

Our contribution to feminism and anarchism
Can the use of separatist methods serve to gain
personal autonomy or does it rather give
only a false security?

We are a group of women who first met in 1982 in a course of an "Autonomous School for Women". In the beginning we were thirteen women of totally different background and various motivations. We all wanted to analyse anarchism. The largest part of this group had been engaged in armed political conflicts on behalf of Startbahn 18 West (likely to be the most popular air strip in Germany). The experience of helplessness in the face of a bold statepower was reason enough for us to seek other ways of dealing with political conflicts.

We approached the question of anarchism and feminism by tracking up the lives of anarchist women, who were part of a very lively, anarchist, respectively populist movement. A movement with which they could identify and feel comfortable with. Still there was and will be for all women a breach with their own identity resulting from the fact that in anarchism male defined rules and standards are dominating, although there will always be room enough for "exceptional" women.

we do want to introduce the "populist women", especially women of the narodniki, and Emma Goldmann and after that tell you about our own experiences.

The populist women

Populism stands for a period of development in Russia covering the time of 1850 to 1880.

The populist movement was a very enthousiastical political trend and all involved had great hopes and were winged by utopia. A rigid autocratic system, the principles of which were applied in all social institutions such as church, family, school and bureaucracy seemed to be faltering because of the awakening of groups which had been excluded from social life up to then, such as peasants, the commons, students and least but not last women. Common sense, science and education were to bring freedom for everyone. The individual and its self realization as human being and civic were the focus of all reflections. Political expression of these hopes and aims was the call for the liberations of peasants and education for all.

In this period women and peasants were the two biggest groups dashing into public consciousness with great strife. Leading these groups were the women of the lower gentry because they were able to get access to publications at first. Their first step being, publishing in journals, novels and poems about female oppression in society. To them fate was no longer a

a matter of course, but they realized that their situation was a common one and thus regarded their misery, which up to then had been an individual one, now as something mutual. Their misery having been something individual now became something which bound them. The second step was taken in 1861. On a large scale women left their families (especially the young and unmarried) and were heading for the capitals looking for possibilities of economical independence and education. Very often these women had to stay illegally in the cities as they had no identification papers. One of the possibilities to obtain a passport was a false marriage. When a woman could get a passport through marriage, marriage turned into something rational "falling in love" was considered a calamity good for nothing but additional complications.

The importance of education for women

As knowledge and education seemed to be one of the means of liberation women wanted to take part in it. They no longer wanted to remain ignorant, which was considered equal to being minor. Women were pressing for education and wanted to go to schools. When the government refused the admission to educational institutions they organized education for themselves. The well-to-do and privileged women founded schools for the poor and uneducated women. That was the beginning of "sunday schools". Courses were held free of charge by famous teachers and professors who felt dedicated to the cause of the movement. At the same time schools were organized in the country side for the peasants and in the cities for industrial worker.

Right from the start people of different social provenance worked together, educated female aristocrats, renowned intellectuals, run-away girls, radical students, workers and peasants. Living together was to them (especially to the young girls, students, workers) trying out new experimental ways of life. One lived together in a flat, at first for economic reasons, later on, in order to try living in a community. Works hops were founded, which were to give an opportunity for work for women coming to the cities.

Within this movement women felt safe, their interests being identical with those of the movement. In spite of this fact many women insisted in having their own groups, so as not to be taken in by the men in mutual discussions. Free love was not being discussed anymore at that time. Women did not consider themselves as being free or liberated when getting involved with changing men, but felt they would be free and liberated when being allowed to live on their own. The position of insisting on free love had been given up for living together, the antisexual relationship of comrades who had to fulfill important tasks.

during this period the populist women dressed expressively "unfemale" the "nihilist look" was in fashion. That meant short-cut hair instead of artificial hair styles, black and simple dresses, blue enormous glasses. In addition to this the young women smoked, had inkspotted fingers, and went out without a hat and unchaperoned. These women had radically broken with their own past life and having done so had to go through most extreme psychic stress. All of these activities provoked only one answer from the authorities: repression.

The Sunday schools were closed, teachers giving classes there were expelled from public schools and all petitions for admission of women to prep schools and universities were rejected.

The peasant liberation from slavery of 1861 proved to be a halfhearted measure, only to worsen the situation of the peasants. Hopelessness took over in the movement which up to that time had almost no structures. The short time of Russian liberalism was gone.

From that time on the aimed-at education needed a new definition. It is now that this education is no longer meant to liberate the women themselves, which indeed it had never done because self reliance meant also being economically independent. A fact which the women had to accept as a sad truth, because there were no jobs for women. These were the facts of the climate in which the narodniki women grew up in.

