



Speeches

"An Anarchist Looks at Life"

Speech by Emma Goldman

**from transcript of proceedings of
the Foyle's Twenty-Ninth Literary Luncheon, March 1, 1933.
Including speech by Paul Robeson and Rebecca West;
moderated by Henry W. Nevinson.
Transcript housed at the Emma Goldman Archive,
International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.**



**FOYLE'S TWENTY-NINTH LITERARY LUNCHEON
HELD ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1, 1933
AT
GROSVENOR HOUSE [London]**

**CHAIRMAN: MR. HENRY W. NEVINSON
MISS EMMA GOLDMAN: "AN ANARCHIST LOOKS AT LIFE"
MR. PAUL ROBESON: A VOTE OF THANKS
MISS REBECCA WEST: SECONDER**

From T.C. FOYLE
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London, E. C. 4.

MR. HENRY W. NEVINSON, introducing Miss EMMA GOLDMAN, said:

Before introducing our distinguished guest, I want to read two short letters which we have received. The first is from Miss Ethel Mannin, who was chairman once, I think, about two months ago:

"I am very sorry indeed not to be able to come to the Emma Goldman and Paul Robeson luncheon, as they are both people for whom I have a profound admiration. Will you please send me her book. A friend has recommended it to me, and I have been meaning to read it for some time."

I hope she will carry out that intention.

The second letter is from one of the greatest men now living in England, Mr. Havelock Ellis:

"I have appreciated the invitation to attend the luncheon for Miss Emma Goldman, for whom I have a high regard and admiration, but I regret I am unable to accept as I have never taken any part in such functions, and at my age I feel it is too late to begin. I wish all success to the gathering, and I shall be pleased if you would give to those present my hearty good wishes."

That is a good send-off from a very distinguished man, and one of the most distinguished writers and men of science in this country.

The very name of Miss Emma Goldman recalls to me the times, some years ago now, when I was very intimate with those great Russians, the most distinguished of whom was Kropotkin. I am glad to say they were all friends of mine, and I lament it very deeply that after all they have suffered and sacrificed for the cause of freedom, it had been, in their opinion, quite futile.

Freedom is almost disappearing from the world. You all know it. If you want further proof, read this morning's papers and the description of the conditions in Germany. Hardly any freedom, political freedom, or even social freedom, is now left in Europe, and it is not much better in Japan.

We have with us now a real champion of freedom, a woman who has devoted all her life, amidst terrible sufferings, indignities and loss to the cause of freedom and freedom alone. You ought to read her book, as Miss Mannin, I believe intends to do, and read that book called "Living My Life." It is one of the most remarkable documents ever written by man or woman, of a courageous, devoted life.

I do not expect everyone here to adopt at once her idea of society or government--well, she has no idea of government. It is true that our greatest thinker--I need not mention his name--as an Irishman has said, "Every Englishman is an anarchist at heart." Well, I wish it were so, and then we might get something like a free and noble form of existence. We have had in this country many fine anarchists, not only Russian anarchists, but real Englishmen, like Edward Carpenter, and I do hope that Englishmen, anarchists at heart, as they are called, will give a generous and fine welcome to a woman who has suffered all her life for the cause of freedom. May I now call upon Miss Emma Goldman. (Applause)

MISS EMMA GOLDMAN, speaking on "An Anarchist Looks at Life," said:

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, the subject this noon is, "An Anarchist Looks at Life." I cannot speak for all my fellow anarchists, but for myself I wish to say that I have been so furiously busy living my life that I had not a moment left to look at it. I am aware that a period comes to everybody when we are obliged, perforce, to sit back and look at life. That period is a wise old age, but never having grown wise I do not expect to ever reach that point. Most people who look at life never live it. What they see is not life but a mere shadow of it. Have they not been taught that life is a curse visited upon them by a bungling God who has made man in his own image? Therefore most people look at life and upon life as a sort of stepping-stone to a heaven in the hereafter. They dare not live life, or get the living spirit out of life as it presents itself to them. It means a risk; it means the giving up their little material achievements. It means going against "public opinion" and the laws and rules of one's country. There are few people who have the daring and the courage to give up what they hug at their hearts. They fear that their possible gain will not be the equivalent for what they give up. As for myself, I can say that I was like Topsy. I was not born and raised--I "grewed." I grew with life, life in all its aspects, in its heights and in its depths. The price to pay was high, of course, but if I had to pay it all over again, I should gladly do it, for unless you are willing to pay the price, unless you are willing to plunge into the very depths, you will never be able to remount to the heights of life.

