

Great Anarchists

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CLIFFORD HARPER**

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RUTH KINNA

Ruth Kinna is a professor of Political Theory at Loughborough University, working in the Department of Politics, History and International Relations where she specialises in political philosophy. Since 2007 she has been the editor of the journal *Anarchist Studies*.

CLIFFORD HARPER

Clifford Harper is a worker, illustrator, and militant anarchist. He has worked for many radical and alternative publications, the international anarchist movement and almost all of the UK national newspapers.



GREAT ANARCHISTS

These short introductions delve into the anarchist canon to recover some of the distinctive ideas that historical anarchists advanced to address problems relevant to their circumstances. Although these contexts were special, many of the issues the anarchists wrestled with still plague our lives. Anarchists developed a body of writing about power, domination, injustice and exploitation, education, prisons and a lot more besides. Honing in on different facets of the anarchist canon is not just an interesting archaeological exercise. The persistence, development and adaptation of anarchist traditions depends on our surveying the historical landscape of ideas and drawing on the resources it contains. The theoretical toolbox that this small assortment of anarchists helped to construct is there to use, amend and adapt.

Agitate, Educate, Organise!



LUCY PARSONS

In 1900 a Republican-leaning US local broadsheet crowned Lucy Parsons an anarchist queen. The coronation bucked a trend. The press usually referred to her as the widow of Albert Parsons, one of the anarchists executed in 1887 following the bombing of a labour demonstration in Chicago's Haymarket Square. The coupling was not entirely inappropriate. Having spearheaded the defence campaigns for the accused, she frequently referred to the injustice of the trial to spotlight the steeliness of capitalist 'slavocracy'; however, her association with Albert is easily misconstrued: she never played second fiddle to Albert nor stood in his shadow. She was a talented writer, orator and organiser in her own right.

A keen advocate of independent labour organising in the late nineteenth century, Parsons was active in the Knights of Labor and the anarchist

International Working People's Association. In 1905 she joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). She wrote regularly for the anarchist-socialist press and lectured across America, refusing to be cowed by police bans or arrests for riot that followed as a consequence of her defiance. In 1888 she spoke at a Haymarket memorial rally in London, leaving a deep impression on the anarchists in William Morris's Socialist League. As 'head' of the Chicago Reds, Parsons was to Chicago what Louise Michel was to Paris, and her influence, like Michel's, extended well beyond the city's limits.

Like most anarchists of the period, Parsons was forever asked questions about political violence and terrorist tactics. Deeply concerned about the capacity of the print media to shape public perceptions, she scrupulously avoided reductive analysis. In a widely syndicated interview published after President McKinley's assassination in 1901 she ventured that the assailant, Leon Czolgosz, was mentally ill. If this sounded like straightforward censure, Parsons based her diagnosis on his evident misunderstanding of class power. She

judged Czolgcysz deluded because he had wrongly thought there was something to be gained from the shooting. Anyone in their right mind could see that he had mistaken the symbol for the source. It was the trusts and heads of trusts who wielded real power, not the people's temporary chief executives.

Parsons' qualified critique reflected her general view that 'organised' government was in the pay of economic lobbyists and therefore largely insulated from its electors. Her refusal to condemn political violence, even as anti-anarchist hysteria reached fever-pitch, also reflected an eagerness to resist binary tactics. Parsons once argued that there were two main categories of anarchist: militant and philosophical. The latter were agitators and teachers who believed in organisation. Militants eschewed organisation and believed in independent action, each one choosing their own path. Gaetano Bresci, assassin of King Umberto I, was an example of this type. Parsons described herself as an 'old school' anarchist because she advocated formal organisation to support sustained propaganda. Organisation was essential for the construction of movements capable of

withstanding capitalist intimidation, infiltration and vigilante actions: without it workers were easy prey for the bosses. Yet Parsons had a foot in both camps and appreciated the galvanising power of the individual act. Her 1884 clarion call, *Word to Tramps*, declared that “organization would be a detriment” to those willing to petition the rich with explosives. Similarly, in 1900 she participated in the *Bresci* solidarity meeting, backing the appeal for workingmen to “come in crowds”. For Parsons the chief enemy was inertia. As she put it: ‘Passivity while slavery is stealing over us is a crime’.

