

## **“Too concerned with culture”: Emma Goldman and the Cultural Politics of Discourse**

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44

The relationship between anarchism and culture has historically been uneasy at the best of times, and downright hostile at the worst.<sup>3</sup> Traditional anarchist theory, established by such diverse thinkers as William Godwin, Peter Kropotkin, Mikhail Bakunin, and Pierre Joseph Proudhon, usually focused upon issues that were far removed from cultural realms and rooted firmly within economic and political discourses.<sup>4</sup> The cultural landscape of anarchist discourse was drastically changed by American anarchist and feminist Emma Goldman, who expanded the parameters of anarchism to address inequalities and oppression within all facets of an American culture dominated by hierarchies. Though she faced extreme opposition from both her American and European anarchist comrades, Goldman insisted on eradicating the culturally constructed boundaries of class, gender, nationality, and ethnicity that dominated and restricted both anarchist theory and the human beings whose complete liberation anarchism sought to ensure. As a Russian-Jewish immigrant immersed in a variety of American subcultures—including those of immigrant working class neighbourhoods, Greenwich Village bohemia, and the modernist avant-garde—Goldman occupied a unique social position on the borders of often conflicting cultural spheres. Her

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), characterizes this relationship as entirely oppositional, and maintains that culture, or at least, his concept of culture as “an inward condition of mind and spirit” that is “a study of perfection,” cannot exist when anarchy is present (49; 45). The relationship between anarchism and culture continues to be called into question by contemporary anarchists such as Murray Bookchin, who dismisses the cultural and aesthetic spheres as secondary to and apart from political struggles. Bookchin further argues that anarchism’s social and political relevance is undermined by its focus upon cultural issues. See his *Social Anarchism or Life-Style Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> In *Anarchy and Culture: The Aesthetic Politics of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), David Weir offers a brief overview of the role of culture in classical anarchist thought, and contends that all four anarchists were concerned that culture not usurp the place of politics. Weir also claims that some anarchists, especially Bakunin, demonstrated “genuine hostility” and “outright antagonism” to art, aesthetics, and other so-called “cultural” issues (39; 34).

autobiographies and personal letters reveal that she lived her entire life in perpetual motion within and between the cultural boundaries that separated high and low, popular and elite, and mainstream and immigrant cultures. Though she may not have been able to overcome the tensions and conflicts within her own life, as Candace Falk, Alice Wexler, and other critics have astutely noted, Goldman was able to transcend such boundaries in her theoretical writings, and in particular, through her discursive strategies.<sup>5</sup> By merging and uniting a vast array of conflicting discourses—including anarchist, feminist, modernist, individualist, historical, literary, and scientific discourses—in both her lectures and writings, Goldman successfully performed her self-designated role of “cultural innovator” by offering a discursive negotiation of culturally constructed boundaries (Stansell 135).<sup>6</sup>

In this paper I will offer a preliminary analysis of the political and social implications of Goldman’s radical strategies of discourse, and will consider the ways in which her discursive anarchy mediates between and ultimately transgresses cultural lines of class, ethnicity, and nationality. Specifically, I will examine the cultural politics of Goldman’s discursive strategies as they are revealed in one of her early and most well known essays, “Anarchism: What it Really Stands For” (1910). This essay is typically viewed as seminal to any understanding of Goldman’s anarchist politics, yet interpretations that focus solely

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<sup>5</sup> See Candace Falk, *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984) and Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> As Raymond Williams argues, the word “culture” is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” that resists a single definition or meaning. The notion of social language or discourse, however, is a common thread that ties together some of the various interpretations of culture offered by twentieth-century cultural theorists. While Weir contends that culture “makes sense only if it is understood as the dynamic center of a series of semantic exchanges” (8), Franz Fanon claims that the “importance” of the “phenomenon of language” is its inextricable relationship to culture: “to speak... means above all to assume a culture (“The Negro and Language,” *Black Skins, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1952, trans. 1967). See also Camille Paglia’s “Sexual Personae: The Cancelled Preface,” in her *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1992: 101-124), where Paglia asserts that “all phases of culture are alive. They have voices... And they are all talking at once!” (118-119), as well as Stuart Hall’s passionate arguments about the “crucial importance of language and of the linguistic metaphor to any study of culture” in his “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996: 262-275); pp. 270-271.

upon the anarchist languages of the essay often neglect or misrepresent the discursive inconsistencies within the text. Complicating such traditional interpretive approaches, I will explore some of the social languages that are voiced throughout the essay in order to reveal the cultural functions of Goldman's discursive heterogeneity.

