

Gendered approaches to anarchist history can generate new ideas about anarchism past, present and future. Paper given at the panel on Anarchism and Feminism, PSA conference, Edinburgh, April 2010.

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The Gender Politics of Anarchist History: Re/Membering Women, Re/Minding Men:

by Judy Greenway

Introduction

In 1876, American anarchist feminist Angela Heywood, fierce critic of what she subsequently termed 'invasive he-ism', wrote of the possibilities for social transformation in a politics which took account of women:

*[L]earning will confess its ignorance of us; books (simply because they are **he** books) will move forward from their alcove shelves and come down ashamed ... to be books ... [W]ars between men's and women's eyes and ideas will become unique and renovating.¹*

¹ Heywood quoted in Blatt (1989) 70, 106.

In this spirit of hopeful critique I want to raise some fundamental questions for anyone trying to write historically about anarchism and/or to write history as an anarchist. I will draw on examples from my historical research into anarchism and gender in Britain, and my own experiences as an anarchist and feminist. Although the history of anarchist gender politics is not the same as the gender politics of anarchist history writing, I hope to show that the two are intertwined.

At their best, anarchist histories can suggest new ways of understanding anarchist theory and practice, challenge current orthodoxies, provide stories to feed the imagination. But as the quote from Heywood implies, anarchist histories can re-produce ignorance. And ignorance, as philosopher Marilyn Frye points out,

*is not a passive state [but] a complex result of many acts and many negligences ... [H]ear the active verb 'to ignore' in the word ignorance.*²

Rather than criticising specific authors or publications, though, my intention in this paper is to generate a discussion about general principles. I will outline some problems and questions and then focus on imagining how new kinds of history might be produced.³

² Frye (1983) 118-9.

³ Pre-emptive notes: Hoping to avoid repetitive headbashing rhythms of attack and defence that distract from the broad structural issues at stake, this paper will not criticize named texts.

And to avoid confusion:

As far as I am concerned, not all anarchist women are feminists; not all anarchist feminists are women; there has been some excellent anarchist feminist history, some written by men; anarchist feminist history is not the same as the history of anarchist feminism, though there is currently a large overlap between the two; no

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Listen to some women talking about their experiences of English anarchism.

- *The men sit and philosophise, while the women get on with the work.*⁴
- *I resent washing [dishes] while men sit and smoke and settle the problems of the universe.*⁵
- *In [the group] I felt like a spectator ... that slightly 'off' feeling, that you're somehow not there, in the way that men are there.*⁶
- *I walked into the room and there were eight men there and I was the only woman ... I said 'Excuse me comrades, where are all the women?' And they said 'They're in the Women's Movement'. And business then proceeded as usual ... the change isn't happening.*⁷

history can be impartial, or cover everything; all approaches have something to offer.

⁴ Jeanne Marin (1937) private correspondence. Quotation provided courtesy of Tessa Marin, June 1988, interview with Judy Greenway.

⁵ Letter from Agnes Inglis to Thomas H. Keell, Feb. 8, 1931, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

⁶ ['Louise' \(1977\) interview with Judy Greenway.](#) From Alderson and Greenway, (1977, 2014).

⁷ ['Emma' \(1977\) interview with Judy Greenway.](#) From Alderson and Greenway, (1977, 2014).

- *The anarchist movement is not gender neutral. We are tired of being told that anarchists don't need to be feminists, because 'anarchism has feminism covered'.⁸*
- *If we begin with immediate personal things, greater and greater opportunities are likely to occur ... I wish to express [anarchism] in my life.⁹*

That last speaker, from 1912, was accused of individualism. Those voices span a hundred years, to 2009, and the recurrent themes are striking: the experience of being in a minority; the sexual division of labour; feeling invisible; women's desire for change, and men's reluctance to take women's issues seriously. These are not specific to anarchism, but have a special resonance for a politics that is meant to stand against all forms of oppression and hierarchy. And while instances of sexism and machismo need to be challenged, deeper structural issues need to be taken on board if anarchism is to broaden its appeal to women.

At last year's Anarchist Movement Conference in London, a group of anarchist feminists intervened to protest male domination of the movement.¹⁰ Their anger and disillusion are not new. In early twentieth century England, many anarchist women found that the insurgent feminism of that period offered them something that they needed: they might not care about the vote, but they did care about fighting for women's freedom. For them, there was no either/or between anarchism and feminism: they needed both.¹¹

⁸ Anon (2009).

⁹ Lily Gair Wilkinson (1912) letter in *The Anarchist*, Dec. 27.

¹⁰ See <http://nopretence.wordpress.com/> accessed March 2, 2010.

