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Anarcha-Feminism

Ruby Flick

For too long anarchist feminists have been labeled as the ladies auxiliary of male bomb throwers. The misconception and manipulation of both feminists and anarchist principles and practice have resulted in the use of

sensationalist and ridiculing tactics by the state and its spokespeople. This has not only polarized the general populace from potentially liberation concepts but has also polarized anarchist from feminists. In the past and more so recently there has been a uniting of these beliefs and Peggy Korneggers article; 'Anarchism; the Feminist Connection' goes so far as to say that the two genres of thought are inextricable tied although the connection has not been consciously articulated by feminists very often. Kornegger argues that feminism "emphasis on the small group as a basic organizational unit, on the personal and political, on anti- authoritarianism and on spontaneous direct action was essentially anarchism. I believe that this puts women in a unique position of being the bearers of a subsurface anarchist consciousness which if articulated and concretized can take us further than any previous group toward the achievement of total revolution.

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While anarchism has provided a framework for the transformation required, for far too long even this revolutionary ideology has been largely male identified; male articulated, male targeted and male exclusive in both its language and participation. It has therefore been unfortunately lacking in vital analysis especially with regard to the psychological and physical realities of oppression experienced by the majority of the human population: women. As Emma Goldman said of the Spanish Revolution of 1936 “Despite the impressive rhetoric, most frequently male anarchists retreated to cultural orthodoxy in the personal relationships with women ... The vast majority of Spanish comrades continued to expect their own “companions” to provide the emotionally supportive and submissive relationships “necessary” for the activism of the males”. Anarchism has often duplicated the very concepts of power it sought to obliterate . One of the basic tenants of anarchist feminism is that we are not prisoners of the past —

“The past leads us if we force it to Otherwise it contains us,
In its asylum with not gate We make history or it makes us”

As anarchist feminist we are not asking men to atone for the sins of the forefathers, we are asking them to take responsibility for the masculinity of the future, we are not asking women to be perpetually aware of their oppression but to emerge from it. Mostly we are not locating conflict with certain people rather than the kind of behavior that takes place between them.

Anarchist feminism addresses these notions of power, attempts to criticize, envision and plan. Everything is involved in the question. However it is from a conscious understanding of the lessons of the past that presses us into the future, however angry or embarrassed. While it is not my intention to analyze in depth the traditions of anarchism and feminism, discussion of their union in the past and the barriers to this union may help to inform both genres as I see them as both phenomenas of urgent relevance.

Definitions of both anarchism and feminism are totally anathema as “freedom is not something to be decreed and protected by laws or states. It is something you shape for yourself and share however both have insisted “on spontaneity, on theoretical flexibility, on simplicity of living, on love and anger as complementary and necessary components of society as well as individual action.” Anarchist feminists see the state as an institution of patriarchy, and seek to find a way out of the alienation of the contemporary world and the impersonal nature of the state and its rituals of economic, physical and psychological violence.

The word anarchist comes from “archon” meaning “a ruler” and the addition of the prefix “an” meaning “without” creates the terms for conceiving not of chaos not disorganization, but of a situation in which there is emancipation from authority. Ironically what constitutes anarchism is not goal orientated post revolutionary bliss but is a set of organizational principles which may redress the current obstacles to freedom. As Carlo Pisacane, an Italian anarchist wrote “The propaganda of the idea is a chimera. Ideas result from deeds, not the later from the former, and the people will not be free when they are educated, but educated when they are free.”

Most of the focus of anarchist discussion has been “around the governmental source of most of societies troubles and the viable alternative forms of voluntary organization possible”, but has paid little attention to the manifestations of the state in our intimate relationships nor with the individual psychological thought processes which affect our every relationship while living under the tyranny of a power-over ideology. The above quote came from George Woodcock's anthology called *The Anarchist Reader* who should be forever embarrassed for citing only one woman briefly (Emma Goldman in the role of critic of the Russian Revolution). The quote continues “and by further definition, the anarchist is the man who sets out to create a society without government.”

Exactly.

How is it that revolutionary libertarian fervor can exist so harmoniously with machismo? It is far too easy in this instance to say that “It is hard to locate our tormentor. It’s so pervasive, so familiar, We have known it all our lives. It is our culture.” because although it is true the essences of liberty so illustriously espoused by these people have not extended their definition of freedom to their sisters. Why not?? It is often a problem of language used by idealists in their use of the term man as generic, but what is also clear in so much of the rhetoric is that the envisioned ‘proletariat’ is the male worker, the revolutionary is a person entering into the struggle that is the seeking of a “legitimizing” expression of ‘masculinity’ in the political forum staked out by the dominant male paradigm. Feminists are suspicious of logic and its rituals and the audience addressed by a ritual language, with reason. Consider the following examples and if you are not a woman try to imagine the conflict created by such wonderful ideas that deliberately and needlessly exclude you from relevance or existence.

“Our animal needs, it is well known, consist in food, clothing and shelter. If justice means anything, nothing can be more unjust than that any man lack them. But justice doesn’t stop there.”

“the objection which anarchists have always sustained to fixed and authoritarian forms of organization does not mean that they deny organization as such. The anarchist is not an individualist in the extreme sense of the word. He believes passionately in individual freedom, but he also recognizes that such freedom can only be safeguarded by a willingness to co-operate by the reality of community”

“An integral part of the collective existence, man feels his dignity at the same time in himself and in others, and thus carries in his heart the principle of morality

with ones perception of it. With capitalism and patriarchy so safely reduced to an explanation, we distance ourselves from the problem and the necessity to immediately interact with it or respond to other people.” So often revolutionaries deal with concepts and not people.