The title of my essay, "Too concerned with culture," is a direct quote from American anarchist Harry Kelly that succinctly summarizes the basic critique underlying most of the various oppositions which anarchists launched against Goldman's unique formulation of anarchism. (qtd. in Wexler 201). Whether she was facing criticism from male and often misogynist anarchists for concentrating upon women's liberation, or from first-wave feminists for making sexuality and sexual morals political issues, Goldman consistently came under attack for her mingling of politics and culture. Both European and American anarchists, including Bakunin, Kropotkin, and John Most, were intolerant of such cultural transgressions, insisting that anarchism devote itself to traditional political and social issues and keep out of cultural matters of aesthetics, gender, sexuality, and any other so-called "bourgeois" issue<sup>7</sup>. Even Voltairine de Cleyre, who stands alongside Goldman as one of only a few prominent female and feminist anarchists of her time, denounced Goldman's political forays into American cultural life, objecting to her attention to "respectable audiences, respectable neighbourhoods, respectable people" (qtd. in Stansell 141-2). De Cleyre's complaint, a familiar one among Goldman's anarchist comrades, exposes just one of the many culturally constructed boundaries—in this case, class boundaries—that were embedded within anarchist theory. Though de Cleyre supported Goldman's transgression of gender, ethnic, and national boundaries, she could not defend her concern and involvement with the American bourgeoisie.

In its focus upon external spaces of oppression, anarchist theory often

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<sup>7</sup> Kropotkin, in a letter to Goldman's long-time lover and lifelong friend Alexander Berkman, writes: "You are quite right in taking a hopeful view of the progress of our ideas in America. It would have been far greater, I am sure, if the American anarchists had succeeded in merging themselves into the mass of the workingmen. So long as they... keep apart from the mass of the working men... their efforts will remain fruitless and their teachings will appeal more to the intellectual bourgeois who rebels against certain restraints in Art, in relations between man and woman, than to the worker" (Nov 20 1908).

failed to address inequalities and injustice within private realms.<sup>8</sup> Arguing that revolutionists should be concerned only with political, economic, and other public or external issues, many of Goldman's anarchist comrades focused solely upon those individuals and groups oppressed within such realms. Goldman's personal experiences, however, and particularly her various positions of subjectivity, allowed her to develop unique insights into the relevance of anarchism for all kinds of cultural groups, including some that are typically marginalized from anarchist theory. Employed at various times as a factory worker, owner of a camera store and an ice cream parlour, a midwife, and a radical writer and lecturer, Goldman was constantly situated on the borders of class and cultural distinctions. She experienced multiple identifications with the working classes, the business/entrepreneurial classes, and the aesthetic classes of the Greenwich Village writers, actors, artists, and intellectuals, in addition to the impoverished and oppressed Russian, Jewish, and Italian immigrants and women with whom she worked. A quick glance at some of her lecture forums, including factories, schools, prisons, theatres, churches and the shafts of a coal mine makes clear that she transgressed class boundaries not only in her lived experience, but also in her application of anarchism to individuals of all classes and cultural positions.

Goldman's refusal to restrict anarchism to particular cultural classes is emphatically declared throughout her essay, in which she debunks popular myths and misconceptions of anarchism. She provides several definitions of anarchism throughout the essay, many of which are situated within an identifiable anarchist discourse. Within the same pages that include such conventional definitions, however, Goldman strays far from the borders of the traditional languages of anarchism. Injecting her political theory with the discourses of proletarianism, humanism, Marxism, modernism, individualism, literature, and history, Goldman discursively performs her argument that "anarchism is therefore the teacher of the

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<sup>8</sup> In using the monological phrases "anarchist discourse" and "anarchist theory," I do not mean to suggest that anarchism can be thought of as a single and unified body of thought that is free from contradictions and tensions. Indeed, I agree with Murray Bookchin's analysis of the "grave danger[s]" of dealing with anarchism or any other "ism" simplistically, as a fixed and singular body of theory, discourse, and/or practice. Nevertheless, I agree with Bookchin that anarchist discourse, and for that matter, any other discourse or theoretical "ism," still embodies and retains a theoretical identity ("Anarchism: Past and Present" in *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*. Ed. Howard J. Ehrlich. San Francisco: AK Press, 1996: 19-30).

unity of life; not merely in nature, but in man” (52). She consistently stresses the unity of culturally constructed differences not only through her rhetoric of “unity” and “harmony,” but also through her integration of opposing political and cultural discourses. Her discursive strategy allows her inclusive anarchist vision of culture to overcome culturally constructed boundaries of difference, and liberates both individuals and the discourses she uses from the cultural borders that divide humanity into separate and distinct groups.