¹¹ For example, Sophie and Sasha Kropotkin were among those who participated in women's suffrage demonstrations, and some imprisoned suffragettes found inspiration in Peter Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*.

During the 1970s, anarchist feminist groups and publications flourished within the Women's Liberation Movement. Some of the women involved were new to anarchism; others abandoned the mixed anarchist groups in which they had felt ignored, silenced, and sometimes exploited. A few of us, optimism triumphing over experience, tried remaining active in both kinds of group. Feminism gave us new ways of thinking about our experiences, and the upsurge of women's history inspired some of us to investigate the history of women in anarchism, as one way of helping to understand our own situation.¹²

It may be that anarchism in theory embraces women but, at least in England, women do not in general embrace anarchism. In every mixed anarchist group or meeting I have been to over a period of forty-five years, women have been in the minority, often a tiny minority. The textual spaces of anarchist history writing replicate the physical spaces of the anarchist movement. With some welcome exceptions, here too women are regularly minoritised, segregated, silenced or ignored.¹³ While feminist historiography has flourished since the 1970s, in general anarchist history has been slow to engage with these new developments. Even before you start reading, look at lists of authors and conference speakers, look in indexes, look at chapter and section headings, look at bibliographies:

Excuse me, comrades, where are all the women?

¹² Sheila Rowbotham's 'Hidden From History' was a key inspiration for many of us.

¹³ I am not suggesting that this is necessarily conscious on the part of historians, many of whom have the best of intentions. Some anarchist historians, including Sharif Gemie and Richard Cleminson, have begun to address these issues, eg in Gemie (1996) Cleminson (1998).

The next section of the paper sketches out some different approaches in feminist historiography, noting their relevance for anarchist historians.

Feminist Historiographies

The additive approach

This is a regular starting point for addressing exclusions from history. Existing histories are seen to be lacking an important element, which the new history seeks to add: restoring women to their rightful place in history, as the cliché goes. Initially, the focus tends to be on individuals, often in a search for — if not heroines — women who were precursors of today's feminist concerns. In anarchist history, this approach attempts to add figures such as Emma Goldman or Voltairine de Cleyre to the canon of important anarchists. (I will return later to the issue of 'importance'.) The value of this approach is that besides (re)discovering previously neglected figures, it draws attention to the process of canon formation; at its best it can also demonstrate something about the processes of ignoring and forgetting.

The Emma Goldman Short-Circuit

Within anarchist history writing, the major beneficiary of the additive approach has been Emma Goldman.¹⁴ The one woman known outside anarchist circles, her work was extensively republished in the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement,

¹⁴¹⁴ In one well-known history of anarchism, she is the only one of eight named women to get any substantive discussion, and of the tiny proportion of publications by women in the bibliography, almost half are about her.

and she has been the focus of numerous books and articles since then, some of them excellent; analyzing these would take far more space than I have here.¹⁵ But I want to highlight how invocation of the name 'Emma Goldman' is used to forestall debates about anarchist feminism – what I call the Emma Goldman short-circuit.

More than once, I have heard such comments as: 'Of course, Emma said it all before'. Such remarks are made not out of respect for Goldman, but out of disrespect for what is being said now. It implies that post-Goldman there is nothing else to be said (or listened to) about feminism. Indeed a recent book claims that, before Emma Goldman, feminism was irrelevant to anarchists because it was only about the vote. In fact, the multiple feminisms of Goldman's own time and place concerned themselves with a wide range of issues, and as already mentioned, involved many anarchist women.

Goldman's own relationships with feminists and feminism were deeply ambivalent. Her critique of the women's movement of the period fails to acknowledge its diversity and complexity: in casting herself as the pioneer of true emancipation, she renders other anarchist feminists invisible. To use her to attack anarchism feminism now, compounds this invisibility. Anarchist feminism neither began nor ended with Goldman. Although even pointing this out helps to keep her name in the limelight, the spotlight here is on her role in anarchist historiography (and anti-feminist argumentation).

The Women's Issues Approach

If, reductively described, the additive approach increases the number of women's names in a book's index, the women's issues

¹⁵ A thoughtful historiographical analysis can be found in Jose (2005).

approach increases the number of topics. This approach investigates specific areas of life which have been of particular concern to women, throwing light on previously neglected areas of history such as domestic labour, reproduction, and sexuality, revealing 'hidden' lives. Although it can be seen as a variation of the additive approach, at its best it goes further in its challenge to existing histories, to the ideas of what is or is not important, historically significant or indeed capable of serious study and investigation. It also facilitates an analysis that focuses on groups and movements rather than individuals.

