

Goldman Papers Seized

Various Authors

The following is excerpted from a longer critique of the Emma Goldman Papers Project and its director, Candace Falk. For a copy of the complete article, write: c/o the Last Blast, Box 410151, San Francisco, CA 94141. [Authorship in the print edition is attributed to “Marie Berneri & Francois Ravachol.”]

When we first heard about the Emma Goldman Papers, we were excited by the idea, although admittedly skeptical that a project on an anarchist was being undertaken at an institution such as the University of California at Berkeley. We had questions about who was working on the project, how it was organized, and where their funding came from. Since then, we have heard numerous accounts of problems within the project as well as a number of stories about negative encounters between the project’s director and anarchists in the community. We thought that an investigation into what has gone on there could be useful to other anarchists who may have dealings with the Emma Goldman Papers. What we learned was pretty grim.

The Emma Goldman Papers at the University of California at Berkeley was established to collect all of Emma’s papers—correspondence, essays, speeches—for publication on microfilm which will then be sold to libraries. The director of the project, who represents herself as an authority on Goldman, seems to cling to an image of Goldman as a feminist with just a casual interest in anarchism. In her recently published book, she dismisses what she calls “the anarchist doctrine” as essentially flawed for attributing “all that was negative in society...to government and institutional forces, while human nature was inherently benign.”

From interviews with half a dozen people who have worked for the Emma Goldman Papers, we heard that the director of this project knows little and cares even less about anarchism, past or present. (In her interview with us, she kept on confusing historians of anarchism with anarchist activists, and seemed to think that they were one and the same.) In fact, all of the former employees that we talked to were convinced that this project was more a vehicle for the professional advancement of the project director than a serious study of Emma Goldman. All expressed real doubts that the project would ever be completed.

As we mentioned, the director of the project, Candace Falk, has published her own biography of Goldman called *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman*. (If you read *Mother Jones*, you may remember how the seedier parts of this book—the overt sexual references in Emma’s private correspondence with Ben Reitman—were excerpted under the title *Amorous Anarchist*, with a cover teaser *Found: Emma Goldman’s Erotic Letters*.) The text of the biography is studded with examples of Falk’s attempts to collapse Emma’s political conviction into a mess of psycho-jargon. According to Falk, it was largely Goldman’s loveless and unfulfilled childhood which drove her to seek the unattainable, both personally and in her politics; anarchism is constantly referred to as an “ideal” and seems hopelessly utopian. The challenge that Goldman poses for herself and others for the possibilities of creating new social relationships seems to Falk almost designed to create utter despair; wouldn’t Goldman have been happier had she not reached so far? Falk apparently thinks that if someone believes in anarchism, they must be at least a little crazy.

This project started in 1980 and there are currently about a dozen employees, yet only one (a former Communist Party member who works only one day a week) has ever lasted working for Falk for much more than a year. All the

anarchists, as well as most leftists, and “non-yuppie” feminists have found working with Falk intolerable, and have been forced to quit the project.

Falk has solicited money from anarchists to help finance her projects and has received at least \$10,000 from the anarchist community. When approaching anarchists who have money, she acts as if she is an anarchist. But to others, she emphasizes that she has absolutely no sympathy whatsoever with anarchism (which she seems to regard as a kind of infantile disorder). She seemed to scoff at the notion that people might automatically assume that the founder of such a project was an anarchist or fellow-traveler. She criticized as “closed-minded” the idea that the anarchist community would act differently toward her if she was not a comrade, and likened this to McCarthyism. She maintained that her work on the collection is a “gift” to the anarchists, and that she should be appreciated for it.

It seems clear enough that each employee’s decision to leave stemmed directly or indirectly from Falk’s attitude of ownership toward Emma Goldman’s papers and from her “management style.”

It seems to us that all of these folks did well to leave Candace Falk to the world of academic opportunism where she belongs. It’s a shame that such a vast collection of Emma Goldman’s papers is imprisoned there with her.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/323-summer-1986/goldman-papers-seized>
Fifth Estate #323, Summer, 1986

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