The narodniki women

They had no hopes for reformatory changes from the authorities and thus were trying to get in touch with radical student groups and regarded their own education only in reference to social needs. They wanted to join "the people" a slogan which now became very popular and the leading idea of the youth.

In 1869 there were women communities, setting up their own reading programs. One of the women who propagated these programs was Sofia Perovskaya. These, partly very young, women did not want to accept any authorities any longer, they read everything in original texts, in order to get their own impression. When on walks they would wear men's cloth such as breeches, boots and jackets just to show that they were independent. They took riding lessons and lived on their own in the countryside. They behaved as though to them authorities did no longer exist. Doing so they felt at ease and to them everything seemed possible. Many, especially men did admire these women.

During the summer they would live in the countryside, sometimes together with radical students, did sports and otherwise lived a very frugal life. It was a real juvenile subculture. Other women decided to go abroad and study at universities where women are admitted. Most of them go to

Zuerich. Many of them had to go through bad conflicts with their families and sometimes they would obtain their exile only by a false marriage. As for example had to be done by Vera Figner. And it was only a diminishing minority of them who could do this. And thus it happened, that a several hundreds of people come to bid two women in Odessa good bye when they left for Europe. In Zürich too, women's communities sprang up, where women lived and studied together and started being political. Their relations are very intense and emotional, and men are almost always excluded.

Starting in 1871 there were also mixed groups and organisations where women played a leading role right from the start. The women are now able to effectively determine the values of these groups. For instance they insist on the principle for accepting a new member to be only its moral integrity and they insisted as well on absolutely democratic structures and on the principle of obtaining decisions by agreement of all. In addition to this they enforced prohibition of love affairs in the organisation because they felt that such relations would harm the principle of social justice.

Founding these organisation these groups regarded themselves as being anarchist. The author of their first program is Kropotkin using the ideas of Lavrov and Bakunin and the experience of the Paris Commune.

In 1873 the great migration of the students into "the people" took place. Thousands of students, amongst them at least one third women, were agitating in the countryside. Many were arrested, tried, accused and deported. Sometimes they had to wait in solitary confinement up to three years before they would have a trial. Many went insane, became sick and died.

In 1874 after an official prohibition to study abroad, and slandering assaults against women studying abroad, these radical female students returned to Russia and joined the "Zemla i Voya" the party. Under the impression of a starting workers movement many of these women went to work in the factories. Again many of them were arrested and their first trials were held. The speeches held by them in defense are very impressive to the public. The "Moscow Amazons" being talked about. At the same time they are being given an aura of "holiness", because they were ready to give up and sacrifice everything (their provenance, education money and career) for the poor and oppressed.

In 1876 two women start the series of assassinations. Vera Zassulitsch shot at the general governor of Petersburg taking revenge for her imprisoned comrades. Most certainly it was not pure coincidence that two women planned and

attempted the first assassination. Long before this the women had been discontent with the role they were playing in the party. They were forced to do the printing, visit comrades in prisons and so on. They themselves wanted to take more actively part in party life and thus attempted this assassination without discussing this in the party. In spite of these facts the now emerging terrorist is being described by Kravchinsky as follows: On the horizon appeared the outlines of a sombre figure, illuminated by some kind of hellish flame, a figure with chin raised proudly in the air. and a gaze that breathed provocation and vengeance. Passing through the frightened crowds, the revolutionary enters with proud step on to the arena of history. He is wonderful, awe-inspiring and irresistible, for he unites the two most lofty forms of human grandeur, the martyr and the hero. +)

In 1879 the party "Zemla i Voya" which up to then had been occupied with agitating the people, decided to assassinate the czar. The women had been excluded from the preparatory conference, as the men felt that they would oppose this decision. At that time the majority of the women are working in the countryside, as midwives, teachers, shoemakers, in the dyer's trade or running teashops. Because of this work, the men of the party did consider them as dreamers who peacefully cling to some sort of utopia. Vera Zassulitsch seemed to be forgotten. Their personal courage it took to break with social taboos, the energy it took them to get an education and the enormous task of living as women by themselves in the countryside are being suppressed and kept silent about. The women are simply overruled by majority. Abolished were the principles of decentralization, the care for imprisoned comrades, respect for the will of the individual member, as well as the principle of decisions based on mutual agreement and revolving delegation, all of them basics that women had brought into the party. In contradiction to these principles now everything was aimed at one goal. Discipline and total devotion to the party became now recruiting symbols.