In anarchist history this approach is most evident in writings about sexuality and reproductive freedom; whether or not characterized as 'women's issues' these are areas in which many anarchist women have been actively involved, and so become more visible to researchers. Despite attempts by some historians to characterize such activism as about free speech or as somehow gender neutral, many such women did indeed develop a specifically anarchist-feminist perspective.¹⁶

The danger with an issue-based approach is that it facilitates ghettoizing: so for example the importance of sexuality may be acknowledged in passing in a broad history of anarchism, but it still doesn't get integrated or given a major place: in-depth considerations are graciously left to the women and queers (and a few fellow travellers). Too often, if mentioned at all, 'women's issues', get at best segregated quarters in a chapter or sub-section of a book or paper, at worst a passing mention in a sentence listing all the things anarchism supposedly includes.

¹⁶ See discussion in Greenway (2009).

The Inclusive Approach

This is in some respects a more complex variation of the additive approach. Typically, it takes particular historical events, campaigns, or movements which may have been extensively studied before, and investigates the roles played by women: it seeks to put women back into the picture. This approach has made some major inroads into histories of trade unionism, peace activism, and socialist movements. A noteworthy example from anarchist history is found in studies of the role of women in the Spanish Civil War.¹⁷ Histories which in previous tellings were male-dominated, become more complex as women's roles are acknowledged. Old stories are refreshed and re-evaluated. Women are *re-membered* – they become part of all histories. To those who argue that in anarchism in some times and places there were no women or very few, I would say look again — you may be surprised, as I have been in my own researches. Often it is women who are providing the practical support, the enabling, that keeps more visible activities going:

The men sit and philosophise, while the women get on with the work.

Acknowledging political housework changes the picture and raises again questions about what is seen and what is valued in anarchist histories.

In challenging existing versions of history, the inclusive approach can begin to draw attention to the processes of historical exclusion — from outright misogyny to those blind spots which are inevitable in any, necessarily partial, history. It is perhaps less successful than the women's issues approach at challenging the way those histories

¹⁷ See especially Ackelsberg (1991).

are structured — what determines an era, or counts as a significant event? Why are some stories seen as important, while others never get told?

The Transformative Approach

It was in considering such questions that some feminist historians began to rethink their approach, to ask what would happen if the focus was on gender rather than on women. If, rather than being a natural or a social category, 'woman' can only be understood as a relational term, then men and masculinity need to be looked at in order to understand what is happening to women. If women need to be re-membered, made visible, men are already visible, blindingly so: obscuring other presences. But if men are visible, gender usually is not. Again, a quick look at indexes and chapter headings is telling: most commonly a proliferation of men's names compared to women's; 'women' or 'feminism' sometimes present as a category, while 'men' or 'masculinity' might as well be an endangered species.

Excuse me, comrades, where are all the men?

'Re-minding men' in history means paying attention to what it means to be a man in specific historical contexts; analysing masculinities as they emerge from and affect events, organizations, and patterns of social interaction.

That ... feeling, that you're somehow not there, in the way that men are there.

If women are affected by the experience of being in a minority, what of the often taken-for granted experience of being in a

dominant majority? This is not simply a question of numbers, but one of relationality in the construction of identities and the distribution of power. As well as raising such fundamental issues, this approach allows new ways of investigating and understanding such male-dominated activities as warfare.¹⁸ Recently a focus on constructions of masculinity has begun to be evident in some anarchist histories of sexuality, particularly male homosexuality, but much more remains to be done.¹⁹

One risk in the gender approach is that it can be used to suggest that women's history is somehow old-fashioned or theoretically deficient. Conversely, it can allow historians to continue, from a new, 'improved' perspective, to indulge their fascination with male subjects, so re-iterating men's place at the centre of historical attention. But at its best, a gendered history re-minds us of the construction of femininities and masculinities in and through the writing of histories. In speaking of men's 'place' as well as women's 'place' it can begin to displace not just those categories, but the power relations which underpin them.

Methodologies

I want to begin with immediate personal things.

The seventies feminist slogan 'the personal is political' echoes what many anarchists, particularly women, have been arguing since anarchism was first thought of. So far I have looked primarily at approaches to subject matter but I want to speak very briefly about

¹⁸ On gender, identity, and power, see the ongoing body of work by Catherine Hall; on warfare, see recent works by Michael Roper and Joanna Bourke.

