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Conclusion

Epistolary Poethics and Agonistic Politics

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Abstract

In this concluding chapter the author deploys the notion of 'epistolary poethics', as a configuration of the way Arendtian theoretical narratives have been brought in dialogue with her feminist interlocutors, as well as with the epistolaria and political writings of four revolutionary women: Désirée Véret-Gay, Rosa Luxemburg, Emma Goldman and Rose Pesotta. Despite their differences in terms of their political ideas and positions, but also in terms of the social, cultural and economic conditions that underpin their lived experiences, all four women grappled not only with the existential aporias of love, but also with the discourses and practices of free love. In this backdrop, feeling love was an experience of joy and happiness, both personal and collective, but also an agonistic practice that drove the four revolutionary women's actions and winged their pens. They loved while acting and they acted for love.

In looking into feminist discourses around love, Margaret Toye (2010) has underlined the crucial role of language in mediating affects, particularly highlighting how love should not only be taken as a dyadic relation between the self and the other, but also as a transformative process of the self. Toye highlights the importance of 'the distance or spacing' between the self and the other. This spacing interrogates the status of the subject, but also creates 'a place for two subjects to exist', she argues. (48) Considering some of the challenges that the discourse of love poses, Toye particularly points to 'its curious resistance to representation and communicability'. (41) It is here that she locates the importance of literary language: 'The medium of literature can help to create this spacing, or distance, between the self and the other, because of the ways in which it aids in the process of transposition, generating new concepts and offering a language for conceiving and reconceiving our relations to the others around us.' (48) In this context Toye introduces the notion of 'a poethics of love', rather than the well-recognised notion of 'theories of love', as an assemblage of ethical, aesthetic and political modalities of thinking around love. As a neologism encompassing the poetics and ethics of love, *poethics* is configured as:

> a theory/methodology which involves combining the poetic theoretical writings of theorists such as Irigaray's and Kristeva's with the theoretical narratives of a selection of novelists. The aesthetics involved in texts generated by the theorists and ethicists are emphasized, on the one hand, and the theoretical and ethical aspects of the aesthetic texts generated by the novelists are foregrounded, on the other. (49)

In dealing with love's resistance to representation and communicability and following Toye, in this concluding chapter, I deploy the notion of 'epistolary poethics' as a configuration of the way I have brought together Arendtian theoretical narratives in dialogue with a selection of her feminist interlocutors — Cavarero, Guaraldo, Honig and Kristeva, amongst others — but also with the epistolaria and political writings of four revolutionary women: Désirée Véret-Gay, Rosa Luxemburg, Emma Goldman and Rose Pesotta. Despite their differences in terms of their political ideas and positions, but also in terms of the social, cultural and economic conditions that underpin their lived experiences, all four women grappled not only with the existential aporias of love, but also with the discourses and practices of free love.

As it has been widely discussed, the turn of the nineteenth century was a period when discourses around love and sexuality became a theme of concern in the international socialist circles in general and the labour movement in particular.[1] It was during this time that the idea of free love, which had emerged in the theoretical writings of the European utopian socialist movements of the nineteenth century, also became an anarchist principle.[2] But here it is important to note that 'the new' moral stances and values vis-à-vis love and sexuality were not only ideological, but also embodied and embedded in the lived experiences of working-class militants, both men and women, as we have seen throughout this book. (see Bos 2001)

Despite its roots in the founding texts of socialism, radical sexual politics remained in the margins of the labour movement, and it was only taken up as an important political issue within a small circle of its feminist and anarchist circles, both in Europe and the US. In her autobiography, Emma Goldman vividly remembered Peter Kropotkin's bewilderment of her

insistence on matters of sexual freedom when she visited him as a young feisty anarchist in London, in 1899. Her reminiscences colourfully depict not only the ambivalence of the anarchist position, but also women's marginalisation within it. The reference to Kropotkin's wife Sophia sewing quietly in a corner while Goldman and Kropotkin were having an argument is also a valuable memory trace of women's lived experiences within the anarchist movement:

> The paper is doing splendid work,' he warmly agreed, 'but it would do more if it would not waste so much space discussing sex.' I disagreed, and we became involved in a heated argument about the place of the sex problem in anarchist propaganda. Peter's view was that woman's equality with man had nothing to do with sex; it was a matter of brains. […] We both got somewhat excited, and our voices must have sounded as if we were quarrelling. Sophia, quietly sewing a dress for her daughter, tried several times to direct our talk into less vociferous channels, but in vain. (2006, 151-2)

Emma Goldman's intense debate with her anarchist comrade stages a differentiation between utopian and revolutionary movements on matters of love and sexuality. According to Benjamin Zablocki (1980), utopian movements imagine a new world order in the here and now and as we have seen in Chapter Four, they experimented with new ways of living and loving both in Europe, as well as the utopian colonies they tried to establish in North Africa and the USA. (see Pilbeam 2014) Revolutionary movements on the other hand, are more focused on subverting the social and political order, as *a conditio sine qua non* for radical changes in matters of love, sexuality and communal living amongst others.

Moreover, questions around gender relations have also divided the revolutionary movements in modernity, whether utopian, socialist or anarchist. Jesse Battan (2004) has identified two trends: the political radicals, who thought that 'the woman's question' would be solved after the revolution and the cultural radicals who kept insisting that 'the woman's question' went hand in hand with 'the sex question' and that the destruction of capitalism would not necessarily mean the subversion of bourgeois values vis-à-vis women's rights and sexual freedom. As a matter of fact, cultural radicals thought that the economic and social transformation of society would only occur when the emotional and sexual lives of men and women had been transformed. Free love was thus a contested site but throughout this book we have also seen how women political activists positioned themselves differently in it.

In looking into the ways the four revolutionary women wrote about love either in their personal correspondence or in their political texts, differences were also traced between theory and praxis, put simply the way women thought and wrote about love and the way they lived and experienced amorous relationships. Agonism was at the heart of such complex and often contradictory feelings, affects and relations and although this is a notion that derives from feminist political theory in dialogue with Arendt (Honig 1995), in this concluding chapter, I want to transfer it into the realm of love in its uneasy relationship with politics.

Agonism in Bonnie Honig's work (1993) emerges from her pioneering argument that politics is an assemblage of relations, inevitably encompassing exclusions, injustice and inequalities. In this context the need to understand and analyze differences, contestations and ambivalences in their interrelation, should be at the heart of theorizing the political. What is

then the relationship of agonism to contemporary feminist politics in general and the theoretical explorations of this book in particular? Nothing is ever fully settled in politics, Honig (1993) has argued and there is an on-going need to fight against recurring attempts to impose oppressive arrangements. As I write this concluding chapter, feminists around the world are up in arms against the threat of abortion laws being re-introduced and thus Honig's argument could not have been more timely and more urgent.[3]

While 'the agonistic turn' (Maxwell et al., 2019) in political theory has now been taken, agonism 'points toward a practice of theoretical politicization of what we may have understood as private, non-political, or irrelevant to the public realm', Lida Maxell has argued (642). It is precisely in this liminal space between the private and the public, politics and *passios,* as well as the gap between 'words and deeds', that the Arendtian theorization of love has unfolded in this book, in conversation with the amorous epistolaria and political writings of four revolutionary women. There were different ways that agonism was enacted in the four women's entanglement in 'the poethics of love', as I will discuss next, by looking back at the themes that have emerged in their interrelation.

