

LET OUR MOTHERS SHOW THE WAY

ELAINE LEEDER

Where is the women's movement going? Some argue that it is in a period of demise and that we now see the emergence of the "post feminist" generation. Others argue that it is moving into a period of retrenchment, reviewing where it has been and where it is going. While the movement examines itself we continue to exist in a depressed economy where, although women's roles are changing, women are still earning a fraction of men's wages and are assuming much greater responsibility for maintaining their households' economy. In this period of assessment we still see much active work that is being carried out by the various self-help movements. Work in health care, counseling and protection from male violence continue to be vital activities for many of us.

These activities, which often lead to the abandonment of established institutions, may appear to some to be operating in an intellectual and theoretical vacuum. This need now be the case since there is an historical tradition upon which many of the tactics of the women's movement are based. In particular I believe that anarchist women between 1870 and 1920 offer a source of inspiration for a current generation of activists. Many women have been drawn to anarchism because the anarchist belief in freedom of the individual includes the idea of women's freedom. Anarchist ideology holds the belief that all people have the right to complete liberty as long as one's actions do not interfere with the rights of other individuals (Marsh, p. 10). Although this is certainly not an explicit feminist doctrine there are the seeds for women's liberation within the ideology. However, women within the movement also experienced anti-feminist behavior on the part of some anarchist men.

The anarchist tradition of direct resistance to authority, the belief in direct action such as strikes, boycotts and other confrontations with those in power, the conviction that humanity is inherently good and society can change for the better are all themes found in the works of anarchist women. In addition the women sometimes advocated the use of violence. Many of the women who did espouse this tactic did so as young women and changed their thinking or left the movement as they got older. (Marsh, p. 22). Anarchist women, however, added new dimensions to the tradition which can not be found in the teachings of Proudhon, Kropotkin and Bakunin. Anarchist women believed that changes in society had to occur in the economic and political spheres but their emphasis was also on the personal and psychological dimensions of life. They believed that changes in personal aspects of life, such as families, children, sex, should be viewed as political activity. This is a new dimension that was added to anarchist theory by the women at the turn of the century.

The changes that women wanted might be called a "moral revolution," a term used by Voltairine de Cleyre (Avrich, p. 163). This evolution would give freedom to the soul and the body. It was an attempt to free society from the constructions of Victorian morals and, as such, involved developing non-traditional life styles, values and forms of behavior. These women flaunted social norms and thumbed their noses at convention. Emma Goldman lived communally with friends. Some anarchist women lived together with men in "free union" without being married; parents had children and did not raise them. The anarchist women believed that changes had to occur in the institutions of marriage and family, in sexuality, in children's education, to name just a few of the "personal" areas that came under their scrutiny.

Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin had never dealt with the issues that were being raised by anarchist women. All three men had been married and had traditional beliefs about the role of women. Bakunin's marriage was somewhat unusual in that he did not live with his wife for periods of time while she was off living with her lover. In fact, he even assumed responsibility for a child that she had by another man. (Carr, pp. 368, 386, 399). None of the three founders of anarchism wrote of a different role for women other than that of mother, wife and nurturer. Proudhon felt that the patriarchal family was the fundamental unit in his future society (Marsh, p. 19). Believing that women were the domestic force in life, he also opposed divorce. Kropotkin believed that women could do political work but that the working class struggle came first. He assumed that there were natural behaviors for each sex and that women were the dependent

sex. Later, anarchist men such as Moses Harmon believed that men's concerns were universal but that women's concerns were selfish (Marsh, p. 56). Other anarchist men were frightened of having any changes made in the domestic situation and thwarted or subverted attempts in that direction (Marsh, pp. 27 and 82).

In dealings with the "woman question," as it was called then, or sexism, as it is called now, anarchist women argued that intellectual and psychological characteristics are not gender based (Marsh, p. 4). They argued that roles in society should be based on capacity and preferences rather than on sex. They believed that women must be economically, sexually and psychologically independent of men. Voltairine de Cleyre spent much of her life educating women to be "industrially independent" (Marsh, p. 158) and to fight against the social constrictions of sex stereotyped roles. She used language that can be found in modern feminist writings such as "she-ro worship" and argued against 'the narrow confines placed on women's behavior in her society (Avrich, p. 159). Not only did de Cleyre argue for economic independence, she also lived it in her life. Having been treated as a sex object and domestic servant by the men in her life, she argued that women should maintain a room or rooms for themselves in order to remain free of the confines of the nuclear family. With much difficulty she maintained economic independence throughout her life.

