

BEYOND FEMINISM

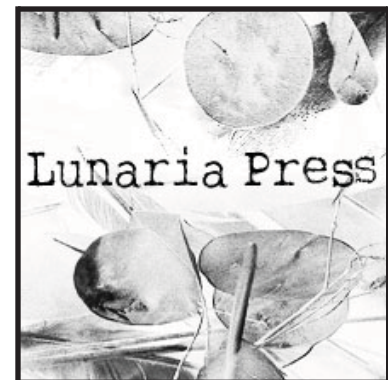
Anarchism and Human Nature



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LP

A critique of modern feminist theories
from The Politics of Individualism.



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Introduction

L. Susan Brown became interested in Anarchist theory when obtaining her B.A. at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. She became disillusioned with the broken promises of her liberal upbringing after being exposed to Marxist criticisms in pursuit of making sense of the world. This accounted for the uneasiness she had always felt when considering our society. The Marxism she embraced was a humanistic vision of society that critically revealed inherent contradictions in liberal capitalism and a world where the potential of the human individual could be fully realized. Then, through reading the literary works of Emma Goldman, she recognized the historical and theoretical incompatibilities between Marxism and Anarchism. Her ideas as an individualist anarchist then started to bleed into her critical consideration of the political philosophy of liberal feminism. Her book, *The Politics of Individualism*, was published in 2003:

“I found myself drawn back to the humanism of anarchism as I recoiled against the often blind anger of feminism.”

Brown uses certain terminology and definitions that I would not have personally chosen to represent my thoughts; such as her referring to the “adherents” of anarchism. However, she articulates her weariness and critiques clearly with an emphasis on liberal feminism lacking a vital opposition to domination as a whole within the many veins of contemporary feminist theories. Coming from different experiences and upbringings, this is a weariness that I share. Without an anti-authoritarian perspective, “liberation” of our own individual identities is not only unachievable, but also provides a wider range of those in positions that are inherently dominant over others. The redistribution of this essay is an expression of my own interest in steering clear from the feminist identity and is an attempt to propose a discussion with those who choose to reside within it.

it is versatile enough to be able to respond to any form of oppression that may emerge in the future. If tomorrow, for instance, left-handed people were proclaimed to be criminals for their lack of right-handedness, anarchists would have to oppose such oppression in order to remain true to anarchism's underlying existential individualism. It is this fundamental anti-authoritarianism which leads anarchists to fight for the dignity and freedom of such groups as women, people of color, gays and lesbians, people with AIDS, the differently abled, the poor, the homeless, among others. Anarchism goes beyond most other liberatory movements in opposing oppression in whatever form it takes, without assigning priority to one oppression over another.

Unlike most other political movements, anarchism understands that all oppressions are mutually reinforcing; therefore it urges that the liberation struggle take place on many fronts at once. Thus, some anarchists concentrate on challenging State power, others focus on opposing male domination, and still others spend their energy fighting against capitalist exploitation, compulsive heterosexuality, organized religion, and a myriad of other causes. The anarchist movement accommodates a diversity of anti-authoritarian struggles, and while each is recognized as being essential to the establishment of a truly free society, none is placed as prior to the others. Anarchism fights all oppression in all its manifestations.

Anarchism goes beyond feminism, beyond liberalism, indeed beyond most other liberatory movements, in its relentless quest for individual freedom. Certainly there are people working within other movements who share anarchism's aversion to power; however, any political movement that does not have at its core an anti-authoritarian critique of power leaves itself open to anarchist questioning. The gift of anarchism lies in this critique- a thoughtful of relentless questioning of authority and power, one which seeks to create a world where all individuals may live in freedom.

within the women's movement who are decidedly "archic," that is who endorse the use of power in both theory and in practice. By collapsing anarchism and feminism into one movement, Kornegger and Farrow disregard the rich diversity of perspectives that make the feminist movement, at the same time committing a grave injustice to anarchism by focusing on the narrow issue of women's subordination. Anarchism embraces feminism, but anarchism is also a great deal more. In fact, feminism and anarchism are not identical movements as Farrow and Kornegger suggest; feminism as a whole recognizes the iniquity of the oppression of women by men; anarchism opposes oppression of all kinds. Certainly some feminists look beyond sexism to a wider, anarchistic critique of power; however, this wider critique is not at all necessary to feminism.