Whereas the women had totally different ideas of gaining liberty. They identified strongly with the misery of the peasants and as we would say as well with that of their wives. They had worked as midwives, female doctors in the countryside and thus had a fairly good idea of the whole misery. Being hostesses (innkeepers) they come to know the alcoholism of the peasants, they saw how hard the peasants and their offspring had to work, they knew of the missing means, the superstition and sorrows of the women. Dealing with women and children of peasants they knew that these peasants were not much different from their authoritative fathers (fathers of the narodniki women). Their own fathers had drunk and whored. They tormented and beat their women and daughters and kept them in ignorance. The women seemed to have been colder and emotionally more involved with the peasants than the men of "Zemla i Voya". In the countryside the women felt more important, could do more useful work,

+) Kravchinsky; "Father and Daughters, " Cathy Porter

a work that satisfied them. They themselves could determine place and meaning of action and they could immediately experience success. This kind of work was very material, sensual and perceptible, it included a direct relationship between liberators and the "to-be-liberated". A great deal of motivation had resulted from these contacts between peasants and party women. The men of the party were totally different, in seeing their first task in taking up the male challenge of the czarist state. Their challenge being the armed fight. The female way of committing was ridiculed by the men and regarded as a remnant of the old populism.

Because they felt obliged to the cause the women submitted to the new directives of the party. In any case they wanted to prevent splitting the organisation. Their submission however devaluated the women. They had no alternatives, they were not able to present any logic and reasonable recipes for coping with czarist repression. They had nothing but their old dreams and their experiences gained in the countryside, where success was very slow and constantly threatened.

Compared with the women's ideals aggressively defined, jacobin ideas of centralism seemed to promise more direct results. The women did not yet have enough self-confidence, and thus could not utter their uneasiness as a criterion for criticism. They still did believe too much in "rationalism" and therefore accepted the male strategy. Doing so they put themselves under great psychic stress.

" We were asked to take part in the political struggle, we were called to the city, but we felt the village needed us that without us it would be darker there. Reason told us that we must follow the course chosen by our comrades, political terrorists who were drunk with the spirit of strife and animated by success. But our hearts spoke otherwise... it drew us to the world of the dispossessed," she wrote, and went on: "Of course we did not take this into account then, but subsequently this attitude was properly defined as the desire for a pure life, for a kind of personal sanctity... But we put aside our feelings and bravely stood alongside our comrades, whose political instinct determined ours." +)

And the result. In 1861 the czar is assassinated but instead of the expected revolt of the people there is a pitiless hunt for revolutionaries. And unlike in earlier groups the new structures of centralism helped to infiltrate the party. Police spies infiltrated and soon the organisation was totally smashed.

+) Vera Figner; Fathers and Daughters by Cathy Porter

Conclusion:

Most exciting the the lives of the narodniki women is the fact, that they themselves were in no way the poor, oppressed women, but in contrary were self reliant, respected admired and accepted and were idols for many. Still, there had been one point when they lost themselves and gave up their own ideas. At this point the idol of the movement carried only male features.

In order not to reduce the problem to women and violence we do want to show another great heroine of anarchism and her experience,

Emma Goldman

She too came from Russia, where she was born in 1869. During her childhood she had heard of the "nihilists" and did identify with their battle against despotism and tyranny. A battle Emma fought against her authoritative father. She first got into contact with radical thoughts when frequenting student groups in 1882/83 with her sister. After emigrating to the USA she joined the anarchist movement in New York, after having been deeply impressed by the haymarket incidents of Chicago.

Emma Goldman did not have a chance of finding a circle of women with who she could get politically involved. From the very beginning she was integrated into a male organization. And there she had but one chance: To overcome sexual differences in order to meet standards of the the generally accepted anarchist idol, she had to become an anarchist hero ready to sacrifice everything for the cause. This hero had purely male features.

During the first period of her political engagement, Emma was conscious of this fact. (see her biography). This is very evident in her conflict with Most, who played a leading role in anarchist New York. At first he tried to see her merely as a woman "the little wife" and then he completely denied accepting this part of her when working with as "comrade". The focus of her coping with this inconsistency showed in her decision to have no child. Although she had a strong want for "children" she decides against having children in order to totally dedicate herself to the cause. This sacrifice is something like a crucial test. After this decision she felt a bit more equal to Sascha Bergmann, whom she thought of as a model anarchist fighter. As much as she wanted a child, she longed for a stable relationship with one lover and a home. All these needs had to be constantly suppressed and sacrificed for heroism. Even her radical calls for free love only claimed same rights for men and women. To her real free love included a possibility to get pregnant and give birth.

The only thin being revolutionary about Emma was that she claimed for herself the same rights as for men.

