



Emma's Lyricism

by Courtney Fiske

Vivian Gornick

Emma Goldman: Revolution as a Way of Life
(Yale University Press, October 2011)

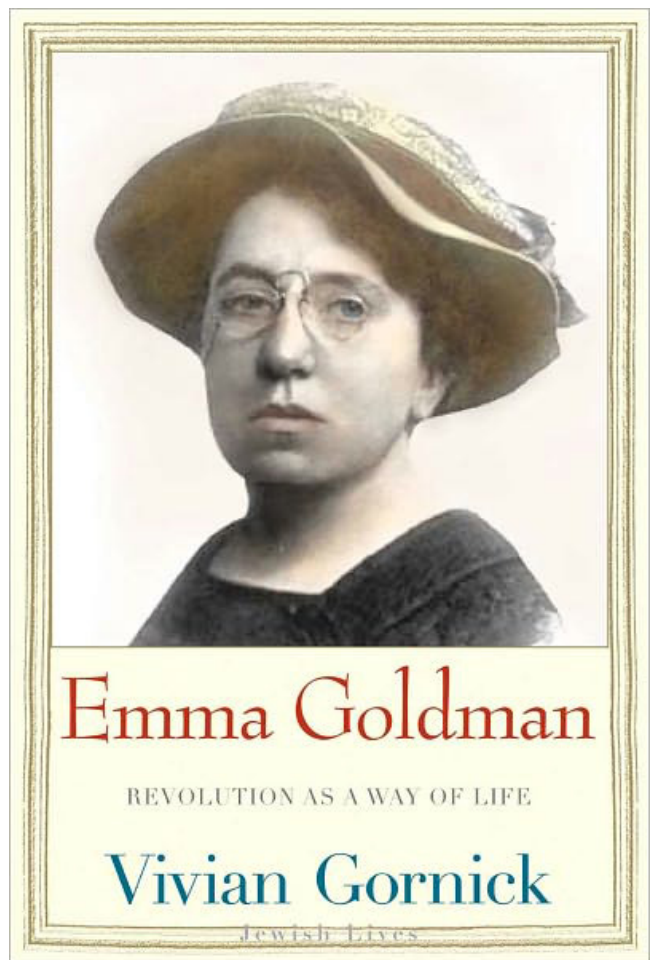
Famed anarchist Emma Goldman led the sort of life biographers dream of. Born in imperial Russia in 1869, Goldman arrived stateside in 1885, where her anti-authoritarian sympathies incubated among the émigré radicals of New York's Lower East Side. As a burgeoning labor movement challenged America's particularly virulent strain of capitalism, the moment seemed ripe for revolution, and Goldman's idealism fell on receptive minds. By her mid-20s, Goldman had abetted the attempted assassination of capitalist bogeyman Henry Clay Frick and was a regular on the country's then-vibrant lecture circuit, drawing crowds by the thousands to her lectures on political philosophy and free love. Dubbed anarchism's "high priestess" by the tabloid press, Goldman fought for her capital-C Cause until, quite literally, the day she died.

Awash with avant-garde allies, explosive confrontations, and myriad acts of sexual radicalism, Goldman's life lends itself to spicy anecdotes: an inclination that Vivian Gornick's recent biography does not resist. Such attention to Goldman's private exploits—many of them in the bedroom—would seem to diminish her political achievements. Yet, Gornick argues, for Goldman, private and public were synonymous realms, her legacy most aptly summed up by the second-wave slogan, "the personal is political." In Gornick's understanding, Goldman's radicalism derived not from abstract texts, but from an abiding sense of affront, originating in the abuses of her despotic father. Transmuting her emotional anger onto a world-historical stage, Goldman made others feel their oppression and experience their existence, however constrained, more intensely. Her virtue, Gornick stresses, lay not in analytic wit or unusual empathy, but in her capacity to feel, insistently and often.

Goldman's anarchism was of an amalgamated sort: a fusion, at times unhappy, of the movement's European and American strains. To the communistic concerns of the continent's originary anarchists, Goldman coupled the humanist thrust of American transcendentalists, the über-individualism of German nihilists, and psychoanalysts' premium on inner liberation. In Goldman's

thought, Bakunin met Whitman, Thoreau, Nietzsche, and Freud. Contravening the asceticism of her contemporaries, who demanded a complete subordination of self to the Cause, Goldman insisted on pleasure, championing birth control and condemning marriage. Her politics amounted to a thoroughgoing refusal of arbitrary power—and, for Goldman, all power, even when exercised in the name of leftist revolution, was arbitrary.