Since it is possible that one could be a feminist without sharing the anarchist sensibility towards power, then it is logical to ask whether it is possible to be an anarchist without being a feminist. In other words, can anarchism accommodate the oppression of women without contradicting itself? As anarchism is a political philosophy that opposes all relationships of power, it is inherently feminist. An anarchist who supports male domination contradicts the implicit critique of power which is the fundamental principle upon which all of anarchism is built. Sexist anarchists do indeed exist, but only by virtue of directly contradicting their own anarchism. This contradiction leaves sexist anarchists open to criticism on their own terms. Anarchism must be feminist if it is to remain self-consistent.

Not only is anarchism inherently feminist, but also it goes beyond feminism in its fundamental opposition to all forms of power, hierarchy and domination. Anarchism transcends and contains feminism in its critique of power. The implicit opposition to the exercise of power gives anarchism a wider mandate than feminism or most other liberatory movements. Anarchist political philosophy and practice is free to critically oppose any situation of oppression. While race, class, age, gender, sexuality, or ability, for instance, may pose analytic problems for other movements, anarchism is capable of dealing with all of these issues as legitimate because of its fundamental commitment to freedom for all individuals. No one oppression is given special status in anarchism- all oppression is equally undesirable. Anarchism fights for existential freedom against each and every form of power and domination, not just a particular historical manifestation of power. This gives anarchism a flexibility not available to other movements. Not only can anarchism address any form of oppression that exists today,

Beyond Feminism: Anarchism and Human Freedom

Anarchism is not only a more coherent liberatory movement than liberal feminism, but it is also a more inclusive and complete liberatory movement than feminism as a whole. This is not to say that feminism has not been useful; anarchism, for a variety of reasons, has yet to emerge as a significant popular movement while feminism has accomplished many extensive gains for women. The feminist movement has identified and documented the very specific domination of women by men in virtually all cultures throughout recorded history. As Seyla Benhabib observes, "the historically known gender-sex systems have contributed to the oppression and exploitation of women. The task of feminist critical theory is to uncover this fact, and to develop the theory that is emancipatory and reflective, and which women in their struggles to overcome oppression and exploitation." Anarchism with its anti-authoritarian imperative, can learn from feminist analysis how the male/female hierarchy in particular is manifested and perpetuated, and can join feminism in opposing male domination. Additionally, in its concern for abolishing supremacy, feminist criticism produces considerable insight into the general nature of hierarchy, which can further help the anarchist protest against all power and domination. However, because the feminist movement as an entity lacks an inherent critique of power and domination, it may be insufficient for the achievement of existential freedom for all women.

Anarchist political philosophy is based upon the belief that individuals are capable of self-determination, that self-determination is the foundation for human freedom, and that the power relationships undermine self-determination and therefore must be constantly opposed. This uncompromising anti-authoritarianism is what makes anarchism so compelling to its adherents, both as a philosophy and as a political movement. Anarchists understand that freedom is grounded in the refusal of the individual to exercise power over others, coupled with the opposition of the individual to restrictions by any external authority. Thus, anarchists challenge any form of organization or relationship which fosters the exercise of power and domination. Compulsory education, State power, sexual repression, censorship, private property, alienated labor, child abuse - these are all relationships of power that anarchists critically challenge.

