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Review:

Tongue of Fire: Emma Goldman, Public Womanhood, and the Sex Question, Donna M. Kowal

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Tongue of Fire: Emma Goldman, Public Womanhood, and the Sex Question, Donna M. Kowal (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016), ISBN 978-1-4384-5973-8, pp. 201, \$75.00.

Emma Goldman has always been something of a heroine to historians of women. She was “discovered” by the 1970s generation of scholars, eager to uncover the deeds of women who had been buried in the traditional political and economic histories. Along with many others, including Victoria Woodhull, Leonora O’Reilly, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Goldman emerged as an icon of rebellion against the constraints of gender and the restrictions of male politics and economics. Goldman has been given her due in the republication of her own memoirs and many of her letters, in the documents collected by the multivolume Emma Goldman Project at the University of California at Berkeley, and in several biographies, most notably that by Candace Falk. What could Donna Kowal add to the literature, I wondered. Not much, I am afraid.

Kowal situates Goldman in the cross-hairs of two theoretical frameworks: Judith Butler’s notions of performative feminism, and Habermas’s construction of public and counterpublic. The five chapters of the book trace Goldman’s relationship to anarchism, sexuality, Jewish identity, and public perception in the light of these theoretical frameworks. Goldman, she argues, had “unprecedented access to audiences” (p. xiii) and therefore deserves to be seen in terms of her performance as a woman and her reception as a female anarchist. Kowal tells us that her purpose is to “understand more fully the way in which her ideas are situated and iterated in the context of gender/sex politics” (p. xvi). Herein lies the first problem. Gender/sex politics is what sociologists used to call an empty box – meaningless until filled with content. It is sometimes exclusionary, generally normative, often restrictive, and occasionally liberating. Kowal acknowledges its complex nature without specifying Goldman’s location in the sex/gender paradigm as it changed over time.

Part of the problem is that Kowal analyses the rhetoric independently of its historical context. Details of Goldman’s life are introduced not as part of her development, but in an effort to fit her into one theory or another. Thus, Kowal defines Goldman as an anarcho-feminist and a feminist, identifying her as part of a network of women who fought for sexual freedom, birth control, and sovereignty over their own bodies. Of

course, the meaning of “feminism” changed dramatically over Goldman’s lifetime, but it is used here to cover the activities of women from about 1890 to the late thirties. I am intrigued, for example, by the notion (pp. 12–13) that Goldman worked with such anarchists as Kate Cooper Austin, Lucy Parsons, and Voltairine de Cleyre. Kowal identifies these women as part of a “counterpublic” that Goldman represented. And yet, she tells us, Goldman never met at least one member of the group and scarcely knew others. Nor do we have any evidence that Goldman knew of their ideas. The network is identified in the first chapter, and though referred to thereafter, it has no tangible dimension.

Although Kowal draws on selected primary sources to reveal Goldman’s “subjective” experience, she relies on a limited range of secondary literature to provide background where necessary. The lack of historical context is frustrating. For example, Kowal insists that Goldman identified as a Jew. But what it meant to Goldman to be an immigrant Jew without religious ties or spiritual inclinations in the first part of the twentieth century remains up for debate. And how being a Jew mattered to Goldman is not discussed. Goldman is said to have been committed to anarchism as it was framed by nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary women with whom she was acquainted. We are treated to descriptions of these women and their activities, but left to wonder how Goldman, who left Russia as a girl of sixteen, without knowledge of these women, knew about them; what she read; which women she identified with.

Taken as a whole, biographers and historians will find this book lacking in substance and generally unsatisfying. Scholars of literature and the arts might find that reading Goldman through the lens of theory provides a useful explication of theoretical models. Others who are more patient with jargon than I, and those who understand it a little better, might enjoy the ways in which Kowal finds Goldman uniquely suited to illustrate an innovative new model of inquiry.

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