

A.3.5 What is Anarcha-Feminism?

Although opposition to the state and all forms of authority had a strong voice among the early feminists of the 19th century, the more recent feminist movement which began in the 1960's was founded upon anarchist practice. This is where the term anarcha-feminism came from, referring to women anarchists who act within the larger feminist and anarchist movements to remind them of their principles.

The modern anarcha-feminists built upon the feminist ideas of previous anarchists, both male and female. Indeed, anarchism and feminism have always been closely linked. Many outstanding feminists have also been anarchists, including the pioneering Mary Wollstonecraft (author of **A Vindication of the Rights of Woman**), the Commune Louise Michel, and the American anarchists (and tireless champions of women's freedom) Voltairine de Cleyre and Emma Goldman (for the former, see her essays "*Sex Slavery*", "*Gates of Freedom*", "*The Case of Woman vs. Orthodoxy*", "*Those Who Marry Do Ill*"; for the latter see "*The Traffic in Women*", "*Woman Suffrage*", "*The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation*", "*Marriage and Love*" and "*Victims of Morality*", for example). **Freedom**, the world's oldest anarchist newspaper, was founded by Charlotte Wilson in 1886. Anarchist women like Virgilia D'Andrea and Rose Pesota played important roles in both the libertarian and labour movements. The "**Mujeres Libres**" ("*Free Women*") movement in Spain during the Spanish revolution is a classic example of women anarchists organising themselves to defend their basic freedoms and create a society based on women's freedom and equality (see **Free Women of Spain** by Martha Ackelsberg for more details on this important organisation). In addition, all the male major anarchist thinkers (bar Proudhon) were firm supporters of women's equality. For example, Bakunin opposed patriarchy and how the law "*subjects [women] to the absolute domination of the man.*" He argued that "*[e]qual rights must belong to men and women*" so that women can "*become independent and be free to forge their own way of life.*" He looked forward to the end of "*the authoritarian juridical family*" and "*the full sexual freedom of women.*" [**Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 396 and p. 397]

Thus anarchism has since the 1860s combined a radical critique of capitalism and the state with an equally powerful critique of patriarchy (rule by men). Anarchists, particularly female ones, recognised that modern society was dominated by men. As Ana Maria Mozzoni (an Italian anarchist immigrant in Buenos Aires) put it, women "*will find that the priest who damns you is a man; that the legislator who oppresses you is a man, that the husband who reduces you to an **object** is a man; that the libertine who harasses you is a man; that the capitalist who enriches himself with your ill-paid work and the speculator who calmly pockets the price of your body, are men.*" Little has changed since then. Patriarchy still exists and, to quote the anarchist paper **La Question Sociale**, it is still usually the case that women "*are slaves both in social and private life. If you are a proletarian, you have two tyrants: the man and the boss. If bourgeois, the only sovereignty left to you is that of frivolity and coquetry.*" [quoted by Jose Moya, **Italians in Buenos Aires's Anarchist Movement**, pp. 197-8 and p. 200]

Anarchism, therefore, is based on an awareness that fighting patriarchy is as important as fighting against the state or capitalism. For "*[y]ou can have no free, or just, or equal society, nor anything approaching it, so long as womanhood is bought, sold, housed, clothed, fed, and **protected**, as a chattel.*" [Voltairine de Cleyre, "*The Gates of Freedom*", pp. 235-250, Eugenia C. Delamotte, **Gates of Freedom**, p. 242] To quote Louise Michel:

"The first thing that must change is the relationship between the sexes. Humanity has two parts, men and women, and we ought to be walking hand in hand; instead there is antagonism, and it will last as long as the 'stronger' half controls, or think its controls, the 'weaker' half." [**The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel**, p. 139]

Thus anarchism, like feminism, fights patriarchy and for women's equality. Both share much common history and a concern about individual freedom, equality and dignity for members of the female sex (although, as we will explain in more depth below, anarchists have always been very critical of mainstream/liberal feminism as not going far enough). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the new wave of feminism of the sixties expressed itself in an anarchistic manner and drew much inspiration from anarchist figures such as Emma Goldman. Cathy Levine points out that, during this time, *"independent groups of women began functioning without the structure, leaders, and other factotums of the male left, creating, independently and simultaneously, organisations similar to those of anarchists of many decades and regions. No accident, either."* [*The Tyranny of Tyranny*, **Quiet Rumours: An Anarcha-Feminist Reader**, p. 66] It is no accident because, as feminist scholars have noted, women were among the first victims of hierarchical society, which is thought to have begun with the rise of patriarchy and ideologies of domination during the late Neolithic era. Marilyn French argues (in **Beyond Power**) that the first major social stratification of the human race occurred when men began dominating women, with women becoming in effect a "lower" and "inferior" social class.