¹⁹ See the ongoing work of Richard Cleminson, for example.

feminist methodologies as well. While some anarchist academics scorn biography and autobiography as somehow irrelevant to or distracting from theoretical and/or historical analysis, never mind revolutionary practice, feminist historians pioneered the now commonplace approach which foregrounds the act of investigating and producing history, placing the author firmly in the picture.²⁰ This focus on the processes of research and narrative construction, the demystification of academic expertise, fits well with the anarchist emphases on process, the interrelationship of means and ends, and subversion of professional authority.

'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', wrote African American feminist Audre Lorde in her critique of white academic feminism.²¹ As well as embarking on the exciting if difficult process of inventing new methods of demolition and rebuilding, we could also try dismantling the tools of history writing and seeing if they can be re-assembled into something fitter for our purposes. Ways of doing that include using an imaginative ju-jitsu to subvert and unbalance the restraints of academic research; acknowledging partiality — in all senses — as something inevitable, tricky, but potentially invigorating; seeking out and reproducing a multiplicity of narratives for a multiplicity of audiences; interacting with audiences to generate new practices.²²

Re-making anarchist histories.

[W]ars between men's and women's eyes and ideas will become unique and renovating.

²⁰ See particularly the work of Liz Stanley (1992).

²¹ Lorde (1979).

²² I discuss some of these points in Greenway (2008).

So what might all this mean for re-making anarchist histories? For me the most valuable kinds of histories speak in many voices; raise more questions than answers; provide cautionary and inspirational stories and analyses which feed the imagination, suggest new possibilities. Making space in anarchist histories for women could be part of the process of opening up anarchism — making space not just by moving over to fit a few more in, or adding an extension, but rethinking the whole structure.

Who counts as history?

All the approaches I have discussed (and others I have had to omit) have something to offer to this process. The recovery of 'lost' individuals widens our understanding of the many ways of living as an anarchist, and how that may differ according to gender. And noticing the processes of exclusion, of forgetting, raises questions about the reproduction of hierarchies of importance which anarchists (not just historians) need to address.

What counts as history?

Greater attention to so-called women's issues would mean that the theory and practice of domestic labour, sexuality, reproduction, and child-rearing (just for starters) were recognized not as add-on 'topics' but as centrally important for understanding social organization, power relationships, and the potential for change.

Inclusion would mean always looking to see what women were doing in relation to a particular movement or event, whether in presence or absence. What counts as political work? How are

activists, movements, communities, economically, physically and emotionally sustained and by whom?²³

Where do we look?

When I first began giving talks about doing anarchist feminist history many years ago, I emphasized the difficulties, the lack of sources, as well as the active erasures. There are difficulties. But if we challenge the hierarchical approach which sees writing and fighting vie for place as Top Anarchist Activity, we can begin to investigate other sources, ask different kinds of questions, gain new inspirations. For example, given the overlaps between anarchism and feminism, the records and recollections of feminist movements repay attention. The peace movement has attracted many anarchist women (and men) anxious to connect international politics with questions and experiments in their daily life.²⁴ There are many other examples where understanding a wider political milieu, rather than searching for a pure stream of anarchism, would produce a very different picture.²⁵

It would be useful to have more empirical information. Have woman been always, everywhere, a minority in anarchism? Is this (as it seems to me) more so than in other left/revolutionary groupings? Such questions are hard to answer in a movement which is mostly without parties or membership lists – but subscription lists, minutes, letter pages as opposed to editorial, can provide clues.

²³ I am thinking here of partnerships like those of Milly Witcop and Rudolf Rocker, Lillian Wolfe and Tom Keell, where in a lifetime of shared politics, it was the men's activities that were seen as the 'real work'.

²⁴ See, for example, the frequent discussions of anarchism, feminism, and sexuality in *Peace News* in the 1960s and 70s.

²⁵ Sheila Rowbotham's exemplary biography of Edward Carpenter demonstrates how a whole complex political, social and cultural milieu can be brought to life.

And for more recent times, oral histories can give a voice to women who may not have left traces in print. Looking at changes over time, and variations between different groups and activities can go beyond counting heads to the beginnings of an analysis of the political dynamics of gender.

The lively debates in feminist historiography also have much to offer, not only on questions of gender, but – also of relevance to anarchists – for thinking about processes of marginalisation and misrepresentation.

Changing the subject

Anarchism is not gender neutral, and anarchist histories which fail to recognise this will continue to re-produce practices of masculinity. We need to ask, in specific contexts, whether and how the experience of anarchism in theory and practice differ for women and for men. Gender cannot be transcended if it is not even recognised as a significant factor.

Asking hard questions, adding new perspectives, would benefit anarchist history as a whole. Each book, each article or letter or interview is part of an ongoing conversation about the relationship between the past present and future of anarchism. The more voices there are in that conversation, the better for us all.

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Notes