

AN AMERICA THAT COULD BE: EMMA GOLDMAN, ANARCHISM, AND THE “AMERICAN DREAM”

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The so-called “Gilded Age,” 1865-1901, was a period in American history characterized by great progress, but also of great turmoil. The evolving social, political, and economic climate challenged the way of life that had existed in pre-Civil War America as European immigration rose alongside the appearance of the United States’ first big businesses and factories.¹ One figure emerges from this era in American history as a forerunner of progressive thought: Emma Goldman. Responding, in part, to the transformations that occurred during the Gilded Age, Goldman gained notoriety as an outspoken advocate of anarchism in speeches throughout the United States and through published essays and pamphlets in anarchist newspapers. Years later, she would synthesize her ideas in collections of essays such as *Anarchism and Other Essays*, first published in 1917.

The purpose of this paper is to contextualize Emma Goldman’s anarchist theory by placing it firmly within the economic, social, and

¹ Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2001), 14.

political reality of turn-of-the-twentieth-century America while demonstrating that her theory is based in a critique of the concept of the “American Dream.” To Goldman, American society had drifted away from the ideal of the “American Dream” due to the institutionalization of exploitation within all aspects of social and political life—namely, economics, religion, and law. The first section of this paper will give a brief account of Emma Goldman’s position within American history at the turn of the twentieth century. It will then discuss how Goldman’s use of the rhetoric of American independence and individualism helps us to fully understand the problems she saw in her contemporary society. Lastly, this paper will describe the ideal social system that would exist under Goldman’s model of anarchism.

Since Goldman’s theory arises out of her criticism of late nineteenth-century American institutions, it is important to understand the position she occupied within such society. The traditional narrative of the “American Dream” tells of the unlimited potential in America for any person, regardless of social status or origin, to become economically successful through his or her own hard work and dedication. Coupled with the fact that the period from roughly 1880-1921 saw an unparalleled increase in the number of immigrants into America—largely from Eastern European countries—the “American dream” described above became a powerful driving force for industrial growth.² Unfortunately, for most of the immigrant population, this “dream” was little more than a myth. Instead of prosperity, many immigrants found that “by the end of the nineteenth century...unregulated working conditions and the free market in urban real estate caused the exploitation of millions of workers and in turn provoked protest and violence from below.”³ Historical accounts of workers’ protests increase rapidly from the end of the nineteenth century into the twentieth century and the growth of trade unions provide further evidence to corroborate these statements.⁴

² Ibid., 23.

³ Melvyn Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker, 1865-1920* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1996), 75.

⁴ Ibid., 79.

One explanation for Goldman's advocacy of anarchism is that she desired to critique the difficult economic situation facing many immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century from her own position as an immigrant. Goldman herself had been born into a Jewish family in Lithuania—then a province of the Russian Empire—and had spent her youth in St. Petersburg before finding her way to in 1885 America at the age of seventeen. Goldman's movement from Prussia to the United States provided her with knowledge of numerous languages, cultures, and movements, which all contributed in varying degrees to her thought.⁵ Although most of her early speeches were done in German, she quickly realized the importance of connecting with her new American compatriots by speaking English. The shift from German to English marked her personal transition from an immigrant "outsider" to a notorious public figure with whom one could get arrested for shaking hands. Not only would using English help her to reach a broader American audience, but it also shows her commitment to working through the tradition and history of America from a "new" American's point a view. Although she came from an Eastern European background, Goldman fully embraced American culture, and her theory of anarchism is consequently firmly grounded in problems prevalent in the United States during her lifetime. In her speeches and essays, she commented on events that had relevance and immediacy in America as she saw them unfold within the context of contemporary society.

In fact, only after moving to the United States and hearing about the May 1886 Haymarket Affair in Chicago did Goldman officially become an anarchist.⁶ On March 4, 1886, a large group of workers held a labor rally in the Haymarket Square in Chicago. As the rally dispersed, an unknown person threw a pipe bomb into the crowd, killing numerous civilians and eight police officers. Following the incident, eight men associated with the anarchist organizers of the originally rally

⁵ *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, vol. 1, ed. Candace Falk (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 489.