The links between anarchism and modern feminism exist in both ideas and action. Leading feminist thinker Carole Pateman notes that her *"discussion [on contract theory and its authoritarian and patriarchal basis] owes something to"* libertarian ideas, that is the *"anarchist wing of the socialist movement."* [**The Sexual Contract**, p. 14] Moreover, she noted in the 1980s how the *"major locus of criticism of authoritarian, hierarchical, undemocratic forms of organisation for the last twenty years has been the women's movement . . . After Marx defeated Bakunin in the First International, the prevailing form of organisation in the labour movement, the nationalised industries and in the left sects has mimicked the hierarchy of the state . . . The women's movement has rescued and put into practice the long-submerged idea [of anarchists like Bakunin] that movements for, and experiments in, social change must 'prefigure' the future form of social organisation."* [**The Disorder of Women**, p. 201]

Peggy Kornegger has drawn attention to these strong connections between feminism and anarchism, both in theory and practice. *"The radical feminist perspective is almost pure anarchism,"* she writes. *"The basic theory postulates the nuclear family as the basis of all authoritarian systems. The lesson the child learns, from father to teacher to boss to god, is to obey the great anonymous voice of Authority. To graduate from childhood to adulthood is to become a full-fledged automaton, incapable of questioning or even of thinking clearly."* [*Anarchism: The Feminist Connection*, **Quiet Rumours: An Anarcha-Feminist Reader**, p. 26] Similarly, the Zero Collective argues that Anarcha-feminism *"consists in recognising the anarchism of feminism and consciously developing it."* [*Anarchism/Feminism*, pp. 3-7, **The Raven**, no. 21, p. 6]

Anarcha-feminists point out that authoritarian traits and values, for example, domination, exploitation, aggressiveness, competitiveness, desensitisation etc., are highly valued in hierarchical civilisations and are traditionally referred to as "masculine." In contrast, non-authoritarian traits and values such as co-operation, sharing, compassion, sensitivity, warmth, etc., are traditionally regarded as "feminine" and are devalued. Feminist scholars have traced this phenomenon back to the growth of patriarchal societies during the early Bronze Age and their conquest of co-operatively based "organic" societies in which "feminine" traits and values were prevalent and respected. Following these conquests, however, such values came to be regarded as "inferior," especially for a man, since men were in charge of domination and exploitation under patriarchy. (See e.g. Riane Eisler, **The Chalice and the Blade**; Elise Boulding, **The Underside of History**). Hence anarcha-feminists have referred to the creation of a non-authoritarian, anarchist society based on co-operation, sharing, mutual aid, etc. as the "feminisation of society."

Anarcha-feminists have noted that "feminising" society cannot be achieved without both self-management and decentralisation. This is because the patriarchal-authoritarian values and traditions

they wish to overthrow are embodied and reproduced in hierarchies. Thus feminism implies decentralisation, which in turn implies self-management. Many feminists have recognised this, as reflected in their experiments with collective forms of feminist organisations that eliminate hierarchical structure and competitive forms of decision making. Some feminists have even argued that directly democratic organisations are specifically female political forms. [see e.g. Nancy Hartsock *"Feminist Theory and the Development of Revolutionary Strategy,"* in Zeila Eisenstein, ed., **Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism**, pp. 56-77] Like all anarchists, anarcha-feminists recognise that self-liberation is the key to women's equality and thus, freedom. Thus Emma Goldman:

"Her development, her freedom, her independence, must come from and through herself. First, by asserting herself as a personality, and not as a sex commodity. Second, by refusing the right of anyone over her body; by refusing to bear children, unless she wants them, by refusing to be a servant to God, the State, society, the husband, the family, etc., by making her life simpler, but deeper and richer. That is, by trying to learn the meaning and substance of life in all its complexities; by freeing herself from the fear of public opinion and public condemnation." [**Anarchism and Other Essays**, p. 211]

