walking." It is, perhaps, not coincidental that women are well-represented as activists in all of these. Nevertheless, it is also the case that—true to much historical experience—(male) activists in these movements have often been less willing to foreground gender issues in the struggles.

At the same time, however, anarchist perspectives continue to be reflected in contemporary theorizing. The embrace—and elaboration—by contemporary feminist and critical studies scholars of the term "intersectionality," for example, can be seen as a clear outgrowth of anarchist (and anarchist-feminist) insistence that the sources of domination/subordination in society are multiple, and must be considered and responded to, in relation to one another, and not separately.

SEE ALSO: Social movements; Spain; collective action; gender equity; feminisms, anarchist; Women's movement: Modern international movement

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING:

Martha Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2005)

Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988)

Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991)

Kathy E. Ferguson, *Emma Goldman* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011)

Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover Books, 1970)

David Graeber, "The New Anarchists" *New Left Review* 13 (January-February 2002), pp. 61-73

Temma Kaplan, *Anarchists of Andalusia, 1868-1903* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977)

Marian Leighton, "Anarcho-Feminism and Louise Michel," *Our Generation* 21 (Summer 1990), pp. 22-29

Maxine Molyneux, "No God, No Boss, No Husband: Anarchist Feminism in Nineteenth-Century Argentina," *Latin American Perspectives* 13, 1 (Winter 1986), pp. 119-145

Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilization* (Denver: Arden Press, 1995)