For the utopian socialist Désirée Véret-Gay, the dream of social love became the guiding star of her agonistic life and politics: 'no more wars, no more antipathies, love for all [amour pour tous]' she had stated with her comrades in the first feminist newspaper she founded in 1832.[4] But despite her revolutionary statements that the new woman would love without hypocrisy and would laugh about prejudices, Désirée Véret-Gay repeatedly felt lost and disillusioned trying to tread the uncharted territories of free love, particularly as she fell in love with some of the leaders of the utopian socialist movements, both in the UK and in France. Désirée Véret-Gay felt uneasy about her subject position as a girl 'easy to give herself and easy to leave'— as she put it in her June 21, 1890 letter to Victor Considérant— till the very end of her life. And yet she never stopped dreaming, thinking, and writing love. While the leaders/lovers theorised free love, but also enjoyed the advantages of free amorous experiences, Désirée Véret-Gay's relationship to love was an agonistic enactment par excellence: it raised the question of how to act politically in conditions of impossibility and was thus deployed on the plane of what Honig has further theorised as *agonistic humanism*, 'a humanism that calls on us to act not out of shared finitude but out of natalist commitments to worldliness.' (in Browning 2012, 135) Désirée Véret-Gay's 'worldliness', expressed in her letters as her love for humanity, runs as a red thread throughout her correspondence, but also in her political writings. It is her passionate insertion in the web of human relations that have created an event, or as Foucault (1986) would put it, 'an emergence' in the genealogical line of Arendt's *amor mundi* and its connections with the joy of Spinoza's love.

It goes without saying that Rosa Luxemburg's voluminous correspondence is underpinned and indeed driven by her agonistic politics, but it is agonism in her relation to love that I want to highlight in this concluding section. As a young woman trying to be accepted and recognized in the European socialist circles in general and the powerful Socialist Democratic Party in Germany in particular, Rosa Luxemburg had to make a lot of concessions in terms of her personal life. She was well aware of the heteropatriarchal relations and discourses among her comrades, and as we have seen in Chapter Five, she had publicly criticized their gendered biases. But since the revolution was at the heart of her politics and very much following the Arendtian line of the vulnerability of love, Rosa Luxemburg chose to keep her private life,

including her passionate relationships, outside the public eye. Her letters to Leo Jogiches reveal her anxiety about how their relationship would be received among the German socialist circles, as well as with her family. It was mostly when on holidays that she enjoyed being with Leo Jogiches — in the tranquillity of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1931)*,* as we have seen in Chapter One — and such mnemonics of love have left their traces in her letters. What therefore surfaces in the waves of her correspondence is a more esoteric relation to love, very much in the spirit of Arendt's take on love as unconditional affirmation — *volo ut sis*. Her correspondence with Leo is an on-going agonistic process towards feeling the Augustinian spirit of *volo ut sis,* but as we have seen it was an unsuccessful agon in the end. Her letters to Kostya Zetkin seem to have established the spacing for two subjects to co-exist, that Toy's 'poethics of love' has configured. (2018) But given how unconventional their love was, it was crushed in the agon of fighting against gendered prejudices and biases, and has remained in the shadows, then and now.

There was no room for concessions in Emma Goldman's love life, immersed as it was in her radical anarchist politics. Her agon was not only staged against the heteronormative values of the bourgeois society, but against her own people, her anarchist comrades. This was a difficult agon indeed, particularly given the contradictions between her theoretical celebration of free and unrestricted love and the lived experiences of dealing with the pragmatics of it, particularly so, because she did not actually 'practice' free love, in the decade of her relationship with Ben Reitman. Later in life and while in exile, Emma Goldman felt the loneliness of not being loved and wrote about it in her letters to Alexander Berkman, as we have seen in Chapter Six. Her letters and political writings about and around love, thus emerge as the discursive effect of the agonistic process of what I want to configure as her 'ideal materialism': an embedded and embodied rebellion underpinned by the social, economic and cultural conditions of her position as a transnational working-class intellectual on the one hand, and idealistic attachments to the purity of truth and the beauty of ideas on the other. While Clare Hemmings (2018) has 'considered' Emma Goldman through the lens of ambivalence, I have not found ambivalent positions in Emma Goldman's amorous epistolarium. I have rather traced an agonistic line in her engagement with the challenges and adventures of living, acting and loving to the full.

