Review: Quiet Rumors

Quiet Rumors: An Anarcha-Feminist Reader edited by Dark Star (Dark Star/AK Press 2002); 120 pp. $15

Red Sonja (Class Against Class)

2003

If anarchism 'undefined' is the sprawling body of thought that it is, reaching such polar philosophical distances as rugged individualism on one hand and libertarian communism on the other, then "anarcha-femiinism" also covers such a vast political terrain with fuzzy boundaries. Whether anarcha-feminism is really Radical Feminism, or Situationism with a feminist bent, or a post-Leftist post-feminism, one never seems to know in this anthology. Of course, its contents are only a reflection of what anarcha-feminism has so far produced, and cannot be blamed. And it is successful in the publishers' ultimate aim, which is to reopen the door on the anarcha-feminist question and revive this debate which never really developed much beyond its once promising beginnings. So what do we have in this anthology? Well for one it is very beautifully put together. Despite its lack of chronology, I will start with the oldest articles — contributions from such foremothers as Voltairine DeCleyre, Emma Goldman, and Charlotte Wilson — the latter being a hero of British anarchist-communism at the turn of the century we ignorantly do not much hear of in North America.

Unfortunately, none of the first wave anarcha-feminists really write about women in particular or feminism in these articles, save Goldman. They are fine examples of anarchist writings of their day: DeCleyre's prose and poetry always well wrought even when describing something as awkward as the various 'isms' of anarchism; Goldman's timely "A Woman Without a Country" attacks the repressive state of affairs surrounding the government's deportation mania; and Wilson's "Social Democracy and Anarchism" shows once again how much ahead of her time this woman was. Wilson was a close comrade of Kropotkin in the late 19th century and along with others in the anarchist circle of the Fabian Society, brought anarchist-communist ideas to England. Her prolific writings were exercises in convincing the average person in the common sense ideas of anarchism, but she had a thoughtful eye in analyzing everyday social relations as they related to grander philosophical ideas. This latter part is where she is especially valuable to feminists, I believe, and echoed sentiments of the 1970s anarcha-feminists almost 100 years earlier. "The key-note of the anarchist contention is that the vitiation of social life is produced by the domination of man by man. The spirit of domination is the disintegrating element, which, constantly tending to break up society, is the fundamental cause of confusion and disorder." Similar to the "Tyrannies" debate found later in this anthology, Wilson writes: "We are often keenly

aware within ourselves of a desire to rule some fellow-creature, who tempts us by his servility or his feeble defiance; of a sense of equal social relationship towards another who meets us on a ground of equality and equal self-respect; or of an instinct of self-defense called out by the aggressive personality of a third. It is this personal experience which is leading us to a clearer conception of the true meaning of the strife we see around us."

We can apply Wilson's acute understanding of domination to a feminist framework, with the help of the second wave anarcha-feminists, but it was Emma Goldman (yes, even despite her often over-glorified position in anarchist histories) who wrote the most about specifically feminist issues. In perhaps one of her most famous pieces concerning feminism, "The Tragedy of Women's Emancipation," Goldman tries to tackle a number of issues at once, and is sometimes misunderstood for her adoration of the "mother instinct" and other "woman-nature" attributes that make me cringe more than a little. Firstly, her criticism of the narrow feminist demand for the vote is as always, accurate, as is her criticism of the emancipated woman's "progress" as mere limited access to main-stream society. In this, Goldman sees women sacrificing their "inner life" in order to achieve equality. This is no emancipation, she writes, and would rather women found happiness in love and child-rearing than in the restrictive conformist unemotional life of the "emancipated woman" as defined by a few Puritan-like souls. Liken this to a contemporary example such as the unrealistic expectations of the "Super Woman" ideal of the 80s, in which women were supposed to succeed in a career, have a happy marriage, run a household, and raise children — and do this all without having a mental breakdown. This ideal quickly became transparent to feminists as being more work for women, and clear to working class women all along that class lines would limit careers, and they were juggling working, and raising families, and keeping a house all along and had never found this very liberating. It becomes clear, then that it is the economic system that must change if women are to ever find equality in the public realm and happiness in the private life. This is what Goldman means when she aims for "the reorganization of our social life, based upon the principles of economic justice."

Overall, I think better examples of these theorists' position on female emancipation could've been included in this anthology. DeCleyre, for example wrote and spoke extensively about the oppression and exploitation of women: "Let every woman ask herself, Why am I the slave of Man? Why is my brain said not to be equal of his brain? Why is my work not paid equally with his? Why must my body be controlled by my husband, giving me in exchange what he deems fit?" Why just include her "Making of an Anarchist" which is primarily about Kropotkin?

Also, a better example of Goldman's true position about her vision of freedom of women could have been included. In the same collection of essays as "The Tragedy", she wrote: "Her development, her freedom, her independence, must come from and through herself. First, by asserting herself as a personality, and not as a sex commodity. Second, by refusing the right of anyone over her body; by refusing to bear children, unless she wants them, by refusing to be a servant to God, the State, society, the husband, the family, etc., by making her life simpler, but deeper and richer. That is, by trying to learn the meaning and substance of life in all its complexities; by freeing herself from the fear of public opinion and public condemnation." These words clear up any muddled thoughts on "woman nature" that may be got from the essay in Quiet Rumors.

The reader rather yearns for some historical context to these essays, essays which span vast differences of opinion — it is hard to imagine Wilson's class-based essay being the theoretical foundation for the resolutely anti-organizational pieces which begin the book, for example.

