Women activists in the UK discuss anarchism, feminism and the relationship between the personal and the political, in extracts from interviews carried out by myself and Lynn Alderson in 1977. The extracts were made at the time and are previously unpublished, though I used some material from them in my 2010 article *The Gender Politics of Anarchist History*.

The whereabouts of the original tapes, or longer transcripts, is unknown, though we still have hopes of recovering them. For now, these partial transcripts are all there is.

**Note on Text:** In line with the original intention that the interviewees would remain anonymous, I have given them pseudonyms, and made one or two minor alterations. Editorial amendments are indicated in square brackets [1977 edits] or square brackets and italics [2014 edits]. Ellipses appear in the original transcriptions, indicating cuts. In a couple of instances I have made additional small cuts, indicated with […], to remove repetition or obscurity.

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**Key Words:** anarchism, anarchafeminism, feminism, gender, women's liberation, 1970s
Notes towards an introduction
by Judy Greenway

This is a very brief preliminary attempt to give a bit of context to interviews carried out by myself and Lynn Alderson in 1977, in which women activists in the UK discussed anarchism, feminism and the relationship between the personal and the political.

In 1977, Lynn Alderson and I, both actively involved with anarchist feminism in London, decided to interview a number of women about their relationship to anarchism and feminism. We completed nine interviews, and made partial transcriptions in preparation for an article or pamphlet which in the end never got written. To judge from our choice of excerpts, this would have been organised thematically. As far as we can reconstruct our original intentions, our idea was to contribute to debates current at the time, while giving voice to a strand of the Women’s Liberation Movement, and of anarchism, which was (and remains) often overlooked. One day I hope to write about that time, giving more context to the questions and debates touched on here. Where possible, it would be illuminating to add comments and reflections from the original interviewees.

Meanwhile, rather than leave this material gathering dust in my filing cabinet, I’m making it available in the hope that it may be useful to others working on the history of that period, and especially to those who are still grappling with the relationship between anarchism and feminism. The language, preoccupations and the specific details of debates may change, but the broad themes remain relevant.

A note to researchers: there was a lively anarchafeminist movement in the 1970s. It included anarchist women challenging male domination and macho culture amongst anarchists, and feminists who believed that an anarchist approach was needed to bring about women’s liberation. Many of us are still alive, and at least some of us have reasonable memories (and/or personal archives). There were anarchafeminist meetings, conferences, workshops, pamphlets and newsletters. These could all be sources for new histories which don’t need to return endlessly to the same individuals and the same stories. Use them while you can!
A note on our approach: these were often as much conversations as interviews. Though there were disagreements amongst ourselves, we saw ourselves as co-contributors to ongoing debates about how to bring about social transformation. Most of us felt anger often, despair sometimes, but also a hopefulness which now seems hard to understand. It’s worth trying to put those feelings and experiences into context, and seeing what can be learned, rather than dismissing them with the cynicism of hindsight or disappointment.

Notes on what the participants were taking for granted:

- We thought of ourselves as women’s liberationists, rather than equal rights feminists.
- We agreed on the need for women-only organizing, whether or not we believed in working with men in specific groups or campaigns.
- The idea of a revolution of some kind in our own lifetimes made sense, whether or not we thought it would happen.
- We believed that politics was about the whole of life, and we tried to make connections between different kinds of groups and activities. Most of us were involved simultaneously in a range of activities. We thought that what we did mattered.
- And it changed our lives.
The Interviews

I really believe in a basic anarchism in all women, because of their experiences.

‘Susan’ (interviewed by Judy Greenway)

I liked the libertarians I met because they were more sympathetic to sexual politics and against hierarchical political groups. I began to tie this up with the way I’d preferred to work in the past and the idea of community-based politics. I was in Southampton at the time … I was a bit isolated. …

The anarchist men I’ve met — some have been very unsympathetic to sexual politics, and some I find it hard to communicate with. …

At the [Anarchist Feminist] Conference it was the first time I’d put the two things together, though for a long time I’d already come to that position in my mind. Since then I’ve joined a group — I’ve met a lot of women who felt very similar. Really one of the best things about [anarchist feminism] for me is the women I’ve met ... since I put the two together I’ve thought of all sorts of things I want to do and work on, while in the past I’ve always been very confused as to how to work politically. I often thought of joining a Marxist group ... the people I met put me off. I was always sort of on the outside ... there are loads of arguments against Marxism [but] in one sense it was just the whole way they related to the world and the way they related to the women I knew. I think it says an awful lot about the kinds of things they believe in.

