

Elephant Archives

On Feminism

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An anarchist who based her revolutionary intervention in social struggles precisely on her being a woman was Emma Goldman, and a clear testimony to this is to be found in her writings.

The obstacles encountered by Emma in her thirty years of anarchist propaganda as well as the polemics she maintained still exist in the revolutionary movement today, and concern no small part of the struggles for women's liberation.

When Emma clashed with the quite evident male chauvinism of well-known anarchists who had often spent their whole lives in the struggle for the social revolution, and argued with men like Most or Kropotkin, she did so first of all as a woman, refusing the marginal role that these men were imposing on her, almost unconsciously. When she brought the sexual question to the fore, pointing out the discrimination that woman is subjected to and the resulting social consequences very clearly, she often caused a scandal and raised suspicion within the revolutionary organisations themselves. And when, in 1900, at the international anarchist conference in Paris, they 'suggested' that she not take up the sexual question so as not 'to make a bad impression' on the press present, she got up and left.

This situation still largely persists, or rather, with the sharpening of the thematics and deepening of analyses it has become more acute, radicalising in incommunicable positions in a fictitious clash between male and female comrades, leading to a great deal of incomprehension.

Before going into the question more specifically, it is important to clarify something. The liberation of woman, therefore feminism, cannot cohabit easily with revolutionary mythologies of the authoritarian kind (and now we will see why); when this cohabitation exists, it is nearly always due to an instrumental compromise. Being disposed to confrontation over the past few years, the feminist movement has found itself surrounded by instruments from

the marxist analysis and has used them. It was not deemed the right moment, also to avoid having too many irons in the fire, to go into the fact that these instruments came from an authoritarian perspective of revolutionary intervention, as they preferred to proceed first for the construction of a structure of intervention, putting off theoretical clarification till later. When some patron saint was attacked, as happened with Hegel, it was done in an attempt to 'save the situation', as clearly happened with the 'reading' of the marxist classics which, after all, were all written (or nearly all) by men, including the Luxemburg who was a woman, but reasoned like a man.

Basically, it seems to us that the revolution women are struggling for cannot be reached through an authoritarian perspective, in the sense of women being in command of the future power 'elite' (guiding party of the proletariat) instead of men. To think like this would be to simply repeat the errors of the struggle for emancipation carried out by women in the past that led them to enter professions that had previously been reserved for men, as well as leading them into Parliament and voting; but it did not take them one inch along the road to freedom and the feminist revolution. Not just that. Starting off handicapped by centuries and centuries of 'gynaeceum', they had to make superhuman efforts to make themselves equal with the 'privileged' male subjects, only to end up contributing to the production of capitalist wealth.

One could object to all this with the discourse of the progressive evolution of the struggles, the maturation of the exploited masses and so on, but that would not change the basic problem: the feminist revolution cannot be built on the authoritarian model, it must set itself out in a qualitatively different way, attacking the centres of male power, not in order to substitute them with another (female) one, but eliminating them completely. In this per-

can only have outlets if it links itself to that other total institution, the society of exploitation, and that the persistence of the latter will always and continually prevent the destruction of the first. And realising that developing a class analysis, they individuate enemies and separate them from the allies, they organise as a revolutionary minority, choose objectives and the means for reaching them. Only then are they really dangerous for power, and only then does the repression become ferocious, because it is no longer possible to draw them into the trap of reduced sentences, bail, amnesty, prison reform; transformisms of a power that means, in this way, to transfer the ghettoised from one ghetto (a smaller one) into another (bigger one).

And the feminist movement is also growing, putting aside its discriminant on the basis of sex where all its efforts were addressed at the beginning. The struggle against the other sex only has reason to be when inserted within the struggle against the boss, against the institution that defends the boss, against the mechanism he has created to perpetuate exploitation. In this wider perspective, the feminist struggle also becomes fundamental, forcing everybody to become aware of a problem that (for the privileged) appears to be secondary. Only when this link is made will the feminist movement appear in all its dangerousness for power; and that is because, during that phase it will not demand anything specific 'for women', but will demand it for all the exploited: a totally revolutionary demand, that only those who have undergone the worst of all exploitation can make. And against the rage of women, it will not be easy for power to find an accommodating solution.

that restricts woman within a precise ghetto of exploitation: the ghetto of social discrimination. Woman comes to be valued as a sex object. Whatever she does, no matter what activity she carries out, in whatever field she involves herself, her sex or rather that which men think her sex to be, arrives before her. This cannot fail to wound the woman and lead her to the conscience that if she wants to reach the feminist revolution, she must, before anything else, knock this barrier down. But the knocking down of this barrier cannot happen without the contemporaneous knocking down of other barriers. The woman will always be considered a sex object so long as a world divided into classes exists, because by reducing her to an object she is enclosed within the ghetto, with that same process of criminalisation that comes to be adopted with the other dangerous minorities: prisoners, the alienated, etc.