Goldman situates her essay within traditional anarchist discourses with her initial definition of anarchism: “the theory that all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary” (50). In her assertion that the “main evil” confronted by anarchism is “an economic one,” she also reinforces the commonly-held notion that anarchism is a political theory concerned solely with eradicating external and public institutions, such as capitalism and the State (50). Throughout the essay, Goldman refers to the foundational anarchist thinkers Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Proudhon, whose theories are upheld in her definition of anarchism as “a philosophy... which maintains that God, the State, and society are non-existent” (52). The proletarian strains that commonly run throughout anarchist discourse also appear within the essay, notably in Goldman’s emphasis upon the inextricable relationship between anarchism and the working classes. She argues that anarchism must recognize “the tremendous importance of labour’s power” and “the importance of the solidaric general protest” to the great anarchist struggle for freedom (66). The proletarian languages of anarchist discourse are also presented in Goldman’s discussion of direct action, which she describes as “the logical, consistent method of anarchism” (66). The myriad of anarchist voices that run throughout the essay speak to and for individuals and social groups traditionally accounted for within anarchist discourse. In particular, her discursive strands of anarchism emerge as the languages of and for the working and immigrant classes, whose labour anarchism sought to free from exploitation by capitalism, or what Goldman describes as “this present insane system of production” (61).

In using the discourses of anarchism and proletarianism to reach a working-class audience, Goldman keeps in line with the discursive traditions of anarchism. However, she also rebels against such conventional discursive strategies through her use of multiple discursive traditions in order to address

working-class immigrants. In her discussions about labour reform, the anarchist and proletarian voices intersect, at various times, with the discourses of both humanism and Marxism<sup>9</sup>. Though anarchism articulated absolute concern with the liberation of humanity, Kropotkin and other communist anarchists often went to great lengths to distinguish anarchist thought from bourgeois traditions of humanism. Anarchist theory, moreover, despite widespread misinterpretation, consistently conflicts with Marxism, notably in its attitude towards the State, and Bakunin and his anarchism were known as “the great enemy of Marx.” In spite of, or perhaps because of such conflicts, Goldman integrates both Marxist and humanist discourses in her description of anarchism’s relevance for the working class: “Anarchism aims to strip labour of its deadening, dulling aspect, of its gloom and compulsion. It aims to make work an instrument of joy, of strength, of colour, of real harmony, so that the poorest sort of a man should find in work both recreation and hope” (61). She also uses both languages in her attack upon capitalist modes of production, whose “fatal crime,” she asserts, is “the crime of turning the producer into a mere particle of a machine... Man is being robbed not merely of the products of his labour, but of the power of free initiative, of originality, and the interest in, or desire for, the things he is making” (54). Mingled in with her discursive strands of proletarianism are historical discourses that directly relate the struggles of immigrant factory workers with historical labour rebellions in France, Spain, Italy, and Russia. Through her use of anarchist, proletarian, and historical discourses, Goldman speaks directly to both American and European working classes, and locates their oppression within familiar economic and historical territories.

While all of these discourses are essential to Goldman’s anarchist analysis of working-class oppression, they also allow her to reach cultural groups that were typically ignored within traditional anarchist theory. By bringing together the conflicting discourses of anarchism, proletarianism, Marxism and

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<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in correspondence to the heterogeneous nature of Goldman’s discursive practices, there is at least one instance where the voice of the humanist comes into conflict with a language that resists the presumed authority of humanist discourse: “Poor human nature, what horrible crimes have been committed in thy name! Every fool, from king to policeman, from the flathead parson to the visionless dabbler in science, presumes to speak authoritatively of human nature” (59).

humanism, Goldman speaks to and includes into her anarchist vision of culture the middle-class bourgeoisie, as well as the artists, writers, and modern thinkers of New York City's bohemian subculture. Situating a key Marxist concept within the discourse of humanism, she argues that "centralization is not only the death-knell of liberty, but also of health and beauty, of art and science, all these being impossible in a clock-like, mechanical atmosphere" (55). In the intersections of these various languages speaks the voice of not only the radical anarchist, but also the "cultural innovator" determined to reveal anarchism's relevance for all human beings of all cultural positions. By allowing such conflicting discourses to intersect and overlap, Goldman addresses the glaring inattention given by anarchist discourse to the middle classes, and transgresses the cultural limits of class built into anarchism.