At one time I thought I was going insane and I started reading [R.D.] Laing and started to realise that social conditions were causing me to feel the way I did. …

I see anarchism as having more imaginative alternatives than Marxism. ... A friend of mine said if you can remain an anarchist in spite of anarchists you must have quite a strong belief in anarchism. ... I think that anarchists are very very necessary at this moment. I know the dangers of utopianism and I don’t actually believe in the anarchist revolution in a few years or even a hundred years. I do think anarchists are more hopeful to work with than

1 [in Britain, 'libertarian' does not usually have the right-wing connotations that it has in the USA. 'Susan' is referring here to left wing libertarians/ anti authoritarian socialists.]
Marxists because they do think of revolution more in cultural terms and in terms of sexual politics. ...

I think one has to act, and work out a theoretical position in conjunction with the action ... one should not look back to nineteenth century theories and try and copy them, but try and relate them to the way things are happening now.

[Feminism] has given me a lot of support. You feel not quite so alone. I think if you feel that you’re not the only person who believes certain things ... your beliefs aren’t actually a sign that you’re going crazy. ...

I don’t think there is an anarchist movement in this country. There are lots of separate anarchists. The only group I feel I could work with is the women’s group and maybe a few men in the street theatre. I work with anarchists in squatting and so on but I don’t think of myself as part of an anarchist movement ... I relate to the women’s movement as a whole more than I do anarchism ...

Squatting is a personal and political choice... I want to live communally with people politically similar to me and there aren’t many situations where I could live like that... the thing about squatting is it brings up the whole question of ownership and possession... we’re learning how we want to live at least, and that’s very important. ...

[Future aims?] I’d like to start a street theatre group, bridge the dichotomy between personal relationships and working relationships. ...

Judy: What is the point [of activism] if you don’t see the possibility of anarchist or feminist revolution?

Susan: I don’t have any choice. Part of living is the process of struggle. I think you always have to be striving towards something which maybe is utopian. After all Marx didn’t produce any blueprint for the future, and I think there are dangers trying to produce blueprints. They don’t take account of the fact that things are changing all the time.

I can’t really see a revolution without women being completely free ... I think men and women have got to be free together.

Judy: Perhaps they have got to be free separately before they can be free together.
**Susan:** I don’t really know what that would mean. I don’t think we can ignore the existence of men ... they do exist. Most of us have to interact with them every day unless we really do shut ourselves away. ...

If there’s a law against abortion, then we should just set up our own abortion clinics, illegally. You’ve got to be brave enough to say ‘Fuck the law’. If enough women take that attitude it’s going to be very hard for the state to come down on them.

We are all frightened of the freedom to be able to choose things for ourselves, although we’re living in a society where the choices are false choices. I’d love to have a child if I could live in the way I’d really like to live, which I don’t think is possible in this society. It’s hard to learn how to cope with freedom in a society that doesn’t allow you very much.

**Judy:** It would probably be hard in a society that did allow you freedom. We are so structured...

**Susan:** Yes, given our conditioning. That’s why I don’t think there’s really a coherent anarchist movement, because anarchists believe in the kinds of things they find it really hard to put into practice ...

**Judy:** I think it’s very important to try and live up to some kind of political ideals — I think that’s what’s important about anarchism, that it has these principles that affect every aspect of your life — but I think it’s romanticising to pretend that you can be there now, that it’s a political failure on your part if you feel jealousy, or you’re angry with your kids, spend money on frivolities — that’s ridiculous ... I think having ideals can move you into a position where you make it easier for yourself to move towards them.

**Susan:** I think politics and ethics are obviously connected. Material change takes place with human interaction. ...

I think when the WLM [Women’s Liberation Movement] becomes more broad-based, it will inevitably take on a much more anarchist structure, because I don’t think the majority of women will allow themselves to be led. I really believe in a basic anarchism in all women, because of their experiences. Women being more at home, more in small groups, more tradition of gossip and small political intrigue — I think that’s something that excludes hierarchical structure.

**Judy:** I think a lot of women have an underlying contempt for political power.
Susan: The more feminists set up examples for women to live alternatively, the more other women are going to be able to develop themselves and get away from their oppression. I think that’s part of the function of the WLM at the moment. And to learn how to live ourselves. To talk to and support all women. I think we can influence people. We’ve all been influenced by people we’ve met, more than books and pamphlets.

Judy: I think the excitement of discovering women’s liberation and realising you’re not alone, and that there are things that could be different, can be so much that you do get very impatient.

Susan: Because we want to live now.

Judy: We are living now!

Susan: We don’t want to sacrifice our lives just to struggle, but we’re almost condemned to that.

Judy: Almost you can’t choose not to. When you recognise things, you can’t turn your back. Well, you can, but you really are killing part of yourself. But I get very resentful about it sometimes ...
My politics have always come from what I experience rather than theory.