While Emma Goldman was a renowned anarchist from the early days of her political agonism, things were very different for the anarchist labour organizer Rose Pesotta. As the only woman in the hierarchy of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) Rose Pesotta's position was lonely, precarious and in the end untenable: 'it was my contention that the voice of a solitary woman on the General Executive Board would be a voice lost in the wilderness', she wrote in her autobiography about her feelings on the day she was elected vice-president for the union. (Pesotta 1987, 110) Rose Pesotta was among those anarchists, who like Kropotkin above, thought that sexuality was a private matter and certainly not a priority for the labour movement. Although her amorous relationships were unconventional and outside the institutional restrictions of marriage, she did not find happiness in love. Her uneasiness and anxiety vis-à-vis her position as 'the other woman' is diffused in her amorous correspondence and vividly stages her agonism towards the impasses of free love.

Despite their differences all four women were related in some way to socialism and/or anarchism, and therefore also had connections with the labour movement. However, while

for Désirée Véret-Gay and Emma Goldman, the sexual question was a political question, sexual freedom was bracketed in Rosa Luxemburg's socialist politics and Rose Pesotta's labour activism. Here they followed the historical divide between the political and cultural radicals that Battan (2004) has discussed, as we have seen above. What is also important to consider in all cases, is the wider socio-political and cultural context within which the four women experimented with and wrote about love.

Utopian socialism was a fertile ground for ideas of free love and yet Désirée Véret-Gay had seen her friend and co-founder of *La Femme Libre,* Marie-Reine Guindorf throwing herself to the river Seine, leaving behind her baby and a suicide note about women's impossibility to have desires and satisfy their passions. (see Adler 1979, 72) Falling in love with a Fourierist intellectual and proponent of free love had been a catalytic event in her marriage and lived experiences as a young mother. Marie-Reine Guindorf's suicide in June 1837, was not the only one. In August 1833, the Saint-Simonian Claire Démar had committed suicide alongside her much younger lover Perret Déssesarts, as an act of protest against the way her ideas on free love and vehement critique of marriage had marginalized her within the Saint-Simonians. This was one of the most dramatic moments in the way free love failed women in their struggle against heteropatriarchy even within the utopian socialist movements. (see Tamboukou 2015, 118)

During the time that Rosa Luxemburg wrote passionate letters to her lovers, but also tried to hide the amorous side of her life, *The League of Progressive Women's Associations* was active in Germany, between 1891 and 1919. Its founders were Lily Braun and Minna Cauer, who had vehemently criticised the German Socialist Party for its conservatism in matters of sex, as well as its double moral standards for men and women. Instead, they were putting forward women's right for sexual pleasure and they were calling for an open boycott of marriage. (see Poldevaart 2001) Since they were silenced by the socialists but also marginalised within the labour movement, the women of the League took over the task of organizing 'unprotected working class women like female home workers, shop assistants, domestic servants, and prostitutes.' (9) They were also active in organizing childcare, supporting the right to abortion, propagating contraception among working class women, and demanding the abolition of criminal penalties against homosexuality. (9) Their political work was either ignored as 'utopian' or rejected 'as bourgeois activities' by the labour movement, Poldervaart has noted. (9)

Emma Goldman's ideas and activism should further be considered within the Greenwich Village feminism in New York, between 1910 and 1920. While adopting the socialist dream of changing the world, the members of this bohemian group — mostly women, but some men as well — were also influenced by the ideas of anarchist immigrant female workers in the New York garment industry. The Village feminists argued that women should develop their human potentials by smashing the social barriers that encaged them within restrictive roles and they wanted to experiment with their sexual lives, roles and identities. (see Sochen 1972) They exchanged their ideas through discussion and reading clubs, a theatre group and their famous journal, *The Masses.* (see Levin 2018) The 'new women' of the Greenwich bohemians were bold in expressing their sexual desires and their revolt was both against capitalism and against puritanism. (see Cowley 1994) However, when the 'Red Scare' overshadowed American politics, feminism and free love were associated with the communist threat and this

led to the decline of bohemian ideas in the 1920s, around the same time that Emma Goldman was deported.