⁶ Candace Falk, "Forging Her Place: An Introduction," in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, vol. 1, 1-84 (see note 5), 6.

were put on trial for murder—all eight were convicted.⁷ At the time, some had argued that the incident was a consequence of rampant immigration and radical foreign idealism challenging American values. As historian Melyvn Dubofsky notes, “For many, the [Haymarket] incident justified fears of the ‘reckless foreign wretches,’ as one newspaper termed the protesting workers.”⁸ On the other hand, the Haymarket Affair became a rallying cry against police brutality, corruption, and prejudice against persons whose political views did not conform to mainstream society. Goldman sympathized with the latter view and was appalled at the flagrant disregard for justice of Illinois Judge Gary, quoting him fictitiously in her essay “The Psychology of Political Violence” as saying, “Not because you have caused the Haymarket bomb, but because you are Anarchists, are you on trial.”⁹

However, while Goldman was certainly aware of the problems facing industrial workers, who were largely immigrants, and sympathized with their plight, her formulation of anarchism extends beyond a purely socio-economic critique to a historical critique. In her theory, she argues for a return to past American ideals—that is, a glorification of the principles first set forth during the American Revolution. Thus, the “American Dream” that Goldman believed to have been perverted throughout post-Civil War America, was not the traditional “rags to riches” fable, but the “dream” of a new nation that privileged individualism and natural freedom above all else. According to Goldman, these were the values advocated by America’s “founding fathers,” who declared independence from Great Britain in 1776 and subsequently wrote the United States Constitution. Goldman chose to present anarchism as a necessary response to problems rooted in the unique circumstances of American history in the decades following the American Civil War.

One way in which Goldman commented on the loss of American values in “Gilded Age” society was by appropriating traditional

⁷ Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 208.

⁸ Kraut, 89.

⁹ Emma Goldman, “The Psychology of Political Violence” in *Anarchism and Other Essays*, 79-108 (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 87.

American rhetoric to her own advantage, using it as a foil with which she contrasted the current state of affairs in America. As traditional schoolchildren during the time period were instructed in such areas as the wording of the Declaration of Independence, Goldman's use of common phrases such as "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" was able to draw on the national ideology instilled in many Americans since childhood. In "A New Declaration of Independence," for instance, Goldman used language and composition based on the Declaration of Independence, proclaiming, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all human beings, irrespective of race, color, or sex, are born with the equal right to share at the table of life; that to secure this right, there must be established among men economic, social, and political freedom."¹⁰ The combination of the familiar American phrase "We hold these truths to be self-evident" from the actual Declaration of Independence with the subsequent reformulation of anarchist goals creates a sense of irony that served to ridicule the current state, which had, according to Goldman, distanced itself and society from the "truths" established at the origin of the United States.

It important to note here the distinction Goldman drew between a commitment to adhering to what she viewed as original American ideals as opposed to the "perverted conception of patriotism" she linked to militarism, "conceit, arrogance and egotism."¹¹ To Goldman, patriotism represented the view that one nation believes itself to be greater than some other nation and, by virtue of that fact, may dominate others. This view is contrary to the equalizing nature of anarchism, which provides each person or group with the freedom to achieve their individual goals without relying on exploitative measures. Patriotism is also contrary to providing the freedom of all individuals

¹⁰ Emma Goldman, "A New Declaration of Independence," *Mother Earth* 4, no. 5 (July 1909). Available online at <http://ucblibrary3.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Writings/Essays/independence.html>, (accessed November 30, 2009).

¹¹ Emma Goldman, "The Tragedy at Buffalo" (article, *Free Society*, October 6, 1901), Jewish Women's Archive. (Brookline, MA: Jewish Women's Archive, 1998), http://jwa.org/exhibits/jsp/article.jsp?&imgfile=exhibits//images/exhban15.gif&media_id=acgtragedy1 (accessed November 30, 2009).

that Goldman always hoped to achieve, because it asserts a false hierarchy of power relationships.¹²

Goldman also utilized irony and repetitive rhetoric to assert the specifically American identity of her vision of anarchism in order to oppose critics who condemned her theory as foreign and “un-American.” After the assassination of William McKinley in September 1901, newspaper reports emerged that linked Goldman to assassin Leon Czolgosz by casting Czolgosz as an impressionable Polish foreigner who was inspired to the act by Goldman’s radical anarchist speeches.¹³ In defense of both herself and Czolgosz, Goldman wrote “The Tragedy at Buffalo,” in which she challenged the popular misconception that he was a foreigner and that his act was a manifestation of the European assault on American values.