Anarcha-feminism tries to keep feminism from becoming influenced and dominated by authoritarian ideologies of either the right or left. It proposes direct action and self-help instead of the mass reformist campaigns favoured by the "official" feminist movement, with its creation of hierarchical and centralist organisations and its illusion that having more women bosses, politicians, and soldiers is a move towards "equality." Anarcha-feminists would point out that the so-called "management science" which women have to learn in order to become managers in capitalist companies is essentially a set of techniques for controlling and exploiting wage workers in corporate hierarchies, whereas "feminising" society requires the elimination of capitalist wage-slavery and managerial domination altogether. Anarcha-feminists realise that learning how to become an effective exploiter or oppressor is not the path to equality (as one member of the *Mujeres Libres* put it, "[w]e did not want to substitute a feminist hierarchy for a masculine one" [quoted by Martha A. Ackelsberg, **Free Women of Spain**, pp. 22-3] -- also see [section B.1.4](#) for a further discussion on patriarchy and hierarchy).

Hence anarchism's traditional hostility to liberal (or mainstream) feminism, while supporting women's liberation and equality. Federica Montseny (a leading figure in the Spanish Anarchist movement) argued that such feminism advocated equality for women, but did not challenge existing institutions. She argued that (mainstream) feminism's only ambition is to give to women of a particular class the opportunity to participate more fully in the existing system of privilege and if these institutions *"are unjust when men take advantage of them, they will still be unjust if women take advantage of them."* [quoted by Martha A. Ackelsberg, **Op. Cit.**, p. 119] Thus, for anarchists, women's freedom did not mean an equal chance to become a boss or a wage slave, a voter or a politician, but rather to be a free and equal individual co-operating as equals in free associations. *"Feminism,"* stressed Peggy Kornegger, *"doesn't mean female corporate power or a woman President; it means no corporate power and no Presidents. The Equal Rights Amendment will not transform society; it only gives women the 'right' to plug into a hierarchical economy. Challenging sexism means challenging all hierarchy -- economic, political, and personal. And that means an anarcha-feminist revolution."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 27]

Anarchism, as can be seen, included a class and economic analysis which is missing from mainstream feminism while, at the same time, showing an awareness to domestic and sex-based power relations which eluded the mainstream socialist movement. This flows from our hatred of hierarchy. As Mozzoni put it, *"Anarchy defends the cause of all the oppressed, and because of this,*

and in a special way, it defends your [women's] cause, oh! women, doubly oppressed by present society in both the social and private spheres." [quoted by Moya, **Op. Cit.**, p. 203] This means that, to quote a Chinese anarchist, what anarchists "*mean by equality between the sexes is not just that the men will no longer oppress women. We also want men to no longer to be oppressed by other men, and women no longer to be oppressed by other women.*" Thus women should "*completely overthrow rulership, force men to abandon all their special privileges and become equal to women, and make a world with neither the oppression of women nor the oppression of men.*" [He Zhen, quoted by Peter Zarrow, **Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture**, p. 147]

So, in the historic anarchist movement, as Martha Ackelsberg notes, liberal/mainstream feminism was considered as being "*too narrowly focused as a strategy for women's emancipation; sexual struggle could not be separated from class struggle or from the anarchist project as a whole.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 119] Anarcha-feminism continues this tradition by arguing that all forms of hierarchy are wrong, not just patriarchy, and that feminism is in conflict with its own ideals if it desires simply to allow women to have the same chance of being a boss as a man does. They simply state the obvious, namely that they "*do not believe that power in the hands of women could possibly lead to a non-coercive society*" nor do they "*believe that anything good can come out of a mass movement with a leadership elite.*" The "*central issues are always power and social hierarchy*" and so people "*are free only when they have power over their own lives.*" [Carole Ehrlich, "*Socialism, Anarchism and Feminism*", **Quiet Rumours: An Anarcha-Feminist Reader**, p. 44] For if, as Louise Michel put it, "*a proletarian is a slave; the wife of a proletarian is even more a slave*" ensuring that the wife experiences an equal level of oppression as the husband misses the point. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 141]