In this scheme, compromise—especially with Goldman's leftist peers, the communists—was strictly taboo. Endowed with a profound (and, in the full light of the 20th century, astonishingly naïve) belief in humankind's essential goodness, Goldman upheld anarchism as a salve for all evils, whether primordial or present-day. Enmity, jealousy, greed; each would evanesce once the restraints of government were lifted. In Goldman's vision, the realization of this ideal promised to resolve the age-old antagonism between the individual and society, begetting an “organic unity of life” where people would be at once free and economically equal. In pursuit of this complete, sublime solution, there could be no concessions to the powers-that-be. Even in 1939, with the malevolence of Nazism lain bare, Goldman, herself Jewish, continued to hold that anti-Semitism would cease if Jews simply furthered the Cause.



Overthrow of the existing system was imperative, but what would come the morning after the system's collapse? On this question, Goldman faltered. As Gornick recounts, Goldman's tendency to feel first and think later prevented her from appraising anarchist dogma, even when circumstances compelled her to do so. Take, for example, Goldman's experience of Soviet Russia. Settling in Petrograd in 1920, three years after the tsar's deposition, her initial enchantment with the Bolsheviks faded as the Soviet state's oppressive power grew ever more apparent. The revolution she formerly touted as “destined to redeem mankind” now became the object of her unabated scorn. Refusing to admit nuance, Goldman's worldview remained starkly binary: any state that fell short of her anarchist ideal might as well have not transpired. Indignant to the last, Goldman aired her grievances to Lenin himself, who briskly advised her to focus her outrage elsewhere.

Twenty-three months after she arrived, Goldman quit Soviet Russia, leading the remainder of her life as a peripatetic, inhabiting a string of European capitals before taking root in Canada. Yet, rather than leave with a more subtle political understanding (as did her longtime collaborator, Alexander Berkman), Goldman came away wounded and resentful. With the publication of her 1923 memoir-cum-polemic, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, anti-Bolshevism became her *idée fixe*: a stance that

alienated her former allies on the Left, all of whom remained enamored of the revolution.

As Gornick aptly observes, Goldman's invective against the Bolsheviks served as a shield, one that relieved her of the necessity to interrogate her own views. Rather than revitalize anarchism for a weary post-war world, Goldman continued to preach the same credo, a decision that left her without allies in a climate no longer receptive to her brand of earth-shattering radicalism. Measured against other anarchists of her day—such as Peter Kropotkin, with his model of a post-revolutionary world of federated communes and voluntary cooperation—Goldman's vision appears deconstructive to a fault.

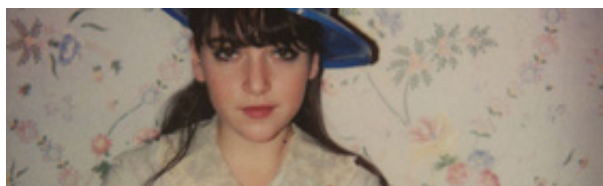
For better or for worse, Gornick refrains from such assessments of Goldman's anarchist project, a task that she declares early on as beyond the scope of her study. Her aim is, rather, to render the textures of Goldman's life. Befittingly, context—the Lower East Side where her radicalism was forged, the fin-de-siècle Vienna where she briefly lived, the “Lyrical Left” of Greenwich Village that anxiously embraced her—absorbs much of Gornick's narrative. Digressions are ample and, for the most part, illuminating, save for those that linger too long on Goldman's love life. At times, Gornick indulges the same hyperbole and sweeping generalizations of which Goldman was guilty, preceding statements with “always,” “never,” and vague invocations of destiny.

Gornick is at her best when she writes as a critic, not an adoring fan. Her parsing of the contradictions of Goldman's legacy—her equivocation on political violence, her troubled relationship with feminism, her relentless self-heroicization—furnishes the text's most fruitful insights into this activist's self. To far greater extent than Gornick may care to admit, Goldman numbers among that ilk whose intractable convictions lead to lives of profound ambivalence.

CONTRIBUTOR

Courtney Fiske

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