

Emma Goldman in Spain

Book review

Pat Flanagan

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a review of

Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution. David Porter, editor, New Paltz NY, Commonground Press, 1983, 346 pp., \$7.50.

Georg Groddeck once wrote that his aim in life was not to cure others but to become a human being. Throughout Emma Goldman's life, this human struggle was identified with freedom: freedom to love and grow, learn and create, work and seek fulfillment, think, experience and act in every domain of interest.

To be a humanist was thus necessarily to be a libertarian. But liberty was and remains indivisible, for all or none. In a world of power relations, I can be free only if all are. Struggle for equal freedom for all necessarily replaces all untenable "personal/political," "self/others" dichotomies.

Freedom is always freedom for the other fellow. In a world built on institutionalized economic and State violence, the struggle to be human means ceaseless struggle against the root causes of freedom violation. To be what one is for in a world of inhuman unfreedom is necessarily to be a revolutionary.

But what sort of revolutionary was Goldman? How did she live the contradictions of free human existence, the warping pressures of trying to be what one is for, in our repressive, totalitarian times? This superb Goldman anthology by North American libertarian David Porter expressly addresses these questions, with special focus on Emma's last field of struggle, the Spanish revolution of 1936 through 1939.

In Richard Drinnon's pioneering 1961 *Rebel in Paradise*, Drinnon's dominant theme and conclusion is that "In the last analysis, however, Emma remained essentially a rebel rather than a revolutionist." True, one variously can slice and splice the rebel/revolutionary nexus. But to this reviewer at least, one of the many virtues of Porter's comprehensive anthology, invaluable chapter by chapter commentaries and scholarship, is to demonstrate beyond question Goldman's revolutionary passion for freedom.

At root, a rebel is one whose commitment to radical social change accepts confinement within the existing social order. Goldman was never content thus to confine her vision. Despite all her objections to revolutionary violence, Goldman remained constant in her recognition that only institutional social revolution could suffice (in Porter's words) "to end the terror of hierarchically-employed violence once and for all" (215):

"All my life I have insisted that the only test of real freedom is whether people have the right to disagree, because it is very easy indeed to agree...It is, however, nevertheless true that the individual, whether artist or worker, can never hope to assert himself to the fullest unless the mass is emancipated, unless all the evils of our present system are eradicated root and all, and that can only be done by means of fundamental upheavals, not because we want it so, but because those in power...will fight back as has been proved over and over against even the most pacific attempt on the part of the workers to better their condition. It is from this angle that I believe in the inevitability of revolution."

Standing on the shoulders of Goldman's own writings, plus extant Emma biographies by Drinnon, Alix Kates Shulman and Peirats (valuable all), Porter's sumptuously documented 8-year labor of scholarship is outstanding for

its finely sensitive, scrupulous, anti-dogmatic tone. Porter's aims in *Vision* are two-fold, and closely related. First, to illuminate the contradictions of Emma's views and actions concerning the Spanish revolution by setting them against the totality of her life's struggle for human freedom. Second, to show the relevance of Goldman's efforts to live the contradictions of freedom and violence, means and ends, for present day libertarians. Despite several—intolerable—censorship restrictions on archive source material by the Amsterdam International Institute of Social History, he has succeeded magnificently. The contradictions within and between her head and heart over Spain, violence, revolution, anarchist leadership, love, friendship, female emancipation, and comradeship, are lovingly, skillfully laid bare and interwoven. It is a tribute to Porter's generous sensitivity that his text not merely allows but encourages libertarian dialogue—constructive criticism and disagreement—with both Emma and Porter himself.

Consider, for example, Goldman's agonizing dilemma of "friendship" over the counterrevolutionary collaboration of the CNT-FAI leadership in the Barcelona and Madrid governments. Hitherto essentially constant in her rejection of all means/ends apologies for compromise of libertarian principle, Emma allowed her heart and hopes to dominate her head. The end justified the means: she would confine her criticisms of Oliver, Montseny and other members of the collaborating "anarchist dynasty" (Montseny) to the "private" realm. Publicly, her position was one of "understanding" and support.

