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tongue of fire: Emma Goldman, public womanhood, and the sex question

Donna M. Kowal, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2016, 222pp., ISBN: 978-1-4384-5973-8, \$75.00 (Hbk)/ ISBN: 978-1-4384-5974-5, \$22.95 (Pbk)

Donna M. Kowal has written an engaging book with the aim of centring 'the sex question' in the work and life of anarchist thinker and activist Emma Goldman. While there has been considerable interest in Goldman in recent years, in line with the more general increase of interest in anarchist modes of political resistance, to date there has been no full length study of Goldman's role in the changing understandings of 'sex' and the public sphere. Kowal's book outlines Goldman's participation in a vibrant early twentieth-century scene of anarchist and socialist struggle, and draws out the importance of the contestation of a public/private divide for the contemporary revolutionary imagination. Anyone still deluded in their presumption that the post-1968 Left was fragmented by concerns with sexuality or gender should read this book; Kowal aptly demonstrates that 'the sex question' was fundamental to the development of political consciousness in Left counterpublics, as Christine Stansell (2000) has also rather brilliantly explored. Kowal's work draws on published and unpublished documents to create a picture of Goldman's extraordinary interventions in those counterpublics, and to explore the contradictory nature of those same interventions.

To some extent, Kowal's book is an intellectual biography that provides a lively account of Goldman's life and work on 'the sex question'. But to my mind, it is most interesting when she diverges from this task to explore the messiness of her heroine's thought and the media obsession with her person. As Kowal explores in her chapter 'Sex, labor and the public sphere', Goldman was both supportive of women's issues and simultaneously vicious in her critiques of their passivity; she supported prostitutes but not the institution itself; and she married for papers despite her earlier trenchant dismissal of such actions as cowardice. Goldman was also torn between her international sensibilities beyond ethnic, religious or racial identity, and her desire to inhabit her Jewishness as part of developing a revolutionary method; so too her relationship to violence remained unsettled throughout her lifetime, as Kathy Ferguson (2011) also suggests. But while I appreciated Kowal's outlining of these contradictions, I wanted her to push further and suggest what some of the implications of Goldman's struggles over these issues might be. Some effort is made to do this in the conclusion, in which Kowal raises the relevance of Goldman's thinking for contemporary politics, but this is only seven pages long and begs more questions than it resolves.

Chapter 5, 'Framing "the high priestess of anarchy"' is my favourite chapter. It maps the media's fascination with Goldman over many years, and its role in presenting her as a sex-crazed bomb-throwing anarchist to her voracious audience. Kowal deftly highlights how concern with

Goldman's appearance allowed journalists to titillate their audiences with a set of oppositions that played on their existing social and cultural anxieties. Thus Goldman was portrayed by turn as hyper-feminine in appearance and demeanour—masking her true violent anarchist nature—or monstrously unfeminine in ways that served as signs of anarchism's unnaturalness. As Kowal implies, such tactics worked precisely to the extent that 'the sex question' was already a live one in Goldman's contemporary context. Kowal suggests further that these knowing framings of Goldman go some way to explaining the huge crowds that jostled to catch a glimpse of the 'high priestess' while she was on tour. Perhaps this was why Goldman did not rail at such representations as much as one might have expected, accepting this as the price she had to pay for the opportunity to politicise her audience. As part of my own research on Goldman, I have also looked at these media representations, so it may be unfair to project my own concerns onto those of the author. But I thought Kowal missed an opportunity for a fuller analysis linking race, class and representations of Goldman, an analysis that lies just below the surface in her account.

This is an important book. It gives us a needed account of Goldman's engagement with 'the sex question' in the context of her peers and the counterpublics in which she participated. But to my mind, it lacks a deeper theoretical commitment. Judith Butler's theory of 'performativity' is mentioned as a productive possibility early on, but then abandoned; contradictions are provocatively laid bare but their implications left to one side; and the productive possibilities of an intersectional analysis are sacrificed in favour of a more descriptive account of Goldman's life and work.

references

Ferguson, K.E., 2011. *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets*. London: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Stansell, C., 2000. *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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