‘Rose’ (interviewed by Lynn Alderson)

The majority of people active in [the Claimant’s Union\(^2\)] were unsupported mothers. Actions like sit-ins in Social Security offices for extra money for heating — well, it certainly achieved something materially for individuals. Part of the ideology was to show people that they could be equally strong, that everyone came to find out how to do it and then went out and helped others — it was taking power into your own hands instead of someone doing it for you. Also collectivity – learning about working together. ...

[In Denmark] I was starting to relate sexually to women ... getting shouted at and hissed for walking hand-in-hand with a woman in the street — the aggression was an eye-opener. I do feel very oppressed as a woman — I felt it most on a day-to-day hassle level. Also economically — having a child and being considered dependent on the man I was living with, and I wasn’t prepared to be ...

I always felt very intimidated by [men], particularly politically and intellectually. I joined Troops Out\(^3\) and tried to work in that for a long time, but I couldn’t take the hierarchical structure. Now ... I don’t feel intimidated, but more alienated by their way of discussing politics and their theory. I haven’t got a theoretical background — my politics have always come from what I experience rather than theory. I think that the personal being political is the basis of feminism ... some of the other important feminist principles to me are also the destruction of power structures — that’s why I identify as an anarchist — that anarchy is about everyone having power rather than one group taking power ...

[Children] ... I think it’s inevitable that there is a power relationship — [my child is] legally and financially dependent on me, and there’s a physical power difference — but taking all that into account, I try to do the most I can to minimise it and try not to use it. My main feeling is that they should be as independent as soon as possible.

\(^2\) [Claimants Unions were founded in Britain in the late 1960s to unite unemployed workers and others organising for welfare entitlements.]

\(^3\) [Troops Out, founded in 1973, campaigned for the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland.]
That’s what impressed me about anarchist writing, that they think about kids as people and not lesser beings and there’s been quite a lot of energy and thought in trying to give them back power and freedom.

I was impressed by anarchist groups in Denmark using drama as a way of taking politics into the streets — for instance one theatre group dressed up as Father Christmas at Christmas-time and went into big stores and started giving away all the goods to the people in the shop. Meanwhile other people in the streets were giving out leaflets and explaining their actions ... I think demonstration-type politics are so predictable and don’t raise anybody’s consciousness. I’d like to see unusual and unexpected actions that make a point ... what’s disillusioned me most about politics is the endless discussions and the same old clichés and it seems like discussing a scab on your knee while your whole body is putrefying.
If you’re working towards a free society, you have to think about everything.

‘Louise’ (interviewed by Judy Greenway)

[Anarchism and feminism] are really connected, because the thing about the personal is political in feminism — it stops you getting that slightly ‘off’ feeling that you’re not somehow there, in the way that men are there — your presence isn’t just taken for granted — which I’ve felt in social situations as much as any other. ...

In East London Libertarians I felt like a spectator... in the smaller group [East London Anarchist Group] it was much more relaxed...

[Working with men] Well, I don’t feel it is as important as some women who leave the Women’s Liberation Movement so they can organise with men ... but on the other hand with things like racism and fascism you have to be able to work with men. Because if you say you’re against racism you have to think about Black men, Asian men. You have to think of working out the future for everybody and that includes men... you can’t take a separatist attitude and want to be against racism and the exploitation of working-class men ... I probably would want to be in a women’s group and work it out with women. ...

There is no tradition in this country of feeling involved... when I think of people working in factories... they’re mostly not even thinking about things like health — things like that aren’t talked about at all. That demoralises you — you feel so cut off in your ideas. ...

Judy: One of the things that impresses me about anarchism as a set of political attitudes is taking into account all the different aspects of what it’s like to be at work, being bossed around and things like that. You could solve a lot of material things — theoretically you could raise your standard of living considerably and equalise it considerably and people would still be being bossed around and pissed off and alienated at work — and I think that’s really important about women’s liberation too, it’s not just about equal rights and equal pay and things like that, because you could have all those things and still be oppressed because you didn’t have the power to decide about your own life. ...

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4 [East London Libertarians: in Britain ‘libertarian’ does not usually have the right-wing connotations that it has in the USA. ELL was an informal discussion group for local anti-authoritarians, socialists and anarchists.]
**Louise:** I identify as an anarchist ... not having hierarchies, and thinking about people as a whole person. Thinking about work and about what women’s lives are like ... thinking about children and about old people — they get lost as well, in the trade union thing. Thinking about your surroundings and your school and the education of kids is like ... It’s the sexual thing as well, children not thinking they could be gay, and if they do think it, cutting it out ... they’re all related really.

**Judy:** You can’t have the ‘good state’, or the ‘people’s state’ — the state means power out of the hands of all the people, and I think that’s really important — it affects my attitude to quite a lot of the campaigns that go on within the Women’s Liberation Movement. ...