Naturally, life presents itself in different forms to different ages. Between the age of eight and twelve I dreamed of becoming a Judith. I longed to avenge the sufferings of my people, the Jews, to cut off the head of their Holofernos. When I was fourteen I wanted to study medicine, so as to be able to help my fellow-beings. When I was fifteen I suffered from unrequited love, and I wanted to commit suicide in a romantic way by drinking a lot of vinegar. I thought that would make me look ethereal and interesting, very pale and poetic when in my grave, but at sixteen I decided on a more exalted death. I wanted to dance myself to death.

Then came America, America with its huge factories, the pedaling of a machine for ten hours a day at two dollars fifty a week. It was followed by the greatest event in my life, which made me what I am. It was the tragedy of Chicago, in 1887, when five of the noblest men were judicially murdered by the State of Illinois. They were the famous anarchists of America--Albert Parsons, Spies, Fischer, Engels and Lingg who were legally assassinated on the 11th of November, 1887. Brave young Lingg cheated his executioners, preferring to die by his own hand, while three other comrades of the executed--Neebe, Fielden and Schwab--were doomed to prison. The death of those Chicago martyrs was my spiritual birth: their ideal became the motive of my entire life.

I realise that most of you have but a very inadequate, very strange and usually false conception of Anarchism. I do not blame you. You get your information from the daily press. Yet that is the very last place on earth to seek for truth in any state of form. Anarchism, to the great teachers and leaders in the spiritual aspect of life, was not a dogma, not a thing that drains the blood from the heart and makes people zealots, dictators or impossible bores. Anarchism is a releasing and liberating force because it teaches people to rely on their own possibilities, teaches them faith in liberty, and inspires men and women to strive for a state of social life where everyone shall be free and secure. There is neither freedom nor security in the world today: whether one be rich or poor, whether his station high or low, no one is secure as long as there is a single slave in the world. No one is safe or secure as long as he must submit to the orders, whim or will of another

who has the power to punish him, to send him to prison or to take his life, to dictate the terms of his existence, even from the cradle to the grave.

It is not only because of love of one's fellow-men--it is for their own sake that people must learn to understand the meaning and significance of Anarchism, and it will not be long before they will appreciate the great importance and the beauty of its philosophy.

Anarchism repudiates any attempt of a group of men or of any individual to arrange life for others. Anarchism rests on faith in humanity and its potentialities, while all other social philosophies have no faith in humanity whatever. The other philosophies insist that man cannot govern himself and that he must be ruled over. Nowadays most people believe that the stronger the Government the greater the success of society will be. It is the old belief in the rod. The more used on the child the finer will it be when grown to manhood or womanhood. We have emancipated ourselves from that stupidity. We have come to understand that education does not mean knocking in, does not mean crippling, warping and dwarfing the young growth. We have learned that freedom in the development of the child secures better results, both so far as the child and society are concerned.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is Anarchism. The greater the freedom and the opportunities for every unit in society, the finer will be the individual and the better for society; and the more creative and constructive the life of the collectivity. That, in brief, has been the ideal to which I have devoted my life.

Anarchism is not a cut-and-dried theory. It is a vital spirit embracing all of life. Therefore I do not address myself only to some particular elements in society: I do not address myself only to the workers. I address myself to the upper classes as well, for indeed they need enlightenment even more than the workers. Life itself teaches the masses, and it is a strict, effective teacher. Unfortunately life does not teach those who consider themselves the socially select, the better educated, the superior. I have always held that every form of information and instruction that helps to widen the mental horizon of men and women is most useful and should be employed. For in the last analysis, the grand adventure--which is liberty, the true inspiration of all idealists, poets and artists--is the only human adventure worth striving and living for.

