

# H-Net Reviews

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**Donna M. Kowal.** *Tongue of Fire: Emma Goldman, Public Womanhood, and the Sex Question.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016. 222 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-5973-8.

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As an anarchist and a feminist who was at one point known as the “most dangerous woman in America,” Emma Goldman has captivated the attention of many. Both to her contemporaries and to present-day researchers and activists, Goldman’s ideology and public image have been a source of interest, debate, attraction, fear, and repulsion. Adding to the extensive scholarship on Goldman, Donna M. Kowal’s book, *Tongue of Fire: Emma Goldman, Public Womanhood, and the Sex Question*, focuses on the words and rhetoric of Goldman, and especially on her approach to sexuality and women’s bodies. Analyzing Goldman’s ideas on women’s liberation and sexual freedom as they were reflected in her writings, speeches, and media coverage of her, *Tongue of Fire* positions Goldman as a “philosopher of gender/sex who recognized women’s bodies as a focal point of sociopolitical struggle” and as a unique voice that is still relevant today (p. xvi).

By exploring “the ways in which [Goldman’s] public advocacy contributed to a shift of power over women’s bodies” and to the reclaiming of women’s sexual agency as a source of power (p. xiv), Kowal illuminates the central role that questions of sex and women’s bodies played in public discourse in the early twentieth century. Kowal does not offer a biography of Goldman, so much as an analysis that situates sex and gender at the center of her activist thought and rhetoric. The first chapter situates Goldman as a unique voice in a broader anarchist milieu, showing how her ideas both corresponded to and differed from those of other female anarchists. In chapters 2 and 3, Kowal moves to analyze Goldman’s arguments regarding sexual freedom and expression in more detail, as well

as her critique of capitalism as an oppressive sexual system. Goldman advocated sexual freedom and choice in the realms of marriage and motherhood and viewed sexuality as a positive and empowering force, for both men and women. She rejected the moralistic view that saw women as helpless victims and instead called for women to develop sexual awareness and knowledge. Goldman viewed the devaluation of women’s work as connected to their sexual expression and compared marriage to prostitution, seeing both as economic institutions that sought to oppress women. Kowal is right to observe that by defining sex as a significant social force and not as a biologically determined identity, Goldman created an opening for recognizing homosexual and heterosexual relationships equally. And indeed, Kowal’s discussion of Goldman’s view of same-sex relationships in chapter 2 provides some of the most interesting interpretations of her ideology.

In chapter 4, which is the book’s strongest, Kowal shows her skills as a communication and media scholar when analyzing Goldman’s rhetoric style. Demonstrating how Goldman’s challenge to gender and class conventions were expressed not only in the message she conveyed but also in how she delivered this message, Kowal shifts the attention to the importance of appearances and style in modern politics. Pointing to how Goldman “constructed a persona that was gendered in a way that intersected with her class, ethnicity, and suspect citizenship” (p. 77), Kowal’s analysis offers an important contribution to our understanding of the varied ways women negotiated and defied social norms, and of the origins of modern publicity tactics and intersectional performance. By

using a style that was based on authoritative tone, use of analogies, metaphors, expert testimony, deductive reasoning, and negotiation of gender norms, Goldman embodied her call for freedom and independence, agitating her listeners to embrace her anarchist message. While Kowal presents a convincing argument regarding Goldman's performance style, her argument regarding the influence of her Jewish-Russian background on her ideology is less persuasive. While Goldman certainly was aware of her Jewish heritage, given that her political development and radicalization happened while she was already in the United States, it is likely that she was influenced more by her American anarchist milieu, rather than by the legacy of Jewish-Russian radical tradition.

If in chapter 4 Kowal focuses on how Goldman constructed her own public persona, in chapter 5 she deals with the way her image was shaped by others, mainly the printed press. Depicted as a dangerous, unruly orator, and a woman who possessed an uncanny ability to induce people to act, the mainstream press helped to publicize Goldman and contributed to her persona as an anarchist. Kowal also pays attention to how reporters described Goldman's body and feminine appearance, which oscillated between ugly and beautiful, feminine and dangerous. However, Kowal does not pay attention to the visual aspect of her image, and although this chapter is accompanied by illustrations of Goldman in the press, Kowal does not refer to them in her analysis. While this is a well-researched chapter full of archival evidence, more analysis of the connections between images and words could have enriched the readers' understanding of the role of the media in shaping popular attitudes regarding women's political presence in the public sphere.

Throughout the book, Kowal foregrounds her analysis in the current literature on publics and counter publics theory, intersectionality, and gender/sex performativity. Using Goldman as a case study, Kowal shows how discourses regarding women's sexual agency and pleasure are not products of late twentieth-century feminist movements, but in fact have a long trajectory in the anarchist-feminist thought of early twentieth-century radicalism. For Goldman, women's liberation meant hu-

man liberation, and she saw sexual freedom and choice as the touchstones of individual liberty and autonomy. By rejecting the division between public and private, Goldman contributed to the politicization of women's sexuality, claiming that "the personal is the political" long before it became a feminist slogan. Indeed, Goldman, as the most well-known, original, and prolific thinker of feminist anarchism, reminds us of the importance of looking at the past in today's struggles. In offering an alternative model of public womanhood at a time when notions of sex and gender were in the midst of change, Kowal manages to reclaim Goldman as an important voice in the continuous feminist debates over the "sex question."

However, while this approach helps Kowal in positioning Goldman's relevancy to present-day feminism, challenging the accuracy of the "waves" metaphor as an organizing category, it also leads to some anachronistic observations and obscures the differences that are the result of the specific historical context in which Goldman operated. Indeed, for the historian, the book can at times be very frustrating. Kowal does not provide enough nuanced understanding of the ways in which gender norms have changed from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. Nor does she provide adequate historical background regarding the radical, yet non-anarchist, circles with which Goldman engaged and acted. Despite the unique voice Goldman represented, she was one out of a significant group of women, such as Margaret Sanger, Crystal Eastman, Rose Schneiderman, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, who also challenged gender norms and the capitalistic system. Placing Goldman in this broader landscape of feminism and radicalism could have enriched Kowal's analysis and could have highlighted Goldman's unique position as an anarchist feminist.

Yet, if as a history book *Tongue of Fire* leaves the reader somewhat dissatisfied, it has value in bringing attention to the centrality of questions of sexuality to modern political discourse. By pointing to the long historical trajectory of women's bodies as political tools, Kowal offers an important addition to our understanding of Emma Goldman as a feminist icon and her role in bringing sex into the public sphere.

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