**Louise:** Theory is important because if you’re working towards a free society, you have to think about everything. And education hasn’t taught us to think about everything. It’s taught us to think about getting married and having kids and blah blah — and you have to make an effort to go against that and make sure you think about things as much as you can, because you’re going to have to deal with them. ...

You don’t want to give the state any more control [but] you have to ask a bit from them just because it’s a matter of your life. ...

[A free society] is not likely at all, [but you keep on] because it’s the only thing you can do when you think of the tragedy of people’s lives ... it’s your own life... it’s your own misery as well, so you just work from there. ...

Working with people, laughing with people... working towards relationships that you want in the end... you know you won’t get them, but it makes life better... it helps to bring out things in you....

If you can change how people think about things, like homosexuality, that’s what’s essential because it’s just going so much towards people not wanting to think about their own situation very deeply — that’s drummed into people so much. It’s really dangerous — I think of fascism when I think of that. ... You can talk to people you work with... about how you feel and about what happens to you and what’s happening to them. ...

I think it is essential to organise, politically, to connect all the different things that are going on. But for that to work — and I don’t think it is working, that conferences are working anything out — it is essential that it starts with consciousness-raising, and sharing the history of the women’s movement, and making basic points clear and connecting them up. ...
It has to be a lot more localised to work. That is an old anarchist idea really, having cells that can come together but that are generating energy on their own.

The divides have to come out — and that is another anarchist idea, of coming to a consensus.

**Louise:** We have to start practising that now. ...

**Judy:** And if you can’t *[reach consensus]* then going your own way.

**Judy:** In what ways do you think being an anarchist feminist has actually affected how you live?

**Louise:** It stopped me getting married, and having kids. It helped me become a lesbian woman, which is what I always wanted. If I’d carried on the way I was going on, I’d be married and have kids by now ... It’s giving some priority to how you live ... opening up more of yourself, really, but on the other hand not feeling bad that you’re not as free in your head as you want to be. ... *[It helps?]* you understand the conflict between what you want and what you are.

[On freedom] It’s all chiselled out for you. There isn’t any choice. You can jump up now and then to see what it is on top of the fence ... there’s always a little tear in the net and a few of them get out. ...

I think I’m basically good. I think I’m basically wonderful: I just don’t assume I’m the only one ... when people go on and talk about human nature, they’re talking about themselves, really; they’re saying they don’t deserve to be free ... If you think historically, people that were really ground down — they were fighting, and I think that gives you some idea of things continuing.
Revolution without fun was pointless.

‘Olive’ (Interviewed by Lynn Alderson)

[Left student politics] was so joyless, and I was beginning to get into ideas that revolution without fun was pointless ... at the same time I was beginning to realise how important my personal life was to my politics, and that all seemed to be lacking in what I heard from the socialists ... I started an affair with a woman and think that the first four hours were the biggest political revelation of my life. I’d known about the women’s movement ... it all immediately fell into place, like a jigsaw ... It was the personal is the political connection that I hadn’t been making. The whole thing that I was an individual, and my personal experience stopped being a separate thing from the ‘class struggle’. ...

[Monogamy] serves to deny the autonomy and ultimate aloneness of an individual ... it’s not that I feel it’s evil, but the pattern relates very much to competitive oppressive power structures in society ... [It's] closely related to the way men oppress women in society, it implies possession and the rights of one person over another.

Racism ... all these things [are] linked with personal power of one over another, with competition and structures and elitism ... what I really feel now is that seeing those links is the most important aspects of political thought ... attempting to get some consistency, but not feeling that consistency is the be-all and end-all. ...

Recognising that women as a group are oppressed by men as a group: in looking for the reasons for that ... it’s become necessary to examine not just the fact of their oppression, but the connection with the structures used to oppress women, and one of the major components of that structure is the mass line and group identity — having common ideas about women as a group. To fight that has meant grabbing hold of individuality, and insisting on it as a good thing, and turning the male idea on its head.

There’s a difference between individualism in a co-operative society and hierarchical, capitalistic individualism. If you’re going to be individualistic here and now, it is always reacting away from, and being eccentric, but in a co-operative society your individuality is part of group organisation. ...

[Working politically with?] [men]: No.
Acting non-hierarchically affects every part of our lives.

‘Angela’ (interviewed by Lynn Alderson)

[Had been in various Left reading groups]

I thought I was a radical feminist but that was more a personal response to my experience than a decision based on worked-out theory.

The strength of the Left is that it appears to touch more on what is going on, e.g. Grunwick’s. We [feminists] suffer from a lack of confirmation in a public way — the media doesn’t recognise nursery campaigns and abortion marches in the same way — after a period of time, it’s hard to go on working, having no apparent impact ... We need to see ourselves as being part of something that is having an effect — that’s a weakness of radical feminism. Most actions now are more of a consciousness-raising nature, presenting a different image of women. If we’re talking about social change, then there’s no discussion about such issues as using violence.