I do not know how many of you have read Gorki's marvelous prose-poem called "The Snake and the Falcon." The snake cannot understand the falcon. "Why don't you rest here in the dark, in the good slimy moisture?" the snake demands. "Why soar to the heavens? Don't you know the dangers lurking there, the stress and storm awaiting you there, and the hunter's gun which will bring you down and destroy your life?" But the falcon paid no heed. It spread its wings and soared through space, its triumphant song resounding through the heavens. One day the falcon was brought down, blood streaming from its heart, and the snake said: "You fool, I warned you, I told you to stay where I am, in the dark, in the good warm moisture, where no one could find you and harm you." But with its last breath the falcon replied: "I have soared through space, I have scaled dazzling heights, I have beheld the light, I have lived, I have lived!"

MR. NEVINSON SAID:

I wish now to call upon one old friend of Emma Goldman, a man well known to us all for his magnificent power and art in singing, in singing especially those splendid songs of the negro in the Southern States. You know them. If you don't, then you had better learn them quick.

"Deep, deep river, my home is over Jordan,
Roll Jordan, roll, come down Moses,
I am going to tell God all my troubles when I get home."

All those songs of the Southern States of the time when slavery existed in the Southern plantations, all those noble songs are known to us, chiefly through Paul Robeson. They are songs that, to my mind, make even our most beautiful hymns seem hardly better than music-hall songs, because behind those songs, behind that splendid music, there is all the pathos of a slave population longing for freedom.

Let me call at once upon Mr. Paul Robeson, and I do wish--I do not know whether I am overstepping his invitation--but if only he would sing us one of those songs, "Deep, deep River, my home is over Jordan."

MR. PAUL ROBESON, proposing a vote of thanks, said:

Mr. Chairman, Miss Goldman, I am here today to speak not about Miss Goldman, but of Emma, a very dear friend, and I come, as negroes often do in their religious meetings, to offer testimony. They tell what such and such an experience meant to them, and what contact with such a person has meant to them, and what they have gotten from that person. Often the testimony reaches such fine heights that often I find great folk lore in those testimonies.

I remember years ago in the Provincetown theatre in New York, which has given the world O'Neill, certainly the greatest American playwright and one of the most important dramatists now writing, I met a group of people who believed that in the theater they could find truth, that it was not only a place of entertainment, but it was a place to reach and find the highest values of our existence, and I grew up in that atmosphere with Mr. O'Neill, and often when we were struggling and it seemed as if we played a little too highbrow and had better get down to facts and get out and get the money, somebody would remember Emma. I did not know who she was, except that she was a legend to me, and I know her family and niece and sister. I sang round America, and people said, "You must meet Emma," and I came here to play Emperor Jones in 1925, and I went to see her one evening, and I found a very simple, straightforward, kind, human person, and certainly no one to be afraid of, and I sat down and sang a few songs for Emma, and I do not think that I have ever enjoyed anything so much in my life, and now comes my part of the testimony. She came to see me in "Emperor Jones" just after I had finished my legal training, and I was not thinking of going into the business of singing or acting, but she felt so deeply that I wondered whether I should, and I went to her, and I said, "Well, if a person like that feels that way, I will get along," and she will never know what the feeling that she understood meant to me.

Few people know what a spirit like hers has meant in the development of the spiritual life of America, for behind it all is Emma, with her great spirit and with her great love of the human heart, and when one hears her speak out about her faith in humanity and sees the things going on in the world, it takes a great, courageous person who has great faith in the human soul really to feel the human race has so far progressed and really can do the things she wishes it to do.

I talk to Emma, and in her presence I feel that human love coming out I only get otherwise from the novels of Dostoevsky, the feeling that someone exists whose love really embraces all humanity, and I would like just to sing. I will not be able to sing the spiritual Mr. Nevinson wants me to, but I will sing another well-known one, "Sometimes I feel like a morning dove."