But while as anarcha-feminists we object to much of the politics of socialist (as a friend of mine says, “After your revolution we’ll still be us, but you’ll be them), we also argue that liberation needs to happen in small affinity groups so that people are not bludgeoned into opinions and can build up the personal relationship of trust that facilitates the grieving, the sharing and the exorcisms of the psychological though processes and experiences that brought them to their politics.. This is often a sanity compromising process or do we actually become sane through that difficult time when we realize that the personal is political.

“Those of us who have learned to survive by dominating others, as well as those of us who have learned to survive by accepting domination need to socialize ourselves into being strong without playing dominance submission games, into controlling what happens to us without controlling others.” “To this end anarchism must start with a solid feminist consciousness and practice it or it is doomed to just as much internal contradiction and failure as anarchists traditionally fore-saw for hierarchical Marxism.”

superior to himself. This principle does not come to him from outside, it is secreted within him, it is immanent. It constitutes his essence, the essence of society itself. It is the form of the human spirit, a form which takes shape and grows towards perfection only by the relationship that everyday gives birth to social life. Justice in other works, exists in us like love, like notions of beauty of utility of truth, like all our powers and faculties.”

“Chomsky argues that the basis of Humbolt’s social and political thought is his vision ‘of the end of man’...the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the first and indispensable conditions which the possibility of such a development presupposes.”

And as if bearing witness to the successes of the socialization process, women too use this language as Voltairine de Cleyre said “And when modern revolution has thus been carried to the heart of the whole world if it ever shall be, as I hope it will — then may we hope to see a resurrection of that proud spirit of our fathers which put the simple dignity of Man above the gauds of wealth and class and held that to be an American was greater than to be a king. In that day there shall be neither kings nor Americans — only men, over the whole earth MEN.”

Well save me from tomorrow! Sometimes you have to edit your reading with so many (sic) (sic) (sick’s) it renders the text unreadable. And so to what extent than has revolutionary ideology created and spoken to women when the language, the focus and the freedom offered is so often clearly for men? The fact is that women have only so very recently acquired access to education and also do not often have the opportunity for political involvement, consider both the physical and psychological barriers. There have always been a womans voice in political forums and feminism builds upon

these tradition, theories and courage to create a body of thought that specifically addresses womens empowerment.

As Robin Morgan points out in her book *The Demon Lover*, the left have been dominated and led by a male system of violence which has created with reactionary punctuality its “opposite” (duplicate) of action theory and language. She argues that in the search for “legitimacy” that male revolutionaries adopt the forums and language of violence and domination that continue to oppress women but that because these forums are seemingly the sole route for political transgression; that women are enticed and engaged in the struggle that while purporting to be revolutionary it is revolutionary on male terms and will use and betray her. So often feminist have been abused by and asked by male revolutionaries to make their claim and focus subservient to “the wider struggle”. From the women Abolitionists jeered at when they gave a feminist understanding of the problems of male drunkenness and its devastating effects on women, to the suffragists accused of diverting attention from the war effort, to Zetkin, Luxemburg and Goldman all suffering the eye roll and brutality of both the state that is and the state that would be. We see Alexandra Kollontai the only woman involved in the Russian cabinet after the 1917 Revolution being exiled to Norway after all her references to the necessity of a feminist component to revolution were edited and diluted. We are asked to stop pursuing our cause and start defending it but to argue for the validity of our cause that would imply we wanted “in”. Even recently a once respected friend said that “The womens meeting is on now, the real meeting will state in half and hour.” When questioned he added “the full meeting”. The fullness of the lack filling penile participation I supposed, lubricated and made ready, as always in isolation. Ah but how can one quibble about the sloppiness of language when it serves our purposes so well. Thankyou Mirabeau for the following “Every party has its criminals and fools because every party has its men.”

Entering into political circles with men is an exercise in the risk of compromising and being obedient to this attitude or in confronting it. Ridicule is the worst, tokenism is little better and so gloriously rare and acute is our joy when the issues are taken seriously that we could be mistaken for groaning clapping seals unless we are already cringingly braced in anticipation of the backlash of men genuinely perplexed but inarticulate except in the socialized male response; defensiveness. But there must be some way in which to address the political nature of our polarization as sexes in political forums which involve men. There must be some way to point to the coercive power structures that display a hidden elite, invariable of men but also of women. I believe like Peggy Kornegger that feminism could be the connection that links anarchism to the future, both add to each others struggle not to seize but to abolish power, but both go further than the socialists and assert that people are not free because they are surviving, or even economically comfortable. They are only free when they have power over their own lives. Anarchist feminist say that the goal is not to fabricate the new and artificial social forms but to find ways or articulating people so that out of their groupings, the institutions appropriate to a free society might evolve.”

Socialist organizations are popular with a lot of people who are flocking to these groups because it is felt that one must be involved with a revolutionary group,. Indeed. But their gender blind hierarchical bludgeoning from the podium organizations have a typical style of interpreting feminist concerns and concrete grievances as irrelevant to or symptomatic of the larger struggle. “They appeal to the women to suspend their cause temporarily which inevitable leads to a dismissal of women’s issues as tangential, reducing them to subsidiary categories.”

Anarcha-feminist have said that often the “definitive body of theory which is so often the comforting cushion for male reclining, such theoretical over articulation gives one the illusion of responding to a critical situation, without ever really coming to grips