Of course, many expressions of power exist in our society other

than those listed above; what distinguishes the anarchist from other political activists is that the anarchist opposes them all. This condemnation of power per se is fundamental to the anarchist position and gives it a critical impetus which takes it beyond traditional political movements. The feminist movement, with its central concern the liberation of women, does not contain within itself the larger critique of power that is basic to anarchism. Without an implicit condemnation of power as such, feminism risks limiting itself to an incomplete struggle for liberation.

It is absolutely necessary that an explicit anti-authoritarianism be present in a political philosophy if it is to bring about true human liberation. No hierarchy is acceptable, no ruler is allowable, no domination is justifiable in a free society. Clearly, if this anti-authoritarian principle is not fundamental to a political philosophy, then domination and hierarchy can exist in theory and practice without presenting a crisis. As a movement, feminism does not have as a defining characteristic an anti-authoritarian critique of power and domination; therefore, as a political philosophy, it leaves the door open for the acceptance of hierarchy and domination.

Of course it is possible to point out various groups and individuals within feminism who are critical of power, domination, and hierarchy. The feminist writer Marilyn French, for instance, criticizes power in her book "Beyond Power; On women, Men and Morals," and advocated building a new world on what she argues in the opposite of power: pleasure. Another feminist writer, Starhawk, likewise criticizes the exercise of what she calls "power-over," and advocated the use of consensus decision making as one means to counter power. Angela Miles, in her essay "Feminist Radicalism in the 1980's," argues for an "integrative" feminism that opposes all forms of domination. These are only three examples of feminist thinkers who consciously oppose the exercise of power and domination - there are many others.

However, while one can point to various examples of feminist thought which focus on the problem of power, this does not indicate in any sense that a critique of power is necessary or integral to feminist theory. In other words, just as one can be a feminist and oppose power like the three writers cited above, it is also possible and not inconsistent for a feminist to embrace the use of power and advocate domination without relinquishing the right to be a feminist.

For example, in her essay "The Future- If There Is One- Is Female," Sally Miller Gearhart argues for the establishment of a matriarchy; she says we must "begin thinking of flipping the coin, of making

the exchange of power, of building the ideology of female primacy and control." A matriarchy, like a patriarchy, is based on power; the fact that in a matriarchy women hold the power does not negate the fact that power is still being exercised.

Jo Freeman, in her article "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," argues that feminists should abandon their small leadership groups in favor of delegated power and a strong, centralized feminist organization. In place of small grassroots groups that use consensus to make decisions, Freeman advocates large-scale democratic decision making without questioning the tyranny of the majority over the minority that is inevitable in any democratic form of organization. For Freeman, if feminism is to be successful, then "some middle ground between domination and ineffectiveness can and must be found." Clearly, Freeman sees nothing wrong with women participating in forms of politics which are based on the exercise of domination and power.

Catherine MacKinnon, in "Toward a Feminist Theory of the State," suggests that a widening of State power in the form of a feminist State is the only way to counter male sexual domination. MacKinnon does not question power itself; in fact, she advocates investing the State with more power over the individual. MacKinnon's main concern is with who exercises power; she believes that feminists must wield power through a strong State in order to achieve the liberation of women.

Finally, the liberal feminist Betty Friedan maintains that the struggle for and the achievement of women's equality should take place without disturbing the existing hierarchies of the State and the capitalist economic system. Friedan has no quarrel with economic or political power on an equal footing. Gearhart, Freeman, MacKinnon, and Friedan- all four are undeniably feminist, and all four accept power as a part of their world view. This acceptance of power does not disqualify them from being feminists. Feminism may allow for a critique of power, but a critique of power is not necessary to feminism.

In spite of the fact that some feminists clearly embrace the use of power, the argument has been made by certain theorists that feminism is inherently anarchistic. For instance, Lynne Farrow takes this position when she claims that "feminism practices what Anarchism preaches." Peggy Kornegger also asserts an identity between the two movements when she states "feminists have been unconscious anarchists for years." Both Farrow and Kornegger, in their enthusiasm to link feminism with anarchism, ignore groups and individuals