Mr. Robeson then sang another song, "Hanging on Behind."

Emma has been a fine ride, and if we cannot catch up to her we will have to keep up behind.

MR NEVINSON:

I am sure we are all deeply grateful to Paul Robeson for having sung to us this afternoon. It was really an unexpected joy to me, as to others. I hardly hoped that he would rise to my suggestion, and he could not have paid a finer tribute to our guest, Emma Goldman, than by celebrating her in that way.

And now I have to call upon another friend who stood by Emma Goldman at a very difficult time in her life and has remained her true friend. I mean a very distinguished novelist and I am glad to say a very distinguished member also of my own profession. As a journalist I need not say I call upon Miss Rebecca West.

MISS REBECCA WEST, seconding the vote of thanks, said:

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, I feel like that notorious type of insignificance associated with true importance, I mean the people described "and friend" under photographs in "The Tattler," compared with Miss Goldman and Mr. Robeson. I feel very much like "and friend." But I feel gratitude at being given an opportunity of saying something of what I feel about Miss Goldman, and I wanted to tell you about her something that possibly would not be mentioned otherwise, and that is that she is one of the best cooks in the whole world.

I once was present at a debate among epicures, and the conclusion of various people in a position to know was that the two best cooks now living were Miss Willa Cather, the American novelist, and Miss Goldman. Well, that, after all, is a very great claim to fame, but of course there are so many claims that Emma has, because she is at the top of her form in so many ways. If you had read her book you would know that there is one peculiar thing that whenever Emma Goldman got hold of five dollars, she always asked somebody to stay with her. She is one of the most generous human beings in most difficult circumstances that ever lived, and that is to say really compared with ordinary standards Emma has not much sense. She has not got much sense

compared with me, or compared with you, too, but she has got the sense of getting eternity, and a better press than you or I will. Naturally the saints get their press in eternity because they are more generous and more gentle, as Emma is, and they also get a good press in eternity, because they have fundamentally more sense than the rest of the world, and that is what Emma has done. Emma has been chased out of towns by people who had said to each other, "She is a wicked woman attacking the system, our beautiful social system. How lovely it is. Look how solid and comfortable and enduring it is, and look at this wild woman who has not five dollars, she is daring in her wild anarchist way to attack the system," and then they started chasing Emma, and very nearly often caught her. But I wonder what they would have said if they could have looked past the present to the year 1933 and if they had suddenly stared and looked and seen the system as it would be in 1933, looking not very handsome and seeing Emma, as in 1933, a person without platform in the sense that she had got nothing triumphant behind her, no triumphant mechanism moving on to attack Parliament at St. Stephen's Chamber, but only the solid and enduring cachet of having alone talked sense when she said that there was something wrong with the system. She said something which we have today, and something which everyone of us must admit was true. She can claim with the saints that she had laid hold of wisdom, which was denied to other people.

Therefore, when we think of Emma today, when we read her book, there is something else we ought to think of, and I would wish us to remember it because it belongs to other people, that she was chased by the mob, and she was right all along, and we ought to remember that when we see people chased by the mob today, and if there are any people in any country in Europe who are being chased and being pursued and threatened with unpleasant things because of the faith they hold, I think we must remember Emma and decide not to join in the mob, and if we can do anything to help such people we had better be careful lest we spurn eternal wisdom.

That is all I want to say today. It is not all one can say about Emma. I respect her as much as any woman I have met in my life, and I have a sense of inadequacy before her, because I think she is too good for any one person to understand. (APPLAUSE)

LADY DUFF GORDON, proposing a vote of thanks to the speakers, said:

Just one minute is given to me in which I would just like to thank these extraordinary wonderful people who have come to speak to us. I think this is the most interesting luncheon we have had, and this woman is too marvelous for anything, and the wonderful singing! What did you feel like? Isn't that the voice of the world singing! I just want to thank them, that is all.