Anarchist women such as Emma Goldman, Voltairine de Cleyre and others believed that many of women's problems were related to the nature of marriage and the nuclear family. According to Goldman, marriage made women a sex commodity and made them feel they were objects or things (Drinnon, p. 151). It was an economic arrangement that produced jealousy and was not based in love (Goldman, p. 182). In "The Traffic in Women" Goldman argued that marriage made women men's property and that it was no better for women to marry than to be a prostitute since they were in both cases driven by economic need. In making this argument Goldman relied on the anarchist concept of the abolition of private property, true to Proudhon's belief that "property is theft." In this case she was arguing that woman, as private property of a man, was having her freedom and independence stolen.

Anarchist women, often in direct contradiction to anarchist men of the same era, argued for the abolition of the nuclear family and the institution of marriage as direct action against the subordination of women. They reasoned that as women became economically independent of men there would be no need for marriage. They also condemned the institution of monogamy and advocated a concept of "free love" in which individuals were free to choose their sexual partners and to de-

termine how long they would choose to remain with that partner. They believed that people were erotic beings and that sexual relationships concerned only those involved. They held that the state and the church had no right to be involved in these unions (Marsh, p. 69). They believed that marriage made for unhappiness, and that people should be able to enter and leave relationships at their own discretion. In addition, some anarchist writers advocated a concept known as "varietism" or non-exclusive sexual relationships (Marsh, p. 46). Some anarchist women argued that homosexuality was part of the fight to free sexuality of all types and as such was a legitimate sexual alternative. Many of these ideas are strikingly similar to those being made by current feminists and are strangely contemporary in their vision. Many of these women's beliefs, which were considered deviant within their society, are accepted by large segments of our society today.

In keeping with the anarchist tradition of individual freedom and disregard for laws and conventionality, anarchist women were involved in the birth control movement from its beginning. At a time when birth control information was illegal, Emma Goldman spoke publicly on the subject and actually shared her knowledge with interested parties. She and other anarchist women believed that "voluntary parenthood" was a crucial part of women's freedom. She believed that women had a right to determine whether they wanted children and that they had a right to control their own bodies (Drinnon, pp. 166-167). Although she did not make birth control a major part of her work, she popularized the idea through her speeches and assistance in organizing groups to continue educating the public.

Generally anarchist women such as Goldman and de Cleyre scorned the question of the vote and the women's suffrage question. They believed that it was useless to enter the political arena since laws and voting did nothing to change conditions for the powerless in society. Goldman said:

She can give suffrage or the ballot no new quality, nor can she receive anything from it that will enhance her own quality. Her development, her freedom, her independence must come from and through herself. First, by asserting herself as a personality and not as a sex commodity. Second, by refusing the right to anyone over her body; by refusing to bear children unless she wants them; by refusing to be a servant to God, the State, society, the husband, the family, etc.; by making her life simpler, but deeper and richer. (Goldman, p. 211).

De Cleyre agreed that the ballot could serve no useful purpose for anyone (Marsh, p. 52). Their position was identical with that of Bakunin and Kropotkin who refused to participate in political parties and campaigns.

There was little participation by anarchist women within the larger feminist movement. Some women such as Voltairine de Cleyre organized women's groups for education and "consciousness raising." They did not establish larger organizations for support and education on the woman question (Marsh, p. 63). By not doing so, their views did not become widely known and they had little impact on women of their time. Interestingly enough this question of small decentralized groups versus large mass organizations is one that is currently being discussed within anarchist feminist circles. We are currently questioning the need for larger networks to publicize the anarchist feminist alternative.

While anarchist women differed in some ways from the "patriarchs" of anarchism they also followed many of their teachings. One such example is their involvement in the modern school movement. Anarchist women were involved in this effort to increase public awareness of alternatives in the education of children. Because they were committed to freedom, these women carried this belief into their dealings with children.