Porter himself is, I feel, too "understanding" of Emma Goldman on this key dilemma of revolutionary friendship. Her public/private, means/ends collaboration was more than "immensely uncomfortable and ultimately ambiguous"; it merely begs the question to assert that in Emma's "private" revelation of her personal agony and criticisms, she "reasserted the triumph of anarchist consciousness in her own life" (86). In fact, Goldman knew this untenable dodge—logically identical with standard Marxist de facto apologies for Leninism or Stalinism in the USSR—for what it was; hence her "personal agony."

Porter's formulation that Emma ultimately "opposed (though understood) the CNT-FAI leadership's collaboration" (215) thus obliterates essential distinctions. However difficult or even impossible the conditions, Emma's de facto bad faith apology for collaboration was an abuse of the first principle of libertarian friendship—truth.

Of course, nothing is easier than to practice one's principles, be what one is for, in ideal arm-chair theory. Given the contradictions of real world counterrevolutionary violence, however, what is remarkable is surely not that over Spain Goldman compromised her libertarian principles to the extent that she did, but that her activist compromises were so few, her revolutionary integrity so great. Few, non-pacifist anarchists have struggled with comparable sensitivity and understanding concern over the contradictions between libertarian ideals summarized in my opening paragraph and the recognized necessity for violence in revolutionary social change.

Porter's unfolding of Goldman's struggles in thought and action throughout her career on these questions is admirable. Occasionally, however, he suggests an artificial separation—rather than genuine unity—between Goldman's anarchist and revolutionary commitments. In ideal principle, to be sure, for Goldman "by its very violent nature Revolution denies everything Anarchism stands for. The individual ceases to exist, all his rights and liberties go under" (234).

But if prevailing totalitarian conditions, compromised leaderships, and non-revolutionary mass consciousness after Spain meant that "Anarchism is too far ahead of its time" (*ibid*), in actual practice Emma's final position was clear: "while...violence and Anarchism seem contradictory, it is nonetheless a fact that every revolution brings humanity nearer to the libertarian ideal" (238–9). Goldman's—and our—tragedy, however, is that there have hitherto been no successful libertarian revolutions.

Porter's selection and presentation of Goldman's views on the emancipation of women in general and in Spain is perhaps the most contentious part of the book. Not content with Alix Kates Shulman's efforts to turn Emma into a "feminist," Porter presents her as an "anarcha feminist" (Chapter 8).

My unhappiness with this distortion of Emma's consistent, all-or-nothing libertarianism into a contemporary post-'sixties ideology is a matter of fact and logic, not merely abhorrence of barbarous neologisms. In suggesting that "Goldman linked feminism and anarchism" (249; my emphasis), Porter is falsely suggesting that in Goldman's libertarianism there are two distinct sets of values or principles to be joined in practice.

In fact, while Goldman's libertarianism (like that of every other genuine libertarian) entailed uncompromising opposition to discrimination against women (or men) on grounds of sex (or color...), there was, in theory and fact, neither need nor place for any additional "feminism" in any residual, independent sense. To single out one subset of

oppressed human beings for double-standard treatment was for Goldman, and remains, a reduction ad absurdum of what the libertarian commitment to a society of free and equal human beings is all about.

Goldman's passionate opposition to sexist discrimination against women was no more or less than the consistent expression of her total libertarianism. Only by imposing an untenable contemporary "feminist" ideological grid on Emma—a pernicious means/ends separation which necessarily leads in practice to anti-libertarian feminist sexism—can her libertarian commitment be so misread. It is, once again, a merit of Porter's selection and presentation of Goldman's texts that readers can verify this for themselves.

The fact remains that Goldman was a woman—an outstanding one—in a movement still dominated by men. Apart from its many other virtues, one hopes Porter's book may encourage the recovery of other badly neglected women, Marie Louise Berneri for example.

— Barcelona, 1984

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