In the period I joined the [Women’s Liberation] Movement, sisterhood was really powerful — it was exciting at first, then there was a consideration of what the movement was really based on ... then there were all these things like the economic system working against us. It was like chasing a myth of pure feminism. The Left has appropriated the real issues — e.g. work. Women have never had a chance to work out in our own terms how we thought about that. Like when some women were discussing how to support Grunwick’s, but not in the same way as the Left groups. It was exciting, good to start working out a feminist approach to that. But it got taken over by women already committed to Left points of view. I think radical feminism is lacking because we don’t sit down and discuss how feminist ideology could deal with something like that. ...

I would hate to think that anything women can achieve would be based on other people’s fear.

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5 Grunwick Dispute: a two year strike (ongoing at the time of the interview) at a film-processing plant in London; it was mainly led by older Asian women workers. The dispute became a major confrontation between the labour movement and the Conservative government.
**Lynn:** Would you agree with the anarchist principle of the destruction of power rather than transferral?

**Angela:** Yes — though I wouldn’t call myself an anarchist-feminist, concepts of non-hierarchical power relationships and structures always related back to anarchist principles. The Women’s Liberation Movement is not to do with transferring power from men to women, but more with equalising. I personally feel the situation now is such that it doesn’t mean you work with men to do that — it has to come from men themselves. It is for us to change ourselves and if that affects them, okay — otherwise we’ll be in the position of telling them what to do. Putting energy into men’s problems seems ludicrous when we have enough of our own. ...

The whole concept of acting non-hierarchically does affect every part of our lives.

Hierarchies actually affect personal relationships and just because it’s a woman you’re relating to, you can still be dealing with that as a power relationship. Why aren’t there more radical celibates? ...

[...]

Another weakness is not taking ourselves seriously enough. We’ve lost what we had, we didn’t build on those theories which were there, just constantly reiterated them.
I think we have to change what anarchism is.

‘Marie’ (interviewed by Judy Greenway)

[At age 15 6, I volunteered for Task Force, a local social welfare organisation visiting elderly people living in isolation and poverty] — which really did make me decide that [we] needed a revolution.

[Then I went to [meetings of environmental groups] Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace ]. It was a completely alienating thing to do, really, because I was being a schoolgirl most of the time, and living at home being lonely, and then I’d go and sit in meetings and be terribly impressed with everyone and then go home again ... It was partly because of that kind of background that it took me a long time to get into the Women’s Movement, because that world where the men were seemed interesting and exciting, and women were all at school and being boring and awful ... finally, I went to a women’s group for the last year I was at school. ...

It was because of the logic of pacifism that I first thought about anarchism.

Judy: How much did being involved in feminist ideas change what you were thinking about the other things you were doing?

Marie: Only quite slowly. For a long time I separated them completely. It became clearer, it all clicked together, because seeing your own oppression does make it clearer what the other situations you’re talking about are about, and I think I understood more what was going on, and became more clearly a revolutionary and less a liberal.

Situationism in general, I think is quite close [to feminism, as are the sort of] anarchists that go in for alternatives, links with things like self-help health groups, that sort of thing. ...

I think we have to change what anarchism is.

[On National Abortion Campaign:] It was easier when I lived in London and there were other people [campaigning], I could say let them do it, and I don’t need to, but when it’s a choice between me doing it and nobody doing it at times, I’ll do it. It does so immediately affect your life. ...

6 ['Marie' was 20 at the time of the interview.]
**Judy:** Do you work mostly in women’s things now?

**Marie:** Mostly, but basically you haven’t the choice here [in York] because there isn’t enough. You could just refuse to have anything to do with male politics but I think that would be a cop-out in general ... I put a priority on working with women, but I think if I couldn’t find women that want to do work that I want to do — I don’t really feel that I’ve got the choices. ...

I do think it’s very important, [to look at] at the role of women in fascism, the appeal of fascism to women, quite apart from what it does to women, which is fairly clear, but why it gets the enormous support of women, which it does when it grows. ...

You can’t think of issues in York the way you can in London [...] because you basically have to work on things other people will, and you basically look at what you think people will be bothered about. ...

I think the whole thing about class and race that has been coming up in the [women’s] movement over the last year or two is an issue for the movement, that we have to work on. ...

**Judy:** Do you think theory is important?

**Marie:** Yes, but not theory out of books. I think what’s important is people just realising we haven’t got enough idea of what we’re doing, it’s more strategy than theory I suppose... I don’t think things like theories of origins of oppression are particularly important ... but just a theory of revolution which we simply haven’t got at all — of how to get there and what it would be, which I think is all the same thing ... I think we must get, if only the right terminology of how to talk about women’s revolution.