And the great charge of revolutionary violence comes from her consciousness of feeling herself closed within the ghetto. With a not dissimilar process, prisoners today are gaining consciousness of their situation as ghettoised and are exploding in revolts that are contained with more and more difficulty. Also here we are coming up against not easily avoidable dangers. One runs the risk of emphasizing the 'prisoner' only because he is an human being restricted inside four walls. This, it seems to us, the first moment of growth of the movement, the moment in which, precisely, the movement objectifies itself and does it with the most macroscopic means it has at disposition: in the case of prison, prison as a building, as total institution; in the case of the woman, sex, as a net discriminant between two different worlds, that of the man (dominator) and the woman (dominated).

But then the movement grows. It leaves the period of infancy in which it was recognisable through the most immediate characteristic, and develops its own revolutionary depth. In the same way prisoners realise that the struggle against the total institution

spective it seems to us that the feminist revolution and the anarchist revolution must coincide.

The final aim, however, cannot subtract women (and anarchists) from involvement in the partial structure, a proper analysis of this structure and intervention in the revolutionary sense.

In the first place, escaping from the illusion of quantity. In fact, what were the contrasts between Goldman and Kropotkin or Most, and what are the disagreements between many female and male comrades today? Precisely in the one or the others' claim to count themselves, to measure their capacity of intervention through the number of militants, according to the party schema. Basically, Most had the German-speaking anarchist movement in the United States in his hands. He knew that many German comrades, both due to their religious roots as well as the duality in men who find it difficult to avoid an evaluation of women based on sex, did not like female comrades (who are women after all) to get involved in certain questions (a residual of hypocritical respectability). Hence the contrast with Goldman and his concern that she might 'discredit' the movement, i.e. might cause the number of members to decrease.

Whoever enters the quantitative logic is struggling in a revolutionary perspective, but with inadequate means. Whoever is constantly measuring, ends up fixing an objective line of approach that they are not prepared to question. Their point of reference is the movement of the exploited in general, with the ideas that it possesses at a given time. Now, as far as the problem of woman is concerned, there is no doubt that the movement of the exploited as a whole has quite retrograde ideas on the subject (woman as sex object, as domestic angel, at best as companion at work). Consequently, whoever decides to enter the quantitative logic takes it upon themselves to influence these ideas with political propaganda and action, but, at the same time cannot keep a check on

it, so cannot fail to 'suggest' to the (woman) comrade to 're-enter the ranks'). Anarchists are no different from Marxists in this aspect. Even the female comrades who enter the quantitative logic (building the movement) cannot act otherwise (if they really want to build something).

So, it seems to us that a good part of the efforts of the feminist movement is quite rightly aimed at repelling the chauvinistic pulsions of male comrades. It should also be aimed at analyzing the objectives of the movement and its structures, however, in order to avoid falling into the contradiction of 'make room for me'.

Then there is the other side of the question. If the feminist revolution cannot fail to be anarchist, it follows that the methodology of intervention cannot fail to be similar, if not the same. And how do anarchists see themselves concerning the mass? And how do women place themselves concerning the same problem?

Anarchists do not present themselves as holders of the truth, as a guide, or as revolutionary memory. In fact, they do not even place themselves 'before the masses', they belong to the mass. When they give significance to some organisation of theirs, they do it in order to 'deepen' the revolutionary event because they are forced to approach the revolution gradually, they have a strategic need for the struggle against power. They must not fall into the quantitative equivocation. It is not big anarchist movements that determine liberatory-revolutionary events. A great number of conditions give rise to the revolutionary event, anarchists are just one component, the one that immediately addresses itself towards the liberatory deed, which could be cast aside and killed by an interested minority.

The same could be said for women. If they stand before the mass as simply women, they cannot but discriminate between two distinct groups of a different sex within the mass. In this way 'all women' come to have a revolutionary potential, which remains to

be seen. In the same way, all workers become part of an hypothetical revolutionary potential, even policemen, judges, politicians, mafiosi. Of course, starting from a quantitative logic this solution is very convenient, makes the woman feel strong, makes her part of a 'great mass of sisters', but it certainly doesn't take her towards liberation. Not only, but starting solely from the condition of being a woman, this condition becomes linked with the concept of 'truth' and the woman becomes carrier of truth, which the other half of the mass (the males) must be made to understand, by any means possible.

On the other hand, if the woman sees herself as an anti-authoritarian revolutionary, renounces the perspective of taking over anything in order to crush the other sex, perhaps even more than she herself has been crushed until now, but puts all her involvement in the liberatory revolutionary event, inserting herself within organisational structures which, starting from the feminist matrix, make it possible to valorise thematics and motivations that put the problem of woman in first place. Then it will no longer be a question of dividing the world into two large slices, but of showing it to be divided as it is by capitalist exploitation, always denouncing this division more and more, exasperating it, until the day of the final liberation and abolition of every division, including that based on sexual differences.

That said, we are not suggesting that women should 'soften' the violent charge exploding within them as they become aware of the double exploitation they suffer, in order to enter the 'revolutionary movement' 'purified'. Unfortunately, even between comrades struggling for revolution, who are making efforts in the direction of liberation, but who precisely for this are not 'freed', residuals of prejudice and discrimination remain that are not easily eradicated. The woman feels all that and sharpens her struggle. But this situation is a consequence of capitalist exploitation