

# EGOISM-ARCHISM-AND THE CRITIQUE OF ANARCHISM



Despite the effort Marsden put into the critique of culture and social movements, political theory was never far from her mind. Her three journals are replete with articles and commentary that subject political thought to an egoist perspective. She variously assails democracy, socialism, Marxism, utopianism, autocracy, militarism, and libertarianism.

Her commentary on anarchism generally appeared in the exchanges she had with Tucker and Byington. By the time that Marsden authored a lengthy, systematic statement about anarchism, her journalistic confrontation with the individualist anarchists was over.

After March 1914, Tucker and Byington stopped contributing to *The Egoist* because they believed, quite correctly, that Marsden had little sympathy for the type of anarchism they envisioned. They also recognized that Marsden had a completely different concept of egoism. Tucker leveled what he thought

was the ultimate insult at Marsden, accusing her of being both an “egoist and a rchist.”

Tucker’s criticism of Marsden as an “egoist” was rather ironic given his efforts to publish *The Ego and Its Own* and his putative endorsement of Stirner’s philosophy. For her part, Marsden was nonplussed by the “egoist and archist” accusation Tucker directed toward her, and adopted the labels as descriptive of her political philosophy. Early on in her exchanges with Tucker and Byington, Marsden indicated that she was in favor of anarchism if it meant the abolition of the state, but not if it meant the state would be replaced with the “subtle and far more repressive agency of conscience” to govern the behaviors of individuals.

The issue of course turns upon the point as to whether in anarchism, which is a negative term, one’s attention fixes upon the absence of a state establishment, that is the absence of one particular view of order supported by armed force with acquiescence as to its continued supremacy held by allowing to it a favored position as to defense, in the community among whom it is established; or the absence of every kind of order supported by armed force provided and maintained with the consent of the community, but the presence of that kind of order which obtains when each member of a community agrees to want only the kind of order which will not interfere with the kind of order likely to be wanted by individuals who compose the rest of the community.

She believed that the first approach was compatible with one half of the egoistic anarchism she claimed to propound in her journals. But the second approach, which proposed a new social

order based on conformity in

thought, was completely antithetical to the trajectory of her philosophy.

She was primarily concerned that the philosophies of Proudhon, Tucker, and the "clerico-libertarians" were attempting to create a new social regime in which cultural values and morality would become the new agents of social control. She argues that the "archism" of armies, courts, jurists, jailers, and executioners was "light and superficial" compared to the new forms of control Proudhon, Tucker, and their colleagues planned to impose.

By the end of 1913 she was content with the characterization of her philosophy as "egoist" and "archist." She was convinced that she needed to articulate the differences between anarchism and a consistent egoist philosophy of politics and the role of power in social life.

Marsden outlined her egoist or anarchist political philosophy in several issues of *The Egoist* through 1914 and 1915. Much of the discussion was clearly an attack on what she considered the contradictory, repressive, and idealistic elements in the individualist anarchism of Tucker and Byington. She also attacked the "clerico-libertarian" philosophies of Godwin, Proudhon, and Kropotkin, each of which posited philosophic absolutes as the foundation for their anarchism, much in the same way that absolutes constitute the foundation of religious systems.

Marsden clearly drew inspiration and ideas from Stirner in her assault on both the state and anarchism since there are many

references to the moralistic and clerical foundations of anarchism, a critique that Stirner developed against Proudhon. There are differences between Marsden and Stirner in their egoist critique of politics. Regardless of Stirner's allusion to reciprocity in his description of the union of egoists, Marsden evinces little interest in reciprocity or equal liberty, particularly if it implies a demarcation of what persons can and cannot think and do as they pursue their interests in everyday life. Further, while she does not use "ownness" as a central category, she refers continually to the individual's "own" and the proclivity to acquire and impose his or her will on the world of events.

In several essays and in her "Views and Comments" that appeared in *The Egoist* in 1914, Marsden attacks anarchism and the "libertarian creed" which converts "liberty" into a fixed idea and moralistically interprets the existence of power and domination in the world as an affront to the nature, and natural rights, of human beings.

At the outset, Marsden attacks the idea that "liberty" should be the basic concept of a political philosophy since it has no "bite" to it, matters not at all in the real world, and is nothing more than a "beautiful and ineffectual angel," parroting Matthew Arnold's critique of the anarchist poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. In everyday political rhetoric, "liberty" is the symbol that receives insincere reverence from political actors, including anarchists and libertarians, who "slip past it" at their first opportunity. The unpleasant fact of politics is that individual lives and social relationships are shaped by the imposition of power through law, which is the clearest index of political will. Lives and relationships are also shaped by the equally real dynamics that challenge, resist, and evade law to blunt its most harmful consequences.

"Liberty" is rhetoric used by antagonists in the political drama to either justify the imposition of law, or to challenge, resist, and evade

it. For the egoist, "liberty" is a political veil that masks a substructure of competing individual interests.

Unlike liberty, law is material and permanent. The materiality and permanence of law reveals that discussions and philosophies concerning liberty are "frivolous diversions" because they have little or no relationship to how human beings live on an everyday basis. Egoism and the pursuit of individual and group interests permeate every type of political regime and every type of social relationship. Tucker, Byington, Marsden, and all other Anglo-American individualists, of course, wrote and live under democratic governments. Democratic regimes, especially, make it clear that law is an outward and objective expression of the interests of individuals and groups.

On the negative side, law is also the repression of other interests that contradict, divert, and obstruct prevailing interests, or which are otherwise too weak to command support of the state. Under democracy, law guarantees that the power and resources of the state are applied on behalf of an "interest" which obviously has sufficient power to command it. Ignoring its alliterative and rhetorical jargon, democracy is fundamentally a regime that "quickens the pace" at which alliances between and among individuals within the state are able to impose their interests on others and defeat the interests of opponents.

Even in a democratic regime, the representation of people is an impossibility and the claim to the contrary is simply an ideological tool to maintain social control. But the effective

representation of an interest is a very real thing that can be assessed by those who own it or who oppose it. In politics, interests must be fulfilled or accomplished by political actors, or else the interests are modified or discarded, or the actors are sanctioned or discarded.

Frequently, interests collide and the actors who promote them must fight it out with their adversaries both within and outside of the state. Marsden argues that it is at the interstices where interests and actors collide that "rhetoricians and moralists" like anarchists try to work in their spook of a "libertarian creed." The elevation of liberty into a fixed idea soon becomes an appeal to rights and morality. The rhetoric of politics becomes layered with moralistic concepts, such as "should," "should not," and "respect," which have little meaning in political life. Taking her cue from Tucker and the individualist anarchists she says that the basic elements of "the libertarian creed" are

- 1 . People have a right to protection from invasion of their interests;
2. People should respect each other's interests;
3. The liberty of each and all should be respected; and
4. Individuals should repress their interests when these are likely to interfere with another's.