To achieve this effect, Goldman contextualized his situation within a corrupted society in which “a small band of parasites have robbed the American people and trampled upon the fundamental principles laid down by the forefathers of this country.”¹⁴ Goldman emphasized that the American tradition of individualism was falsely employed to promote the growth of capitalism and the formation of both state and non-state institutions. “In vain they are making the world believe that he is the product of European conditions, and influenced by European ideas,” she argued, “This time the ‘assassin’ happens to be the child of Columbia [Ohio], who lulled him to sleep with ‘My country, ‘tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty,’ and who held out the hope to him that he, too, could become President of the country.”¹⁵ Through the use of tropes and traditions that would be familiar to her American audience—in this case with the lyrics of “My Country ‘tis of Thee”—she played on the idea of a basic American identity by drawing attention to the shared heritage of the audience and Czolgosz, who would both recognize the lyrics and thus be reminded of their upbringing within American society.

¹² Falk, 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 298.

¹⁴ Goldman, “The Tragedy at Buffalo.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Conjuring up the imagery related to adolescence is important for Goldman's theory because her theory also asserts that adolescence is the stage of development in which the concept of an American identity is formed in citizens' minds. To Goldman, adolescence is also characterized by innocence, and her rhetoric creates an identity for Czolgosz that associated his irresponsibility for his deed with the innocence of young children being taught about American history and ideals. Goldman does not argue for a return to an individual's literal adolescence, but to the fundamental principles of the revolutionary period of United States history that America was premised upon, which were characterized by a strong commitment to freedom.

Furthermore, she believed that the United States' commitment to freedom followed directly from a very clear individualist tradition that began before the Revolutionary War and continued through the early nineteenth century. In many of the newspaper and magazine articles Goldman wrote after arriving in America, she hearkened back to an era in American history in which individuals stood up for their own desires in the face of government persecution. She often referenced the writings of Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Brown, who each argued for various forms of individualism in their philosophies. Goldman read these writers extensively after she arrived in America and their thoughts informed her views on the individual's relationship to the political and institutional.¹⁶ From Emerson, for example, anarchists in the late nineteenth century utilized the idea that individuals should trust their own judgment and investigate for themselves the popular standards of thoughts and cultures.¹⁷ This idea paralleled Goldman's belief that anarchism would break with the exploitative tradition of American republican democracy and challenge the population as a whole to rethink and analyze their current situation.¹⁸ Goldman's thought is also

¹⁶ "Talk with Emma Goldman." *New York Sun*, January 6, 1901, in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, vol. 1, 423-431 (see note 5), 426.

¹⁷ Lillian Browne, "Emerson the Anarchist," *Mother Earth Bulletin* 4, no. 10, (December 1909): 330.

¹⁸ Emma Goldman, "Anarchism: What it Really Stands For," in *Anarchism and Other Essays*, 47-67 (see note 9), 50.

strongly influenced by Emerson's recognition of the close relationship between humans and the natural earth, and the human body's subordination to the whims of its natural desires, which will be discussed later.¹⁹

At the heart of Goldman's theory of anarchism, then, is a strong disavowal of the state and institutions that serve to naturalize mechanisms for exploitation and suppress individual freedom. Hence, Goldman explicitly defined anarchism as "the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion; the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government."²⁰ Goldman's theory of anarchism was also a subtle criticism of the democratic republic, in which the interests of the maximum number of citizens are mediated through a specific individual elected to represent those citizens. The problem Goldman located was that republics allow another person to make decisions on an individual's behalf. Although, in theory, representatives are elected by the people they represent, Goldman argued that the republican form of government provided an opening for exploitation to occur in the gap between the desires of an individual and the desires of a representative. As the American system of government developed and the discrepancy between individuals and their representatives grew wide, exploitation effectively became institutionalized through official channels, which then reinforced and extended it into other sectors of society. Observing how the state government dominated the economic, social, and legal policies of the era, Goldman not only wished to dispense with government institutions, but also with institutions that she viewed as exploitative in their current states, such as religion or education. In order to analyze how Goldman saw the state as institutionalizing exploitation, it will be helpful to divide her arguments with regards to three separate categories: economics, law, and religion. In all three categories, Goldman contrasts institutions and the natural state of humans as individuals, and therefore casts institutions as oppressive and preventing individual growth.

¹⁹ Browne, 331.

²⁰ Goldman, "Anarchism: What it Really Stands For," 62.