The next step was that she but saw the misery of other women, she could no longer express her own problems. She fought for the underprivileged women, claimed for the right to have an abortion defended prostitution, but at this moment she forgot completely about her own problems. She declared prostitution to be more honest than marriage, but totally pushed aside the fact that she herself had been married twice and failed to prostitute herself when once been forced to do so because they ran out of money. Her struggle for other women caused her to partly withdraw from her own personality and thus her declarations in reference to women rights carried no great messages. There were similar mistakes in her political estimates. In 1921 for instance, she still believed that the Russian people would perhaps - after being disappointed by the bolsheviki - revolt once more and this time under the flag of anarcho-syndicalism. As much as she refused to realize her own exhaustion she could not accept how exhausted the people in Russia were. They only wanted to secure their survival, needed and wanted a period of peace and normal "routine" life, and were by no means able to go on fighting.

The last step was taken in the moment she did not longer understand the contradiction between anarchist ideals and her own wishes. That was when she decided to become a combattant for the cause. From then on, to us she seemed to be nothing else but a quarrelsome charger, which could be seen in her contempt of the female young lover of Alexander Berkman. She had to pay a high price pushing aside these contradictions. It was the price of being lonely. As long as she had played her party role ok, filled the halls with her propaganda travelling, sold pamphlets and collected money everything seemed to be ok. She was accepted with her comrades. Nobody was interested in her personal feelings, how embittered she was, how much she devaluated herself as woman when she got older. All of this was rather inconceivable to her comrades, and they took her behaviour as the whims of an aging lady.

We think that at this point it is clear, that feminist politics do not fit without difficulties into anarchism. The anarchist individual is a man not a woman. Women can be heroines only by fitting into this pattern as best possible. Nobody cares about the "costs". But these costs are incomparably higher for women than for men, who very often still do have a "private life" (as for instance Most). Men usually are by custom married and their reproductionary work is done by their wives. Of course, she (the wife) could be left any time if "the cause" asked for it. Charming, really!!

It is here that the question comes up what is it good for, this spirit of sacrifice? We think that this is a very elitarian perception because very few are ready to meet these high standards. These who do submit to this restraint, - because

of their repressed wishes - inclined to despise others who do not meet these standards. In the long run Emma Goldmann develops quite an animosity to other (feminist) women. Apart from this the idea that if one shows good will and is convinced of the own cause then one will be able to move mountains. It goes without saying this concept of human possibilities, structures and motivation is extremely flat.

Our experiences and outlooks

One of the most important characteristics of the feminist movement is that it does not create the idol of the "new woman" not paying attention to our introverted structures, our wishes and personal obstruction but it takes into consideration our very reality.

The most important instrument of the feminist movement are or groups, where women often find out that even with socially very different realities the women are subject to structural similarities. Not only public pressure or conscious malevolence of men whom they work with, do prevent women's liberation, but it is also not a matter of personal assertion. On the contrary, busting of social standards or finding new ones or searching for one's own way of life can only be achieved collectively.

Our experiences in mixed libertarian groups did not have the dramatic consequences as they had with the narodniki women, still it is remarkable that the setting up of feminist autonomic structures was so frantically criticized. The questions on feminism and anarchism which were submitted to us, in connection with this gathering, are testimony for this fact. As soon as feminist groups came up and women felt drawn to them and worked comfortably within these, promptly they were being accused of producing a feeling which is to be but an illusionary improvement of female vital feelings. It is said to be a feeling obtained by mere objection of realities. Funny, but such accusations are never being raised in connection with social power organizations even so, these organizations are pure male legues. Apart from feminists, nobody ever thought of accusing these organizations of being irrational because of their male dominated structures. The outstanding and first task of these feminist structures is to restore women's damaged identity. Something that otherwise is accepted and defined only when deformed.

In the course of the last fifteen years feminist movement has indeed created a new female image in the whole western world. Individual failure to cope with the invisible sex barriers was suddenly understood as being their (the women) mutual fate.

Today constant personal insecurity, a perception of personal deficiency can be delt with by regarding it as a structural problem. In order to solve this problem it is necessary to come up with political strategies and not to individually adapt. Gaining this insight has set free an enormous power of energy with the feminist. It is not mere coincidence

that for the first time in Germany most women between 20 and 30 years of age are not married. Nowadays women can be complete personas even without husband and children. The change of social standards was obtained by cracking the wall of silence behind which women had lived with their feelings and hopes. The slogan "the private is public" was born by public importance as well as public opinion in private life, and it crumbled many a social bulwark. In connection with these actions it was not merely the euphoria of growing but as well the enormous psychic stress and fear. The abolished taboos were not only superficial but as well introverted. Success also brought on anxiety. At the moment we are occupied filling the space and newly gained identity with reality. But even a pause is a position of feminist strategy and we do allow ourselves to advance at a pace we choose.

Moreover we found that male bulwarks were not yet overrun but had only receded a little bit. The tenacious guerrilla fight between sexes still goes on.