Goldman also liberates anarchist discourse from cultural constraints of class by allowing the political voice of anarchism to engage with the aesthetic and cultural voices of modernism, as it was manifested in the bohemian subcultures of early twentieth-century Greenwich Village. In particular, she embraces the intellectuals, writers, and artists of New York City's bohemian communities through a specific appeal to "modern thinker[s]" of the "modern society" (57; 63). Goldman's dependence upon a modernist discourse is presented in the first sentences of the essay, where she writes, "The Old has never hesitated to make use of the foulest and cruellest means to stay the advent of the New" (47-8). In his study of the modern age, Leonard Lief uses similar language to describe one of the main principles of modernism: "while old values and standards are dying, new ones must take their place" (3). Goldman's rhetoric of progress, innovation, and newness, while not entirely new to anarchism, is still located firmly within a modernist language familiar to the American literary and artistic avant-garde. Furthermore, by representing anarchism less as a political tradition and more as a New idea, she specifically aligns anarchism with the modernist discourses of the New Drama, the New Poetry, the New Art, the New Architecture, and, perhaps most importantly, with the modernist and feminist discourses of the "New Woman" (Drinnon 146). Though Goldman refused the label of "feminist" and consistently distanced herself from the feminist suffragists of her generation, she passionately argued for women's economic, personal, sexual, reproductive, intellectual, moral, and educational freedom. Moreover, Goldman has been

described by Christine Stansell as the “reigning” and “most daring” New Woman of Greenwich Village (109; 121). Goldman’s discourse(s) of modernism enable the subtle presentation of her feminist interpretation of anarchism, and liberate anarchist discourses from the oppressive forces of misogyny and class hierarchies by speaking directly to issues of freedom related to bourgeois women.

Goldman’s modernist discourses are used to reach not only artistic and intellectual avant-garde subcultures, but also the mainstream culture of middle-class America. In her emphasis upon the intellectual value and possibilities of the New idea of anarchism, she encourages all thinking men and women to free themselves from the tyranny of ignorance, or what Goldman describes as “the most violent element” in modern society (49). In so doing, she expresses a modernist faith in human thought, most notably in her definition of anarchism as “the great leaven of thought” (67). A modernist voice challenges all those who deny the practicality of anarchism, and asserts the intellectual soundness of anarchist theory:

Anarchism urges man to think, to investigate, to analyze every proposition... This is not a wild fancy or an aberration of the mind. It is the conclusion arrived at by hosts of intellectual men and women the world over; a conclusion resulting from the close and studious observation of the tendencies of the modern society. (50; 62-3)

Through her repeated references to the oppressive forces of ignorance, Goldman offers an analysis of the relationship between knowledge and personal freedom that is grounded in what Kropotkin critically describes as the “bourgeois” discourses of individualism and humanism. She finds her sources for such discourses not only within a modernist aesthetics of individualism, but also within the seeds of an American middle-class tradition of libertarian radicalism that were planted as early as the American Revolution. Making pointed to references to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau, as well as to the history of individual liberty in America, Goldman uses aesthetic, literary, and historical discourses to appeal to the individualist ideologies of middle-class American liberals, and in particular, the American-born doctors,

lawyers, academics, and businessmen who comprised what de Cleyre negatively describes as Goldman's "respectable" audiences.

In the preface to *Anarchism and Other Essays*, Goldman grants to all readers a privileged position of autonomy, and asserts that any book will always be what the reader wants it to be (42). Nevertheless, she cautions against misreadings and misinterpretations based on "narrow attitudes" and the "disheartening tendency... to tear out one sentence from a work as a criterion of the writer's ideas or personality" (44). Such a tendency is manifested in many critical interpretations of Goldman's works, which typically focus upon her radical political discourses of anarchism and feminism, and thus marginalize the multitude of social, cultural, theoretical, and discursive milieus that contributed to Goldman's ideologies and writings<sup>10</sup>. A discursive analysis that situates her works within all of their discursive contexts will not only provide a richer and more accurate representation of Goldman's politics, but will also reveal that Goldman's successful move of "the stage of anarchic action from politics to culture" depended in large part upon her discursive performances of her unique anarchism (Clark 161). Rather than, or in addition to viewing this legacy of Goldman's as a confirmation of anarchism's shift from politics to culture, we might want to follow her discursive and rhetorical leads by dismantling the boundaries between culture and politics, thereby allowing the two terms to be brought together in ways that will enable new readings of the cultural politics of (Goldman's) anarchism. For through her discursive transgression of cultural hierarchies and divisions, Goldman disputes Richard Sonn's contention that the cultural politics of anarchism are limited, and indeed, boldly asserts that a multitude of boundless possibilities exist for a cultural politics of both discourse and anarchism (30).

#### Works Cited

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<sup>10</sup>See Marsha Hewitt "Emma Goldman: The Case for Anarcho-Feminism" and Alice Wexler "Emma Goldman and Women," both in *Our Generation* 17.1 (1986); Margaret S. Marsh, *Anarchist women, 1870-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), and Elaine Leeder, "Let Our Mothers Show the Way," in *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*, Ed. Howard J. Ehrlich (San Francisco: AK Press, 1996), pp. 142-148.

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