**Judy:** I think one should try and be very open, but total lack of strategy doesn’t seem the same as being open. ...

**Judy:** A lot of people have no idea what the word ‘anarchist’ means except as it’s used by the press; they don’t know that there are alternative theories. But then I think part of the problem is that people are looking for a [ready-]made structure — we’re almost looking to be told what to do... I think that’s something to fight against, though some structure is necessary ... and the unhappiness with it is part of being an anarchist. ...

**Marie:** I think I am a revolutionary more because I see that as a moral position in a way, rather than a realistic thing ... Basically I just can’t tolerate not to do anything... I suppose I do think there
will be some kind of revolution in lots and lots of years — I don’t think feminism will be stopped this time. ...

What I don’t think there’ll be is a traditional socialist revolution – I still find it difficult to believe that they all think that it will ...

**Judy**: I think I’m happier now than I was not thinking about my life as a woman. I get very angry and miserable about that still, but it’s nothing like the misery of when I was just isolated and didn’t fit in and didn’t understand what was going on. So I always think that political activity for me is a way of making me feel better ... it’s because you’re doing something that seems to be worthwhile. It’s worthwhile in terms of relationships which are very different from the ones I’d been able to form [at] work, and other [...] ways of meeting people ... I don’t mean the kind of philosophy that you only do what you like — It’s a consequence *[of getting involved]* rather than a reason ...
I see my politics as a totality.

‘Ruth’ (interviewed by Lynn Alderson or Judy Greenway)

I would choose to call myself libertarian.7

At university I thought my women's group was too lefty because of my liberal upbringing, but after a trip to the States, I was appalled at the logical extension of capitalism so therefore I thought you must be a socialist ... [Later] I always identified myself as radical feminist and never saw it precluded me from being socialist feminist ... [as distinct from Marxist feminists]. Socialism can include libertarian principles like not having leaders and accepting the intrinsic rights of all women participating rather than having a vanguard with a political answer.

I do see my politics as a totality, i.e. it's silly putting labels on bits of it ... I don't actually relate politically better to male anarchists than I do to male Marxists. ... I don't like feeling that there's any one party line that I have to dedicate myself to totally and I do feel very comfortable with the basic principles that I see the WLM [Women's Liberation Movement] standing for, i.e. autonomous local or interest groups which can choose to interact with other groups if that's to their mutual advantage; and the fact that every woman has an equal right to express herself but no one else can speak for them. Also the fact that everyday life is an important part of your politics. ... I think being in the WLM does force you to question every aspect of your life. ...

If socialism means true equality I don't see how you can have hierarchies and therefore I don't see how it's possible for one person to presume that they know how another person is thinking or to say what's best for them. You can only say what you want for yourself arising out of your own situation and experience. That's the autonomy of the individual. One thing I think the WLM has taught women, and should go on doing, is we do it because we want to change our situation, not for anyone else. ...

It's important that revolution should be a constant process not just a one-off event — If you conceive of it happening at any moment or any time then that affects your behaviour ... If you think that means

7 [Libertarian: in Britain this term does not usually have the right-wing connotations that it has in the USA. In these interviews it means something like anti-authoritarian socialist/leftist.]
are important, then individual people feel part of that process, and
are not reduced to being insignificant pawns in someone else's
game ...

The classic issue of the abortion campaign — whether it restricts
itself to fighting for changes in the legislation — i.e. asking someone
else to do something for us (I think that has its place) — or whether
we say we must explore teaching ourselves and other women how
to do safe extractions, because that alters the power structure, and
the former doesn't ...

In fighting the closure of hospitals, we should also be questioning
what services they provide and what they do to people. We should
be sharing knowledge with hospitals rather than just dictating
methods of treatment ... the essential things about campaigns — we
are invariably making demands on someone else and don't
challenge our thought processes so that we make demands on
ourselves, not reinforcing our impotence in the face of
bureaucracies and hierarchies who are doling out the goods.
Excuse me comrades, where are all the women?

‘Emma’ (interviewed by Judy Greenway)

I suppose I thought of myself as being a socialist, and I began to think of myself as a pacifist because I came through a position of: ‘Well if nuclear weapons are wrong, all weapons are wrong, and war is wrong.’ Thinking through that — you can’t actually stop war as long as you have nation states — brought me to an anarchist position. The other thing was seeing that the society I grew up in was rotten and wrong, and at the same time [seeing from Communist Party reactions to the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 ...] any politics where you actually put your commitment to an organisation in front of your commitment to an idea and to your friends ... and I thought, you can’t just have politics where you’ll hold to the line of the organisation when it goes against everything, your personal feelings, your friends and your political feelings for the kind of society you want. I suppose that was the other thing that led me to an anarchist position.