These essays, the original 1970s/early 80s era articles remain the theoretical foundations to this thing called "anarcha-feminism" that they have always been (though this is probably because not enough is getting written today — but that's another topic for another day). But often you have to remind yourself of the historical context of the times and ignore the rhetoric — "the coming socialist Sisterhood," for example; and suspect definitions such as "Socialism means all the groovy things people can do and build togetherâ€¦" But remember how groundbreaking this was at the time: the inevitable clamoring collision between the New Left and second wave feminism was bound to produce a little silliness. Let us not forget how blatant the hypocrisy of sexism on the Left was, how much women at the time had to put up with just to be part of the movement. This, I think, is what fueled the rant-like aspects of some of these articles, a characteristic which tends to discredit them. The utter poverty of sound political analysis is a rational critique of them, however. Such as in "Feminism as Anarchism" by Farrow, we have at first a brief history of feminism as it is co-opted by other liberal or progressive movements — sound warnings for a feminist movement, but the author destroys any other possibility of positive advice by romanticizing anti-theoretical components of Feminism, reveling in "our disinterest in theoretical speculation" and "our distrust for logic" (see p.19). This is horrifying, even more so than the romanticization of midwives — what next, Goddess worship as a revolutionary act? Farrow's insistence on "situationist based" feminism was the strong point of feminism, but this became a pit-fall when the movement has become a liberal platform for single-issue demands. This anti-Leftist, anti-theoretical slant perhaps has what has gotten us in this mess in the first place — the vacuum of new and challenging ideas and action.

Kornegger's "Anarchism: the Feminist Connection" on the other hand does try and follow the thread of where history, feminism, and anarchism intersect. Importantly the author makes the argument of why feminism needs anarchism "Challenging sexism means challenging all hierarchy — economic, political, and personal. And that means an anarcha-feminist revolution." Feminism, to succeed, must become revolutionary and anarchist. Kornegger shows how the consciousness raising groups of the late 60s were "practicing what anarchism preaches" and rightly shows how they fell short in often restricting their growth to nothing more than a therapeutic function. This was the context from which sprung the 'Tyrannies' debate. When groups wanted to move on and take direct action or organize campaigns, they "found the 'tyranny of structurelessness' could be as destructive as the 'tyranny of tyranny.'" I think Kornegger is right to say that "what was missing was a verbalized anarchist analysis. Organization does not have to stifle spontaneity or follow hierarchical patterns." Most importantly she tackles the "where do we go from here" question, understanding the long-term process of revolution and destroying patriarchal attitudes and oppression.

Ehrlich in "Socialism, Anarchism, and Feminism" similarly elaborates on the meat of the controversy around the "Tyranny" articles, which are of course included in this anthology. Her over-emphasis on Situationism is misplaced I think, though speaks kernels of truth in her analysis of the "housewife as commodity;" the necessity to reinvent social relations and how this so closely involves women; women as passive consumers, etc. (women as both the consumers and the consumed). Back to the "Tyrannies" again, for they are thrown around even in current debates that it is essential to understand their context. Depending on what strain of anarchism one is proscribed to these days, one "Tyranny" critique may be more favorable than the other. To those trying to build anarchist organizations, Tyranny of Structurelessness certainly rings true, and the response in â€œTyranny of Tyrannyâ€ misses the mark [no, I cannot liken anarchism

to masturbation, thank you very much!]. Yet the latter was seen as the "anarchist" response — one which explained the value of small group organizing and the important struggle against the "inner tyrannies" of domination, to which radical and anarchist feminists had biting criticisms. While neither are self-proclaimed anarchist texts, they are valuable to us because of the central issue of strategy, tactics and methods. I will not go into the arguments of both in this humble book review, (and any anarchist should have read these already!) but to say it is not recommended to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Even in Levine's rather reactionary and heavily individualist response in "Tyranny of Tyranny," it does remind us of the essential anarchist critique of inner psychological dominations as well as our original effort to "create an alternative to bureaucratic organization." In the end, I think a much more useful response could have come from a clear anarchist position, which both Ehrlich and Kornegger began to do in this anthology but it is not enough.

Finally, one of the best of the more recent articles appears near the end of Quiet Rumors: "Make your own Tea" by Alice Nutter. This is like a breath of fresh air I think because it is clearly coming from a working class point of view, and from struggling in a class-based anarchist organization whose feminist work was genuine in its efforts. That Class War's overall performance in the feminist arena is spotty, as Nutter points out, is not shocking (what else is new?) but plainly her critique is part of that organization's development (or demise — it appeared in the last issue of Class War in 1997). And now I am running out of space to write about the best things of this book. Maybe because they are not as frequently republished, but the Rote Zora articles and interviews are rather uplifting, just as the newer specimens about the Bolivian Mujeres Creando. I will let the reader discover these exciting tidbits for herself, for I am certainly not going to critique the bravery and cunning of the actions of these feminist groups.

To sum up I will refer to the introduction to this anthology, a piece I was hoping to be more lengthy having seen the name of Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz as the author. Ortiz is somewhat of a role model for myself, and someone whom I wish we heard more from. What she does give us in few words is the core importance of this book, which is of consulting "our historic predecessors," because they were indeed "far ahead of anarchist men in their vision of freedom." But also, though too briefly, she offers the lens through which we must look at our present situation: as working class women who must do nothing less than change the world.

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