The Modern School Movement was started in the U.S. as a result of the death of Francisco Ferrer in Spain in 1909. Ferrer's ideas about education included the beliefs that children need a healthy physical environment in which to learn, and that children need short and interesting instructional periods. Further, he held that there should be respect for the child with no imposition of ideas and no restraint on children's natural inclination to learn. The Modern School emphasized the process of learning, and learning by example rather than by rote. Children were taught to be self-reliant and were not viewed as their parents' property. Kropotkin had written about the need for manual and intellectual work and the need for "integral education" (Avrich, 1980, pp. 16-17). The Modern Schools personified the traditions of the anarchist founders.

Emma Goldman, along with many anarchist men, was a leading force in the establishment of the first Modern School in New York City, as well as the Ferrer Association which promoted education and public forums for adults. She wrote and spoke extensively on the subject, as did Voltairine de Cleyre. de Cleyre taught at the adult programs in the Modern School, feeling that she was unable to handle the aggression of the small children (Avrich, *Voltairine de Cleyre*, p.

222). As de Cleyre became more familiar with the schools she became critical of them, feeling that those who were involved, with the exception of a few teachers, knew little about the educational process and that the schools were chaotic. Although critical, she maintained an active interest in them throughout her life.

Anarchists like Goldman and de Cleyre believed that there should be cooperative communities where those interested in caring for children could do so. They did not address the possibility of mutual child-rearing by both parents. Their positions were somewhat limited and did not deal with the realities of how to handle the day-to-day issues of having a child. They never discussed the question of power relationships between parents and children, although they were discussing the issue of power in other contexts. Some argue that this failure to find a place for children within the anarchist philosophy indicates an inability on the part of anarchists to translate their radicalism into everyday practice (Marsh, p. 99). I disagree. I believe that anarchists were in fact dealing with issues in their own lives but had not yet seen the need to articulate those positions. Because they were involved in such issues as education, suffrage, sexuality, and economics of women, they were not yet ready to consider how they might change their relationships with children. It is possible that they did not see the limits of their thinking about children. I believe that modern anarchist feminists are now ready to address that question.

Anarchist women led in attempting to transcend the social norms that were constricting them. They took the anarchist tradition, but built on it. They attempted to develop a new society within the vestiges of the old. They stretched the vision beyond what was then acceptable. As a result they were regarded with contempt and anger by the larger society.

Anarchist women have provided role models for a current generation of feminists. They lived in communes, developed models for alternative education experiments and made "free unions" the model for current behavior of "living together." They accepted homosexuality and bisexuality. They emphasized the need for economic independence of women. They argued that the vote would not give women what they needed. They even wrote about and took part in affinity groups and consciousness-raising groups which are part of the current political reality for activists (Avrich, p. 165). Emma Goldman, Voltairine de Cleyre and other anarchist women helped bring the domestic sphere of life within the anarchist tradition. Some of their thinking and writing was limited by their time and their position in society. It remains the task of current anarchist feminists to apply their insights

to relevant social issues, such as child-rearing. It is also necessary for current anarchist feminists to learn from the failure of our predecessors in establishing far reaching organizations which could educate the public as to the anarchist vision of society.

The anarchist tradition is a long and colorful one. It includes many diverse and unusual personalities who have always held as their ideals the unlimited capacity for human good and the hope for true liberty. It now remains the task for current anarchists and feminists to continue that creative tradition. Modern anarchists are busy applying the ideology to areas that earlier anarchists never imagined. And yet the anarchist tradition, with its belief in the abolition of private property, direct action, resistance to authority, and the reliance on small local groups, is easily applied to today's issues. The issues of nuclear power and disarmament, environmental concerns, women's reproductive rights, and child-rearing all lend themselves to an anarchist analysis. Anarchist feminism may be old in its traditions but it is strangely modern in its relevance to today's world.

REFERENCES

- Avrich, Paul. *An American Anarchist: The Life of Voltairine de Cleyre*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1978.
- Avrich, Paul. *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the U.S.* Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1980.
- Drinnon, Richard. *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman*. Harper and Row: New York, 1961.
- Goldman, Emma. *Anarchism and Other Essays*. New York: Dover, 1969.
- Marsh, Margaret. *Anarchist Women: 1870-1920*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981.