CLASS WAR

Born to an enslaved woman in 1851, Parsons explored class conflict through the prism of the American Civil War. When she spoke about the war she referred to the brutality of the fighting, the nobility of the cause and the bitterness of its betrayal. It had been waged to end oppression, for liberation and to put an end to enslavement. For Parsons this meant abolishing both chattel slavery and the structural oppressions it epitomised. Only one of these aims had been realised: Abraham Lincoln had emancipated the slaves but the oppression continued. Returning home from the battlefields the ordinary soldiers discovered that “bloated aristocracy” and “crude monied-ocracy” had won the day and that their lives now hinged on the benevolence of the “slimy cowards” who had made a fast buck from turning out their “paste-bottom boots” – “The overseer’s whip is now fully supplanted by the lash of hunger! And the auction block by the chain gang and the convict cell!”

When Ulysses Grant accepted Robert E. Lee's surrender to bring the hostilities to a formal end, the war rumbled on. Parsons' observed that the political settlement signalled an important realignment of forces and a change in tactics. Having settled the issue of individual property rights, slavers on both sides of the Confederate-Unionist divide regrouped, forging new alliances to wage covert war against the veterans who had done their killing and anyone else who attempted to resist enslavement. Dispensing with the heavy artillery, the owners now wielded the state's constitutional powers, elaborate electoral machinery, the "lying monopolistic press", Pinkerton private militias and armed police to quell resistance. This was class war. It appeared less gruesome than the pitched battles that characterised the Civil War but the oppressors pursued it with the same viciousness. Parsons addressed black workers to explain:

"The same land which you once tilled as a chattel slave you still till as a wage-slave, and in the same cabin which you then entered at eve not knowing but what you would be sold from wife and little ones before the

morrow's setting sun, you now enter with dread lest you will be slain by the assassin hand of those who once would have sold you if they did not like you."

In fact, whereas the Civil War had been fought with honour, the class war was waged shamefully. Unlike General Grant, who accepted Lee's capitulation magnanimously, the state of Illinois ran Albert Parsons through when he gave himself up for trial. It was reasonable to assume that the amnesties that the Union granted the rebels in the Reconstruction era would never be extended to the anarchists and their allies who resisted the new arrangements. Workers should draw their own conclusions. Referring to the 1886 killing spree in Carrolton, Mississippi, which resulted in 23 deaths, Parsons told her black audience:

"As to those local, periodical, damnable massacres to which you are at all times liable, these you must revenge in your own way. Are you deaf, dumb and blind to the atrocities that you are subjected to? Have the gaping wounds of your dead comrades

become so common that they no longer move you? Is your heart a heart of stone, or its palpitations of those of cowards, that you slink to your wretched abode and offer no resistance... Do you need more horrible realities than these to goad you on to deeds of revenge that will at least make your oppressors dread you?"

Parsons described the class war as a war against Christian civilisation. It had three fronts. One was against the system of economic and industrial robbery that enabled capitalists to claim ownership of the things that workers produced, from everyday consumables to the astonishing buildings that fashioned the city skylines. The second was the 'organised fraud' of government. Happy people, she argued, needed no government and were instead inclined towards individualism, or "real self-government". Take away the complex systems required to maintain the injustice of capitalist oppression and people would order themselves. The third front was against religion. Parsons understood this in a narrow sense to refer to the hypocrisy of Church leaders who taught one

set of ethics and practiced another and in a broad sense to refer to the ideology of equal opportunity and the myth of classlessness that pervaded America. Parsons knew from walking the streets of New York and Chicago that workers lived in abject poverty, packed “like sardines” into squalid tenements on filthy sidewalks, and that their children had no access to the parks and amenities that adorned the areas uptown. The picture was one of despair “at once degrading, disgusting and depressing”. Making do with “coffee wagons and soup kitchens” and taking the charity that the “robber class” handed out “like dope” to keep them quiet, they desperately poured over the job adverts that peppered the yellow press, also absorbing the messages that instructed them to cling tightly to the American dream.

CLASS AND SOLIDARITY

Parsons believed that all workers were exploited by capitalists but she also argued that the experience of exploitation was felt more or less sharply by subsets of workers. In other words, gender and race operated independently of class as determinants of oppression.

