

# DORA MARSDEN AND THE EGOIST CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY



Although she bristled at the term, Marsden is arguably the most forceful “Stirnerian” among the writers and activists who were influenced by Max Stirner.

Especially during the period she edited *The Freewoman*, *The New Freewoman*, and *The Egoist*, Marsden uses Stirner’s analytical concepts frequently. Curiously, she does not use the notions of the “unique one,” the “union of egoists,” or “ownness,” but she thoroughly developed Stirner’s concept of the “ragamuffin” and applied it in several of her cultural and political critiques. She developed egoist critiques of social movements, political “rights,” and alienation that were drawn from *The Ego and Its Own*. Equally significant, Marsden makes strong use of the dialectic, both as a method of argumentation in her essays and in her understanding of society and history. Whether she is writing about women’s struggles or political theory, she views social thought and social process as a clash of opposites that eventually produces a “higher presupposition.” Central to Marsden’s use of the dialectic is the antagonism

between the individual and the external world .

For Marsden, the everyday world is a confrontation between the person's inclination to acquire and defend power and property, and the inclination by others to do the same. Everyday life is experienced by the person as a series of challenges or barriers that must be confronted and overcome. The struggle between self and other occurs on multiple levels that range in complexity from the individual's self-identity, to language and culture, and to political economy.

Like Stirner, Marsden also views egoism as an ensemble of resources that can help the poor and powerless in their struggle against the rich and powerful. Both Stirner and Marsden advanced egoist critiques of culture, ideology, and social movements as a way of providing the poor and powerless with the same cultural and political tools used by the rich and powerful . Lacking egoism, the poor and powerless are left with a cultural and political assault by the rich and powerful that uses ideology and coercion to promote compliance and subservience to cultural, economic, and political elites. Egoism promotes direct and ideological challenges to hierarchies of any type. It guarantees that hierarchies are unstable and tenuous because it removes all pretense that the material superiority of elites is ordained by religion, morality, or sociohistorical necessity. Moreover, it undermines all rationales for compliance and subservience, except personal expedience.

In the hands of Stirner and Marsden, egoism renders all forms of domination inherently meaningless. They are nothing but the temporary success of some persons and groups at gaining an advantage over others.

Modernity is defined by the use of fixed, collective abstractions, such as "humanity" and "woman," to promote

compliance and subservience.

There is no humanity nor an ideal type woman. There is only the individual human being. The fixed ideas of humanity and woman are "convenient fictions" to harass and subjugate individuals. For feminists, society, family, culture, and morality become the mechanisms that subjugate women. Marsden's argument is that if women are to be free they must first assert themselves as individuals, as unique egos.

Stirner made a head feint in the direction of reconstructing social order through the notion of the union of egoists, conceptualizing reciprocity as the principle for its operation. Marsden expresses absolutely no interest in reconciling the collision of egoists. In fact, the defining principle of her egoism is total opposition to any sort of articulation of an "embargo" on the behavior of the individual. What may be ambivalence or ambiguity in Stirner's wisp of interest in reciprocity, Marsden resolves definitively in favor of an egoism that transcends any form of embargoism and any form of ragamuffinism. Tucker's notion of "equal liberty," the linchpin of individualist anarchism, was a thoughtful attempt to reconstruct the self other relationship in a context that is free of capitalist exploitation and governmental coercion. Marsden, however, demonstrated that equal liberty is another form of modernist thought that legitimates the dispossession of individuals.

Marsden is uninterested in reconstructing social order, even less so than Stirner. She is unwilling to view egoism as a theory that has any continuity with or responsibility for a social order that might replace the one she savages. Her egoism is a pure critique of the extant society that does not envision any specific transformation or any concept of reconstructed social life. Unlike Tucker, she is an insurrectionist, not a revolutionary. The everyday problems

confronting the egoist, freeing oneself from specific barriers, will be an ongoing challenge regardless of the particular social formation confronting him or her.

The emphasis on force and power in her writings is what fundamentally establishes Marsden's uniqueness as a writer and theorist. She readily admits that the logical extension of egoist thought is that it accepts and celebrates the reality that human beings are inclined to dominate or exert force on each other. This is a radical departure from the writings of Tucker, Godwin, Nozick, and almost all forms of anarchism and libertarianism which set the principle of nonaggression at the center of their world view. Governments and collective activities are assailed as enemies in anarchist and libertarian thought because they are aggressive and invasive of the individual's moral autonomy. The fundamental moral principle of anarchism and libertarianism is that individuals ought to be free from coercion, to decide for themselves how they would like to live their lives.

Marsden rejects all of this as cant. It is not descriptive of how persons actually behave. Its primary consequence is to encourage the poor and powerless to embrace embargoes on their own behavior, to accept their ragamuffinhood. Coercion is another name for the world that humans actually inhabit; power, or the ability to coerce, is therefore its greatest good, its most important form of desiderata.

Marsden's coercion-based view of social life is liberatory in the sense that it encourages individuals to reject ideological constraints on their behavior, but it also has implications that Marsden did not fully explore. If egoism gives the poor and powerless access to the same tools that the rich and powerful employ to maintain their positions at the apex of the social pyramid, it also enables the poor and powerless to employ them on each other.

In other words, there is no guarantee that Marsden's egoism promotes only class conflict and resistance to the state. The implication of Marsden's egoism is that coercion and predation are universalized in human relationships.

Social life can be little more than the war of each against all. No doubt that Marsden's likely response is that the war of each against all is an apt description of modern society. But this has implications that even Marsden would not likely applaud since the very young, the very old, the sick, and those who are otherwise incapacitated are not likely to fare very well in a social contest where all forms of protection and constraint are absent. Marsden recognizes that children constitute one social category that needs the protection of external agents. This is an admission that egoism, anarchism, and libertarianism have predatory consequences that not even Marsden would applaud. To the extent that Marsden's egoist thought sanctions interpersonal predation against those who cannot defend themselves, it falls short of a consistent celebration of the ego.

Dora Marsden certainly deserves to be criticized for the shortcomings in the egoism she articulated between 1911 and 1919, but she should also be appreciated for her contributions to feminist, egoist, and anarchist thought.

Her political thought fills an important niche in contemporary political discourse since it expresses a very radical feminist egoism that completely transcends the traditional boundaries of the political spectrum .