As previously mentioned, economic issues were extremely relevant in Goldman's time due to rapid industrialization and the influx of immigrants who were usually employed as unskilled workers that supported industrialism.²¹ She traces the exploitative nature of the institutionalized capitalist economic system to the protection of private property, reconstituting the words of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, widely considered the first anarchist thinker, who famously wrote, "Property is theft!"²² Goldman criticized the evolution of property in American society by defining it as, "the dominion of man's needs, the denial of the right to satisfy his needs."²³ Of course, all individuals rely on certain items of property for survival and livelihood, but Goldman argued that in the exploitative capitalist system of the United States, humans are not even able to maintain their basic property needs since they are forced to provide goods for an arbitrary superior in exchange for menial wages. The monotony of the mechanized capitalist system stripped human beings of their ability to "enjoy the full fruit of [their] labor,"²⁴ because they cannot work in a job that is important, let alone desirable, to them. The dire economic situation of the era prevented certain people from enjoying their right to all three essential aspects of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" outlined in the Declaration of Independence. Goldman argued that true individualism was being wrongly mobilized within society under the guise of capitalism, which assumed that entrepreneurship of business was an expression of the individual's motivation and dedication to work, when entrepreneurship actually prevented individualist expression through exploitation.

Goldman continued to criticize the separation of products from their producers in "Anarchism: What it Really Stands For," writing, "Man is being robbed not merely of the products of his labor, but of the power of free initiative, of originality, and the interest in, or desire for, the things he is making."²⁵ Her argument mirrors the Marxist critique

²¹ Kraut, 23.

²² John Elzbacher, *The Great Anarchists: Ideas and Teachings of Seven Major Thinkers*, trans. Steven T. Byington (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 73.

²³ Emma Goldman, "Anarchism: What it Really Stands For," 53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

of capitalism, which marks the divide between an object's use-value to its producer and the exchange-value it can only receive when considered in relation to some other product. According to Marx, "There it is a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things."²⁶ The subversion of use-values to exchange values to Marx abstracts the product away from its producer and leads to the confusion of social relationships between people and the relationships between products. Allowing social relationships to be replaced by products removes the human element from production and opens up the possibility for subjugation and exploitation of the workers who actually produce products. Current institutions reduce humans to machines that are inherently unnatural and therefore contrary to the most beneficial way of life for an individual. To counteract the exploitation of workers, Goldman wrote, "Anarchism aims to strip labor of its deadening, dulling aspect, of its gloom and compulsion. It aims to make work an instrument of joy, of strength, of color, of real harmony, so that the poorest sort of a man should find in work both recreation and hope."²⁷ Goldman believed that people in an anarchist society would choose to work in an occupation that is pleasurable to them and allows for the free expression of their individual desires, free of any institutional constraints.

Secondly, Goldman held little faith in the institution of the law as it existed in America at the turn of the century. As the Haymarket trials showed, the laws that were supposed to protect society from crime and danger did not actually function that way, and, oftentimes, legal protections were not given to many workers or underprivileged members of society. One major anxiety about the formation of an anarchist society was the concern that society would dissolve into chaos without a government or official legal institution to regulate it. It is accurate to say that Goldman's theory of anarchism is strongly opposed

²⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ernest Untermann, ed. Frederick Engels, 4th ed. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Co., 1909), Online Library of Liberty (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2009), http://olldownload.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=965&chapter=9421&layout=html&Itemid=27 (accessed November 30, 2009).

²⁷ Goldman, "Anarchism: What it Really Stands For," 61.

to the official legal institutions, but in its place she posited a conception of “natural law” as a regulative mechanism. Her definition of natural law can be seen as stemming from the transcendentalist view of the relationship between humans and nature of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Natural law is defined by Goldman as “that factor in man which asserts itself freely and spontaneously without any external force, in harmony with the requirements of nature. For instance, the demand for nutrition, for sex gratification, for light, air, and exercise.”²⁸ These demands cannot find expression through institutions because the form of institutions is inherently opposed to a state of nature characterized by individual freedom. She inverts the common idea that laws are needed to maintain order in society and instead considers them as part of the larger social problem that causes crime. Anarchism does not equate to violence because politics is violence, and anarchism and the political are opposed to one another. According to Goldman’s view of anarchism, violence would not be an issue in a truly anarchist society because there would be no repressive and violent state for individuals to react *against*.

