

BOOK REVIEW

## Anarchafeminism

Chiara Bottici. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 343 pp. (ISBN 978-1-3500-9586-1)

Martha Ackelsberg

Department of Government and Program for the Study of Women and Gender, Smith College, Northampton, MA 01063, USA Email: [mackelsb@smith.edu](mailto:mackelsb@smith.edu)

The claim that “anarchism is the highest form of order” may well seem an oxymoron. All too often, anarchism is conflated with chaos. But the confusion disappears if one recognizes that, in much of the contemporary world, we assume that order requires authority and/or hierarchy. So, is it possible to have order (or organization) without hierarchy and, in particular, without hierarchical authority? Similarly, is a “thick” collectivity possible without losing the distinctiveness of the individuals that comprise it? These and related questions are at the center of Chiara Bottici’s explication of anarchafeminism and its relevance to many contemporary debates.

In a certain respect—and I do not mean this depreciatively—this book offers a theory of everything. The author argues that, in offering a method of understanding the world that is rooted in opposition to *all hierarchies*, anarchafeminism recognizes a “plurality of axes of oppression” that can bring together Marxist, feminist, queer, ecological, and other perspectives much more seamlessly and effectively than what is now termed “intersectionality.” It does so, moreover, in a way that might ground a non-eurocentric approach to anti-oppression organizing and resistance. As she states at the very beginning, “...in all the literature engaging with intersectionality, there is barely any mention of the feminist tradition of the past that has been claiming the same point for a very long time: anarchist feminism or, as we prefer to call it, ‘anarchafeminism.’” (p. 1). This is a point with which I have long been in agreement; and I am delighted to see this argument taken up and developed in great detail.

The book proceeds in three main sections. The first lays out Bottici’s understanding of anarchism/anarchafeminism as a *methodology* that challenges the necessity of hierarchical organization, and offers a way to bring together many contemporary movements against oppression. While referring to the works of major anarchist theorists of the past (including Godwin, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Reclus, and others), she attempts to develop a “pluralist genealogy of anarchism,” centering the writings of female—though not necessarily self-defined feminist—anarchists, Emma Goldman and He Zhen, that “breaks the barrier of silence created by accumulated layers of Eurocentrism, racism, and sexism.” (68) Further, she argues, anarchism is a philosophy that “is able to keep together two fundamental claims: that there is something specific in the oppression of women... and that in order to address that oppression we need to tackle all other forms of oppression” (22). Thus, even when she draws on queer theory (among other perspectives) to argue against the male/female binary, she continues to

highlight the experience of those who are non-cis-white men. The insistence on the importance (and possibility) of recognizing distinctiveness within collectivity is a critical one, and one that reappears throughout the argument of the book. Oddly, although she quotes Goldman extensively and with great enthusiasm for her contributions, and bemoans the lack of attention to Goldman as a political theorist and philosopher, she seems unaware of some recent treatments of Goldman [e.g. Kathy Ferguson (2011) and Clare Hemmings (2018) to name just two] that explore her political theorizing in depth.

The second section of the book develops a theory and practice of trans-individualism, drawing heavily on the works of Baruch Spinoza. To my mind, this is its most original and provocative contribution, offering an alternative to the methodological individualism that is at the root of so much US- and European-based feminist theorizing. Bottici weaves together Spinoza's philosophy with feminist philosopher of science, Karen Barad's, use of quantum mechanics to critique the separability of bodies, even the separability of so-called "living" from "non-living" organisms. Following Barad and Spinoza, she argues that there is "no individual being pre-existing the inter-action, that is, the action between things... beings exist only because the relation exist[s]." (150) The result is a radically anti-hierarchical view of the order of things/nature, that displaces humans from the top of the "great chain of being," and argues for a "somatic communism" that can, in turn, provide the basis for thinking about a "political communism." It allows for a politics of resistance that starts from assumptions of community and connection, rather than from isolation and individualism. Our individuality/distinctiveness is in the narration of our lives: "the self unfolds through the stories that we tell about ourself... we are always individual through our transindividuality" (156–57). The problem, once again, is not differentiation, but hierarchy. It is possible to retain and develop people's individual and/or communal distinctiveness even within a collectivity, as long as that collectivity is not hierarchically structured.