Women had long been regarded as inferior to men, turned into household drudges and tolerated on condition that they provided their masters with progeny. Some twentieth-century “new women” were able to venture outside the domestic sphere, receive education and enjoy independence. They did not lack inspiring role models to help them make their way: Louise Michel was one. She shone “like a pillar of light or a star of hope”. Still, most women remained “man-tagged”. The better-educated were often groomed for domestic service and waitressing where social norms dictated that applicants should be under forty, good-looking and “wholesome”. For the rest, life remained a grind. In her visits to the city ghettos,

Parsons noted the relationship between hardship and childrearing: the more “poverty-stricken the appearance of the women the greater number of children they seem to have clinging to their skirts”.

Women were exploited “more ruthlessly than the men” simply because they were women. They were the “slaves of the slaves”. Similarly, black Americans were regarded as inferior to whites and routinely subject to racist abuse and violence. At the time of the Carrolton massacre, Parsons maintained that the violence had not been racially motivated; relative poverty was the more important explanatory factor. Black workers in the South were “poorer as a class” than their “white wage-slave” brothers in the North. By 1892 she had changed her mind. Hearing news of the lynchings then reaching a peak in the South, she compared American racist violence to Russian anti-Semitism. As vulnerable as the Jews were under Tsarism, their sufferings were as nothing compared to “lashings and lynching” taking place across the old rebel states. Parsons reported that “leering, white-skinned, black-hearted brutes” stripped women bare, beat them insensible and

“strangled them from the limbs of trees”. This was race war, intensified by gender discrimination and class hatred.

Parsons’ analysis of oppression was reflected in her understanding of solidarity. It had four aspects. First, solidarity was process. Workers had to learn how to exert collective force, build “solidarity of interest as a mass” and act as a class. Second, the process involved distinguishing between class interest and class membership. While it was impossible to reconcile workers’ and owners’ interests, it was nevertheless possible for individuals to transcend economic class divisions. Florence Nightingale, one of Parson’s “famous women of history”, blazed this trail. “Far from want” she had risked her wellbeing to “bring relief to that most stupid victim or our present system, the soldier”. In doing so, she had demonstrated solidarity of interest with the oppressed. Third, solidarity meant standing firm with workers who apparently betrayed class interest, notably scabs. These workers were not to be despised: a scab was just a “poverty-stricken, disheartened wage-slave”. Solidarity demanded that workers refuse

to handle scabbed goods but also that they heal the divisions that owners' created within the mass movement. Fourth, solidarity meant supporting independent organisation and leadership within the workers' movements. Endorsing the words of an anonymous black anti-racist organiser Parsons noted: "The white race furnished us one John Brown; the next must come from our own race."

WAR AND PEACE

Parsons believed that there could be no peace without liberation and that workers were always right to resist exploitation and oppression. She never revised her conception of class war and she scoffed at those who preached peace as a strategic response to domination. Why was “lamb-like” behaviour demanded only of workers and never owners: “Why should they be quiet while starving or receiving just sufficient for their laborious toil to keep body and soul together and to produce more slaves for the bosses?” Yet towards the end of her life she concluded that she was unlikely to witness the demise of capitalism as she had once anticipated. Her frank assessment was that anarchism remained “too far away from the mental level of the masses”. Anti-anarchist propaganda was partly to blame. It was easy for the authorities to paint anarchism as dangerous and unruly; Parsons’ own rhetoric was perhaps misjudged in this respect. But rather than change tack or blame the opposition, she invited anarchists to acknowledge their own deficiencies: they had

failed to sustain organisations essential for the promotion of anarchist ideas.

Parsons' late speeches often harked back to Haymarket. There was some nostalgia in this but a larger dose of hope. Haymarket was a historical trigger for the righteous anger and indignation government smothered. At a wildcat May Day rally in 1930, as the US economy hurtled toward collapse, she warmed to the sight of "young people... who will drop work... when work is so scarce... come out in the mid-week and defy the capitalist classes... come out in the sunlight... standing solid for shorter hours and better conditions... those are the kind of people we have got to have".



Great Anarchists

**BY RUTH KINNA
& CLIFFORD HARPER**

1. Peter Kropotkin
2. Voltairine de Cleyre
3. Mikhail Bakunin
4. Louise Michel
5. Oscar Wilde
6. Max Stirner
7. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
8. Lucy Parsons
9. William Godwin
10. Errico Malatesta







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