I kept thrashing it around in my head ... and I didn’t know about anarchism. Nobody said the word; I didn’t know that there were anarchists. And then suddenly in 1962, when I was nearly 19, I was talking to a bloke, a Communist, about my ideas, and he looked at me in horror and said ‘You’re an anarchist!’ And I thought, ‘Oooh!’ ... Then I met some other people who were, and thought I must be.

Judy: So what changes did that actually make to your activities?

Emma: Bugger all! ... The only thing happening then was the anti-nuclear movement. [Involvement with the Committee of 100, civil disobedience and direct action] — thinking through that was the other thing that made me come to the point where I was an anarchist. ...

I now feel it’s extremely important to study, particularly history, to find out why we went wrong and the Leninists went wrong and to find out what forms of organisation we need to make a revolution and to make a society that works properly ... I know what the anti-intellectual thing is about, it’s about a lot of intellectuals who cut themselves off from their feelings and personal experience and that is disastrous. But I feel if you can do both things at once that makes for a much stronger movement. ...

Judy: I don’t think that there is an anarchist theorist of the same kind of stature as Marx, but then I don’t know that we should be
looking for one. I think looking at history isn’t the same as looking back for theory.

**Emma:** No. I’d rather take my theory from history. ...

We don’t have any founding fathers. ...

*[On marriage the anarchist convention is]* ‘Oh, anarchists don’t get married’ ... I didn’t need a licence from the state. But I didn’t think in terms of being a *woman* who didn’t want to get married. ... 

It hadn’t actually struck me, until I left school, that I was second-class ... there must have been a lot of conditioning that we weren’t aware of, But I didn’t have that awareness that we’re supposed to have of being second class. And it hit me when I left school, in terms of what jobs I could get. ... Then in about ’68, ’69, another man friend came back from the States and said ‘You know, there’s something happening — the women are really talking about things and getting things on. Why did you always do the cooking when you lived with [Chris]?’ And I sat down and thought, ‘Why did I?’ ...

In the peace movement there were always strong women ... but how we operated, and how I still operate politically — I’d got used to, if I want to say something, standing up and shouting, and so I could still do that ... Anyone who’s been politically active before the Women’s Movement is very badly damaged in irrevocable ways... having gone through years of thinking you’re alone ... you develop a lot of rigidities ... I don’t see how I can get rid of them, in a way. ...

**Judy:** What labels would you accept?

**Emma:** The main one is revolutionary, the second one is anarchist, the third one is ... either non-violent or anarcho-communist. Sometimes both, of course, depending on the context. Feminist is a definition that I’ll put when I feel attacked — It’s not a spontaneous self-definition. Because so far as I’m concerned, when I say that I’m an anarchist you should know that means women’s liberation is going to be a primary concern. Because that’s my liberation, and as an anarchist my liberation is equally important with everyone else’s. [...] 

When people talk about women’s issues, my response is: all issues are women’s issues. If you mean making it a primary thing specifically to work with other women, without men, then I don’t — though I would also like to.

Feminism also means the first women’s bank in New York, and a lot of things within the system. I prefer to talk about women’s
liberation because ‘feminism’ as a word has less political content. ‘Feminist’ is really only a label I use if I’m attacked, almost like I’ll use the label ‘Jew’ if I’m attacked by a racist. …

**Judy:** Do you feel that women actually ought to work with men?

**Emma:** Yes. Because I don’t think that things will change otherwise. It’s only by confronting male chauvinism when it arises, as it arises, and hopefully not always in the context of one’s own domestic relationships with men. I think that it’s very important for men to work more like women — and they’re not going to find out how. …

What was really shattering was being away from the organised anarchist movement for a long time and about 1973 going to a meeting and walking into the room and there were eight men there and I was the only woman. I nearly flipped! I said ‘excuse me, comrades, where are all the women? ‘ And they said ‘they’re in the Women’s Movement.’ And business then proceeded as usual … they recognised what admirable work was being got on in the women’s movement — but the actual group was proceeding as it ever had… that’s why I think that women should work in mixed groups, because the change isn’t happening.

**Judy:** You could say the change is happening elsewhere.

**Emma:** But the men aren’t changing. They’re still going on, and there are still these idiot ways of running meetings … and it’s not necessarily for lack of goodwill. A lot of younger men, having grown up in the context of the women’s movement are quite open to things, but don’t know what to do, because nobody says …

**Judy:** Did you find it helpful being in all-women groups, or is it something you feel you can do without?

**Emma:** It’s something I do do without, but not that I feel I can do without … what I’d really like is to be part of a group you go to and you create a support amongst each other for what you are doing besides that … which was the original concept of a consciousness-raising group as I understood it …

I think that total separatism is politico-crazy. As a temporary thing, fine; as an individual thing, fine; as an ideology, it’s a killer.