Anarcha-feminists, therefore, like all anarchists oppose capitalism as a denial of liberty. Their critique of hierarchy in the society does not start and end with patriarchy. It is a case of wanting freedom everywhere, of wanting to "*[b]reak up . . . every home that rests in slavery! Every marriage that represents the sale and transfer of the individuality of one of its parties to the other! Every institution, social or civil, that stands between man and his right; every tie that renders one a master, another a serf.*" [Voltaireine de Cleyre, "*The Economic Tendency of Freethought*", **The Voltairine de Cleyre Reader**, p. 72] The ideal that an "equal opportunity" capitalism would free women ignores the fact that any such system would still see working class women oppressed by bosses (be they male or female). For anarcha-feminists, the struggle for women's liberation cannot be separated from the struggle against hierarchy **as such**. As L. Susan Brown puts it:

"Anarchist-feminism, as an expression of the anarchist sensibility applied to feminist concerns, takes the individual as its starting point and, in opposition to relations of domination and subordination, argues for non-instrumental economic forms that preserve individual existential freedom, for both men and women." [**The Politics of Individualism**, p. 144]

Anarcha-feminists have much to contribute to our understanding of the origins of the ecological crisis in the authoritarian values of hierarchical civilisation. For example, a number of feminist scholars have argued that the domination of nature has paralleled the domination of women, who have been identified with nature throughout history (See, for example, Caroline Merchant, **The Death of Nature**, 1980). Both women and nature are victims of the obsession with control that characterises the authoritarian personality. For this reason, a growing number of both radical ecologists and feminists are recognising that hierarchies must be dismantled in order to achieve their respective goals.

In addition, anarcha-feminism reminds us of the importance of treating women equally with men while, at the same time, respecting women's differences from men. In other words, that recognising and respecting diversity includes women as well as men. Too often many male anarchists assume that, because they are (in theory) opposed to sexism, they are not sexist in practice. Such an

assumption is false. Anarcha-feminism brings the question of consistency between theory and practice to the front of social activism and reminds us all that we must fight not only external constraints but also internal ones.

This means that anarcha-feminism urges us to practice what we preach. As Voltairine de Cleyre argued, *"I never expect men to **give** us liberty. No, Women, we are not **worth** it, until we **take** it."* This involves *"insisting on a new code of ethics founded on the law of equal freedom: a code recognising the complete individuality of woman. By making rebels wherever we can. By ourselves **living our beliefs** We are revolutionists. And we shall use propaganda by speech, deed, and most of all life -- **being** what we teach."* Thus anarcha-feminists, like all anarchists, see the struggle against patriarchy as being a struggle of the oppressed for their own self-liberation, for *"as a class I have nothing to hope from men . . . No tyrant ever renounced his tyranny until he had to. If history ever teaches us anything it teaches this. Therefore my hope lies in creating rebellion in the breasts of women."* ["*The Gates of Freedom*", pp. 235-250, Eugenia C. Delamotte, **Gates of Freedom**, p. 249 and p. 239] This was sadly as applicable within the anarchist movement as it was outside it in patriarchal society.

Faced with the sexism of male anarchists who spoke of sexual equality, women anarchists in Spain organised themselves into the **Mujeres Libres** organisation to combat it. They did not believe in leaving their liberation to some day after the revolution. Their liberation was an integral part of that revolution and had to be started today. In this they repeated the conclusions of anarchist women in Illinois Coal towns who grew tired of hearing their male comrades *"shout in favour"* of sexual equality *"in the future society"* while doing nothing about it in the here and now. They used a particularly insulting analogy, comparing their male comrades to priests who *"make false promises to the starving masses . . . [that] there will be rewards in paradise."* They argued that mothers should make their daughters *"understand that the difference in sex does not imply inequality in rights"* and that as well as being *"rebels against the social system of today,"* they *"should fight especially against the oppression of men who would like to retain women as their moral and material inferior."* [Ersilia Grandi, quoted by Caroline Waldron Merithew, **Anarchist Motherhood**, p. 227] They formed the *"Luisa Michel"* group to fight against capitalism and patriarchy in the upper Illinois valley coal towns over three decades before their Spanish comrades organised themselves.