The third major section centers Bottici's efforts to de-center euro-American theorizing, and to argue for a "de-colonial" and "de-imperial" anarchafeminism that looks at relationships among gender/sex oppression, capitalism, production, reproduction, and ecology. Here she draws heavily on María Lugones' (and others') work on "decolonial feminism," and effectively attempts a reworking of early socialist-feminist writings, including connecting Marx and Engels on "primitive accumulation" with feminist explorations of early modern witch crazes. In the end, she also introduces the term "menocracy" (to replace "patriarchy,") because patriarchy is not what it used to be: "because fathers are no longer the sole 'head' of the family, and because they are not necessarily 'male.'" (274). However, although patriarchy may not look the same as it used to, "cismen are still the 'first sex'—both in the West and globally." (275). "Menocracy" is meant to account for that reality while still highlighting the subordinated status of virtually all of those who are not cis white men, as well as the possibilities for joint resistance.

This is, in short, a wide-ranging and provocative book, challenging some core assumptions of much feminist theorizing and bringing together literatures and perspectives not often placed in conversation with one another. And yet, even as Bottici criticizes the eurocentrism of so much radical and feminist theorizing, two of the theorists she cites most centrally and extensively—Emma Goldman and Baruch Spinoza—were, of course, European. More disturbingly, the ways she identified each of them struck this reader as odd. Thus, her first (and many later) reference(s) to Goldman identified her as "Lithuanian-born" or as "Lithuanian." Although Goldman may have been born in Lithuania, if she had a national identity it was, surely, as a Jew. Goldman often

spoke to Jewish audiences in Yiddish, drew frequently on Jewish sources and images, and never hid that dimension of her life story. To identify her as Lithuanian, when she and her family emigrated to escape oppression as Jews—and never, to the best of my knowledge, to acknowledge or recognize her Jewishness—seems to me to seriously misrepresent who she was. And there is a similar elision (or avoidance?) of acknowledging Spinoza’s Jewish heritage. While Bottici did identify him once as a “Jewish philosopher,” almost every other mention of him comes with the sobriquet, “the Marrano philosopher,” based, apparently, on a study by Yirmiyahu Yovel, who called Spinoza the “Marrano of Reason.” Spinoza, however, was not, himself, a Marrano (a derogatory term developed in Inquisition Spain to refer to those Jews who officially converted to Catholicism, but continued Jewish practice in secret), but a Jew, until he was excommunicated by the Jewish community of Amsterdam for his heterodox beliefs. I continue to be puzzled by these identifications, and by what appears as a reluctance to identify Judaism as an important component of the life and thought of those two philosophers/activists who are, in reality, central to her work.

Nevertheless, in ranging over so many literatures, and in attempting, at least, to de-center Euro-American perspectives, this book challenges its readers to question what have long been taken to be basic starting-points for (feminist) theorizing. Rather than trying to “shoehorn” race, gender, sexuality and other factors into a socialist paradigm that treats class as *the primary* oppression, anarchism begins with a focus on *hierarchy* in all its forms, thereby recognizing multiple axes of oppression and resistance. Furthermore, Bottici insists that even early socialist feminists, who directly countered the methodological individualism of so much US-based theorizing, were unable to move fully beyond that individualism, because the Marxist theory on which it was based, itself, depended on a fundamental hierarchical distinction between humans and other beings (and certainly between humans and non-living entities). Her claim that anarchafeminist transindividualism gives us a stronger and firmer basis for community and cooperation, as well as for a decolonial resistance that recognizes distinctiveness *within* community, provides a clarion call for new and creative forms of both cultural and political engagement.

## References

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**Martha Ackelsberg** is William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Government, *emerita* at Smith College. She is the author of multiple articles on democratic theory, feminism, social movements, and Jewish feminism, as well as of *Resisting Citizenship: Feminist Essays on Democracy, Politics and Community* (Routledge, 2010). Her *Mujeres Libres: Anarchism and the Struggle of the Emancipation of Women* (Indiana University Press, 1991; revised edition, AK Press, 2005) has been translated and republished in Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, and Russian.