**Judy:** I’ve always thought that the reason why so many different ideas within the Women’s Liberation movement are so upsetting is because they are so threatening personally... in feminist ideas you can’t make all those neat separations between your political ideas...
and the rest of your life; it gets really bound up with your whole identity. ...

Emma: The basis of anarchism is that the worth of every person is equal ... so if that is the premise then obviously that half the human race should be treated as if they are less than the other half is untenable for an anarchist, though I know there are a lot of sexist, male chauvinist anarchists. The oppression of women, and the suppression of those things that are attributed to women traditionally, is the expression of [a] power relationship, which is obviously inimical to anarchism, as any power relationship must be. I think that anyone who is an anarchist who is not making it a prime concern, if she is a woman, to work for her own liberation and that of her sisters; or if he is a man, to eradicate an oppressive part of himself, then I don't think they are taking their anarchism very seriously. ...

Judy: Have you some sort of idea of other issues you’d like to work on, that you think are important, in the next few years?

Emma: Well, the troops are still in Ireland. That’s the main thing that is in the back of my head the whole time. ...

I suppose the main thing that faces me, being 34, is that if I don’t have a child now, I can’t, biologically and yet I can’t work out a way of doing that that would be right for me, or right for the child. ...

I think there are certain moral positions we share with Marxists. It is bad to exploit people, it is bad to have a class society, and so on. I am conscious that I function out of a morality ... I can’t see how you can have any kind of changed society without a morality ... people who say they do things not from a basis of a morality — I can’t work out how they do anything, because if I weren’t doing things from a basis of morality ... I wouldn’t get up in the mornings. I think morality is a kind of prop that we will probably transcend through the creation of an anarchist society. Because I think that if the society that we make frees us from those very basic oppressions, then we will be such changed people that what we think of now as morality will be a kind of crutch which we’ll be able to let drop, because we’ll be living in such different ways.

I have continually to be thinking whether what I’m doing is giving me some satisfaction, and assessing it in two ways:

1. — Is it worthwhile in terms of what I think politically?

And 2. — Is it what I should be doing, personally? ...
[Re squatting]: I do it on the basis that if there is a group of people I want to live with and we can’t get a house on any other basis, then okay. I don’t like paying rent ... a political morality in housing is impossible ....

**Judy**: How likely do you think it is that there will be a revolution, whether it’s anarchist or not?

**Emma**: I don’t know, because you think about it at different levels. If I didn’t believe there was going to be an anarchist revolution, I couldn’t continue to work. I have to believe, and really physically believe it in my body, because I can’t see that the world can survive without blowing itself up or clogging itself up with plastic or nuclear waste or whatever, without a libertarian and decentralised and human society ... I believe it because if I didn’t believe it I couldn’t go on; but I don’t think it. I think there may be bound to be a very repressive period which as a society we may or may not come through; as individuals a lot of us won’t come through it. But I think we have to keep believing that we will.

**Judy**: I find it an impossible contradiction, myself. I find it very hard to believe that there will be one, certainly in my lifetime, probably ever. The likelihood of disaster before then is very great, yes. On the other hand, what else can you do? I couldn’t do nothing, anyway. Even if the chance is minute, you may as well fight for it.

**Emma**: I think it’s physical. I think if I didn’t feel it really was possible — and it’s a physical feeling, it’s not an intellectual feeling, it’s not even emotional — it’s like a hunger. And when people are hungry, if they didn’t think they were going to eat some time they would kill themselves, because hunger is a very painful feeling ... if I thought it was only a slight possibility, then there are an awful lot of other things I’d rather do, given the next few years. I’d rather go and earn some money and travel a lot and things like that, if I thought it wasn’t possible ... intellectually, I can’t see it. ...

**Judy**: Can you say what for you are the important differences between anarchism and Marxism or socialism?

**Emma**: It’s primarily a matter of organisation. The tendency with a Marxist or Leninist form of organisation is the tendency to pull in towards the centre all the time, so that increasing amounts of decisions ... the authoritarian character cannot bear to have anything out of its control. Organisation is a horizontal matter between groups of autonomous people ... no doubt there has to be a certain amount of delegation [but] you have continually to be
watching the tendency of centralisation to happen, and you have continually to be hauling it back out again ...

The thing that gives rise to anarchists being called individualists — which isn’t individualism as I understand it — is ... a respect for and a validation for people, on their own merits, on their own terms, with their own skills and values and each one being as important as the other. Which doesn’t mean working individually. For me, when a collective really works is when I feel strongest as an individual, that I am not just myself, having to work it all out by myself, but that there is a group of people also doing that, and we are feeding each other and supporting each other. That’s the times when I’ve felt strongest as an individual, when I’ve been in a group which has felt strong as a group... that’s a feeling that is very difficult to convey to anyone who thinks hierarchically.