

No Dance; No Revo

What did Emma Goldman really say?

Peter Werbe

2014

So famous is the quote (rendered in a variety of ways), “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be in your revolution,” that it is even emblazoned on a souvenir coffee cup peddled by the Berkeley, Calif.-based Emma Goldman Papers project, and attributed to the turn of the last century anarchist and free love advocate.

There’s a problem with it, though. Two radical archivists with whom I checked couldn’t find an authenticating citation for the quote anywhere in Goldman’s voluminous writings and speeches, making its origins slightly suspect. But of all the words on thousands of pages written by Goldman about liberation and freedom, why does this perhaps fanciful quote remain the most prominent from her long career of fighting for anarchy?

Could it be that there is a human socio-biology that pulls us to the rhythms of dance, which even for a moment negate the straitjacket of authoritarian society with its thousands of rules meant to keep people within the rigid demands of the political state and capitalism?

In a decades old essay, “The Decline of the Choral Dance,” Paul Halmos describes how pre-capitalist people danced together as a community at ceremonies marking life’s significant events, and often just for its joy. Such dancing disappeared as social activity with the rise of capitalist society.

Halmos saw choral dancing as invoking a “rhythmic communal rapture,” a state of being in which the body experiences a sense of freedom and solidarity with everybody and perhaps, everything around us. This emotional ecstasy prefigures the desire for revolution, and hence, is feared by rulers everywhere.

So, let’s dance!

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