It was in the cold climate of the 'Red Scare' that Rose Pesotta became of age, both as a trade unionist and a woman in love. Analyzing positions on sexuality taken by labour organizations in the past, Peter Drucker (2004) points to the importance of recognizing the heterogeneity of the labour movement in terms of gender, generational and social differences, particularly when considering that the background of its leaders and intellectuals was rarely in the working class itself. Rose Pesotta's relationship with Powers Hapgood should be seen through Drucker's lens of differences within the labour movement. He was a Harvard graduate from a well-established family in the American left and she was a migrant woman worker, who learnt English in a night school and got her qualifications in the educational institutions of the labour movement. Their gender, as well as, social, economic and cultural differences had an impact on how they approached their sexual lives and commitments, within an overall puritanical climate that followed the Russian revolution. Bertrand Russel's (2009) famous manifesto for sexual liberation, *Marriage and Morals,* first published in 1929, became for Powers the theoretical backdrop of his position to be with both women: his wife and his lover. As Sarah Jones has argued, British and American free lovers came together through print to build a transatlantic community of sexual reform at the turn of the nineteenth century. (2020) This print coalition was further forged through literature, later in the twentieth century. But as we have seen in Chapter Seven, Rose Pesotta refused to accept Russel's sexual radicalism and her ironic comments in her correspondence with Hapgood pointed to the gap between ideas and lived experiences. Could her refusal to be 'the other woman' be attributed to the two lovers' gender and social differences? There is no doubt about it: their relationship as 'comrades and lovers' should be reconsidered in the light of their embodied and embedded differences within the labour movement.

Differences notwithstanding, 'free love' for all four revolutionary women meant not marrying, or rather entering into marrying contracts either for the purpose of caring for their children or legalizing their alien status and facilitating their mobility. As we have seen throughout the book, the critique of marriage was at the heart of all utopian, feminist and revolutionary movements from different angles and perspectives. Marriage was castigated as the foundation of both capitalism and patriarchy, as well as the institution that crashed and destroyed love. By opposing marriage, all four women also declared and indeed demanded their right to happiness. But unlike their male comrades, happiness was not linked to sexual pleasure. It was rather the Arendtian quest for happiness that we can trace in their amorous correspondence. Olivia Guaraldo (2018) has considered entanglements between action, freedom and happiness, arguing that Arendt's neglected notion of public happiness can help us re-imagine the political as a plane of 'affective realignments':

> I claim that to act politically, in the Arendtian sense, means to experience freedom with others, and by so doing expand or go beyond the limits of the self, not to blur it into an indistinct entity but to *strengthen its reality*, which depends on others to come to life and persist. Freedom as a communal experience qualifies politics as an intersubjective space of 'company', 'concert', and 'plurality': all these words have been chosen by Arendt to describe the sphere of action and speech as an essentially

relational scene in which alone the human can display her humanity. (397, emphasis in the text)

It is from this 'relational scene' of being and acting together that public happiness surges, in Guaraldo's analysis, as 'the intersubjective experience connected to the exercise of public freedom.' (396) What I want to suggest here is that this collective happiness further generates a wider ambience of Spinozist joy, wherein bodies' power to affect and be affected is also increased. It is thus the four women's immersion in the collective sphere of action that has generated the happiness underpinning the amorous passions and feelings that they have expressed in their correspondence. Being comrades and lovers was a subject position that all four of them inhabited, no matter how fleeting and transient this experience was. Feeling love was not just an experience of joy and happiness, both personal and collective, but also the political force that drove their actions and winged their pens. They loved while acting and they acted for love.

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[1] See the Socialism and Sexuality Network for an overview of the debates in this field http://www.iisg.nl/womhist/socandsex.html [Accessed, October 9, 2022].

[2] Questions around free love go back well beyond the nineteenth century. See Poldervaart 2001, for a comprehensive history of free love.

[3] See https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/05/latin-america-abortion-rights-roe-v-wade and https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-supreme-court-overturns-abortion-rights-landmark-2022-06-24/ [Accessed, November 7, 2022]

[4] *La femme Libre, Apostolat des Femmes,* Vol.1, 15-8-1832, p.2. Available on-line at : https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k85525j/f5.item [Accessed, September 9, 2022]