By extending Goldman’s arguments further, it is clear that she would be opposed to the idea that “natural law” is formed and given to mankind by God or a higher being. Religion expects its members to adhere to strict moral codes that affect all aspects of life. According to Goldman, however, the moral codes of religion do promote the basics of life, but, instead, impose unnecessary restrictions on personal freedom. As she states, “[Religion] repudiates, as something vile and sinful, our deepest feelings; but being absolutely ignorant as to the real functions of human emotions, Puritanism is itself the creator of the most unspeakable vices.”²⁹ Religion is hypocritical, therefore, because it suppresses individual desires and asserts a moral hierarchy that does not actually exist, which ironically creates the specific problems that it hopes to address. Since religion excludes certain individuals from being considered moral, Goldman subjects it to the same criticism of

²⁸ Ibid., 58.

²⁹ Emma Goldman, “The Hypocrisy of Puritanism” in *Anarchism and Other Essays*, 167-176 (see note 9), 170.

patriotism explored previously in this paper. Goldman's theory views both the laws created by government and the moral rules created by religion as restricting individual liberties, even though those laws have erroneously been thought of as reflecting "natural law." Goldman's conception of "natural law" is not exploitative, as is human law, because it evolves from the expression of individual desires and requires only "spontaneity and free opportunity" for the laws to be followed.³⁰ In this view, law does not function to resolve disputes or to judge, because there would presumably be no disputes within a system of anarchist organization. Anarchism rejects the notion of an objective arbitrator of justice because it requires obedience to a concept outside of oneself. Therefore, the institution of religion is a flagrant oppressor of individuals and should be repudiated along with all other institutions.

The brief account of Goldman's critique of turn-of-the-century society outlined above provides the necessary background to understand her vision of an anarchist society. In Goldman's anarchist theory, individualist social organization would provide for human contentment through freedom of work and social relationships "based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth, free access to the earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations."³¹ Although she emphasizes the inevitability of free associations of people, Goldman refrains from establishing a set vision of what an anarchist society would look like. She instead recognizes that the form of anarchist society will result from the particular needs of the era in which the society is formed.³²

However, Goldman's vision of a successful anarchist organization of society is not without theoretical problems. For example, she does not directly answer the critique that individual desires and interests may clash as a result of the varied backgrounds and histories from which each individual comes. Goldman locates the origin of most social ills within "the state," but even if individuals were able to abolish the state

³⁰ Goldman, "Anarchism: What it Really Stands For," 58.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

³² Emma Goldman, Preface to *Anarchism and Other Essays*, 41-45 (see note 9), 43.

and institutions in the present, they may still be subject to action and opinions carried over from a pre-anarchist society. For this reason, Goldman foregrounds the inventive quality of anarchism in her theory, arguing that anarchism is able to break free from tradition and outdated ways of thinking which may otherwise hinder its application. In fact, she describes the practical characteristic of anarchism as “[having] vitality enough to leave the stagnant waters of the old, and built, as well as sustain, new life.”³³ Goldman again employs imagery revolving around nature and life to highlight the most basic and essential ability of creation and newness. Furthermore, the “new life” that is possible within an anarchist society can only be brought about through a revolution and a radical restructuring of the current status quo.

In conclusion, it is unfortunate that anarchism, as both a political and social theory, maintains a negative connotation in today’s society and has become synonymous with uncontrollable chaos and disorder. Because of this stigma, anarchist theories like Goldman’s have, more or less, been pushed to the fringe of popular political theory even though her ideas can still inform our present situation nearly a century later. Contemporary complaints about the recent economic crisis and the problems arising from unchecked capitalism echo many of the criticisms of institutional exploitation that Emma Goldman raised at the turn of the twentieth century. Global violence has not been eradicated by any means, despite the formation of numerous laws and international agreements, and many workers struggle to sustain themselves economically through jobs they do not enjoy. While many aspects of Goldman’s theory may not be relevant today, the transformative characteristic of anarchism—which requires a break from tradition and the creation of something new while still retaining a sense of history—could be an advantageous approach to future policy-making at the institutional level.

³³ Goldman, “Anarchism: What it Really Stands For,” 49.

Emma Goldman's vision of anarchism, therefore, was one of individualism and natural freedom, not of chaos and disorder. Looking back on her speeches and writings, it is clear that Goldman simply wanted American society to achieve freedom from all constraints and exploitation and to gain confidence in the natural state of individuals that maintains that freedom.

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