For anarcha-feminists, combating sexism is a key aspect of the struggle for freedom. It is not, as many Marxist socialists argued before the rise of feminism, a diversion from the "real" struggle against capitalism which would somehow be automatically solved after the revolution. It is an essential part of the struggle:

"We do not need any of your titles . . . We want none of them. What we do want is knowledge and education and liberty. We know what our rights are and we demand them. Are we not standing next to you fighting the supreme fight? Are you not strong enough, men, to make part of that supreme fight a struggle for the rights of women? And then men and women together will gain the rights of all humanity." [Louise Michel, **Op. Cit.**, p. 142]

A key part of this revolutionising modern society is the transformation of the current relationship between the sexes. Marriage is a particular evil for *"the old form of marriage, based on the Bible, 'till death doth part,' . . . [is] an institution that stands for the sovereignty of the man over the women, of her complete submission to his whims and commands."* Women are reduced *"to the function of man's servant and bearer of his children."* [Goldman, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 220-1] Instead of this, anarchists proposed *"free love,"* that is couples and families based on free agreement between equals than one partner being in authority and the other simply obeying. Such unions would be without sanction of church or state for *"two beings who love each other do not need permission from a third to go to bed."* [Mozzoni, quoted by Moya, **Op. Cit.**, p. 200]

Equality and freedom apply to more than just relationships. For *"if social progress consists in a constant tendency towards the equalisation of the liberties of social units, then the demands of progress are not satisfied so long as half society, Women, is in subjection. . . . Woman . . . is beginning to feel her servitude; that there is a requisite acknowledgement to be won from her master before he is put down and she exalted to -- Equality. This acknowledgement is, **the freedom to control her own person.**"* [Voltairine de Cleyre, *"The Gates of Freedom"*, **Op. Cit.**, p. 242] Neither men nor state nor church should say what a woman does with her body. A logical extension of this is that women must have control over their own reproductive organs. Thus anarcha-feminists, like anarchists in general, are pro-choice and pro-reproductive rights (i.e. the right of a woman to control her own reproductive decisions). This is a long standing position. Emma Goldman was persecuted and incarcerated because of her public advocacy of birth control methods and the extremist notion that women should decide when they become pregnant (as feminist writer Margaret Anderson put it, *"In 1916, Emma Goldman was sent to prison for advocating that 'women need not always keep their mouth shut and their wombs open.'"*).

Anarcha-feminism does not stop there. Like anarchism in general, it aims at changing **all** aspects of society not just what happens in the home. For, as Goldman asked, *"how much independence is gained if the narrowness and lack of freedom of the home is exchanged for the narrowness and lack of freedom of the factory, sweat-shop, department store, or office?"* Thus women's equality and freedom had to be fought everywhere and defended against all forms of hierarchy. Nor can they be achieved by voting. Real liberation, argue anarcha-feminists, is only possible by direct action and anarcha-feminism is based on women's self-activity and self-liberation for while the *"right to vote, or equal civil rights, may be good demands . . . true emancipation begins neither at the polls nor in the courts. It begins in woman's soul . . . her freedom will reach as far as her power to achieve freedom reaches."* [Goldman, **Op. Cit.**, p. 216 and p. 224]

The history of the women's movement proves this. Every gain has come from below, by the action of women themselves. As Louise Michel put it, *"[w]e women are not bad revolutionaries. Without begging anyone, we are taking our place in the struggles; otherwise, we could go ahead and pass motions until the world ends and gain nothing."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 139] If women waited for others to act for them their social position would never have changed. This includes getting the vote in the first place. Faced with the militant suffrage movement for women's votes, British anarchist Rose Witcop recognised that it was *"true that this movement shows us that women who so far have been so submissive to their masters, the men, are beginning to wake up at last to the fact they are not inferior to those masters."* Yet she argued that women would not be freed by votes but *"by their own strength."* [quoted by Sheila Rowbotham, **Hidden from History**, pp. 100-1 and p. 101] The women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s showed the truth of that analysis. In spite of equal voting rights, women's social place had remained unchanged since the 1920s.

Ultimately, as Anarchist Lily Gair Wilkinson stressed, the *"call for 'votes' can never be a call to freedom. For what is it to vote? To vote is to register assent to being ruled by one legislator or another?"* [quoted by Sheila Rowbotham, **Op. Cit.**, p. 102] It does not get to the heart of the problem, namely hierarchy and the authoritarian social relationships it creates of which patriarchy is only a subset of. Only by getting rid of all bosses, political, economic, social and sexual can **genuine** freedom for women be achieved and *"make it possible for women to be human in the truest sense. Everything within her that craves assertion and activity should reach its fullest expression; all artificial barriers should be broken, and the road towards greater freedom cleared of every trace of centuries of submission and slavery."* [Emma Goldman, **Op. Cit.**, p. 214]