

Great Anarchists

2
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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!



VOLTAIRINE DE CLEYRE

Voltairine de Cleyre was an essayist, educator, poet and advocate of anarchy without adjectives. Born in Michigan in 1866, she spent most of her adult life in Philadelphia surviving day-to-day teaching English. Working in a predominantly Jewish neighbourhood, she learned Yiddish well enough to translate articles from the local anarchist press into English. Her parents were abolitionists and free-thinkers who imprinted their fondness for the Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire on more than just her name. Voltairine's anarchism bore the hallmarks of their radicalism: the distrust of government and authority, sensitivity to injustice, anti-clericalism and confidence in the power of individual reason. Carried into her anarchism, these ideas ran through her critique of government as tyranny, her calls to revolt and her view that social transformation depended on constantly

challenging accepted standards of justice, or what she called collective consciousness.

Voltairine's turn to anarchism was prompted by the trial of the Haymarket anarchists in 1887. This notoriously corrupt process had been triggered by a bombing at a labour demonstration in Chicago in 1886. Eight prominent anarchists were arrested in the policy frenzy that followed. Perjury and prejudice resulted in the judicial killing of four of the defendants (Georg Engel, Adolph Fischer, Albert Parsons and Adolf Spies). A fifth, Louis Lingg, committed suicide while awaiting execution and a further three, Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe and Michael Schwab, were imprisoned until 1893 when the trial was reviewed and the sentences quashed.

Voltairine's initial horror on hearing the news about the explosion gave way to outrage at the state's repression of the anarchists. No attempt had been made to conceal the fact that the men were in the dock because they were anarchists, or that their actual involvement in the dynamiting was immaterial to the consideration of their guilt. At the very least, the flagrant trouncing of free

speech begged questions about the fairness of the judicial process. Voltairine pushed further and concluded that the fraudulence of this trial exposed a systemic bias. Accepting the arguments that the Haymarket anarchists made in their lengthy, defiant defence speeches, she concluded that the constitution of the Republic was rotten, that its representatives had broken faith with the principles of the Revolution and that the continuity of the revolutionary tradition depended on the advancement of anarchy.

Voltairine's pamphlet *Anarchism and American Traditions* diagnosed the symptoms of America's decline: the limitless growth of government, the expansion of commerce and manufacturing and the spread of market values. The constitution had been designed to balance powers to protect the liberties of the people against the government. It had succeeded in concentrating power in the hands of financial and exploitative elites. It was supposed to preserve local independence but it had become a tool for the promotion of debt-fuelled subsistence economies and tax-funded government deficit-financing. The constitution was born from

resistance to colonialism. It was now an instrument of empire. Americans had sworn to maintain their militias. Yet when government agreed the second amendment right to bear arms, leaving citizens free to pursue their grievances against each other, it also tooled itself up with a standing army and navy life. Corruption was rife at every level of social life. The love of liberty had been traded for the pursuit of frippery. The new dream of the new world was material comfort, leisure and conspicuous consumption. Negligence was preferred to vigilance. Free speech, self-reliance and mutual support had gone out of the window. Instead of guarding their liberties, Americans had succumbed to a system of education that stupefied and brutalised. It was better equipped to turn unthinking patriots out of the classrooms than it was to foster reflective, active citizenship. Her European comrades argued similarly, and had she turned her gaze elsewhere she would have undoubtedly appreciated the resonances.

Voltairine's analysis of complicity makes for hard reading. Likewise her steadfast commitment to principle is difficult to emulate. Shot at point blank range three times by a former student in 1902 she

not only refused to identify her attacker, thus scuppering the possibility of his prosecution, she also wrote letter absolving him of his offence. But there's a lesson of empowerment in her critique of slavery and colonialism. It's based on direct action and the reclamation of rights.

SLAVERY AND COLONIALISM

The leading idea that Voltairine took from the Haymarket anarchists was that slavery had never been abolished. The prohibition on chattel slavery in 1863-65 in fact marked its transformation. This argument was not intended to downplay or devalue the history and experience of enslavement but to point out that emancipation had altered the character of domination while making sure that the principle of mastership was preserved. Freed slaves were no longer owned by masters. Yet liberation amounted to the freedom to join the ranks of wage slaves. Ex-slaves were still dependant on their former masters. This dependency was built into the law and it helped explain its evident distortions.

At the trial, the Chicago anarchists had focused on labour exploitation. Their argument was that wage slaves were compelled to compete for employment and authorised to enter into labour contracts that were trumpeted as free, but underpinned by structural inequality. Employers had the legal right to assert exclusive ownership over vast tracts of land, industrial plant and the profits derived from this. They were also at liberty to enforce these rights by violence. So when Chicago workers went on strike to press for the 8-hour day, employers paid armed security to shoot them. Leo Tolstoy put the same case, thinking about the 1861 Emancipation of the serfs in Russia as well as American abolition. He found the image for liberation in the practices of the Tartars of Crimea. Before they released prisoners from their shackles, they would slit the soles of their feet and press bristles into the wounds. This prevented escape while guaranteeing the supply of labour.

Voltairine took this argument in two other directions. On the one hand, she thought about the ways that slavery was perpetuated globally. On the other, she considered how slavery was felt

differently in realms other than labour. The first informed her critique of colonisation. The second led her to advance an analysis of sexual domination.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910-11 crystallised her critique of colonial domination. Treating the revolution as a mobilisation against global economic domination she observed that repeated waves of settlers had exploited, imprisoned and massacred the indigenous populations. The main driver of this tyranny was the same as in the US: economic gain. At the point of the uprising, enormous swathes of Mexico were in the hands of a small number of families. Some holdings were the size of New Jersey, she observed. Having taken possession of the land these families were in a commanding position to force the local population to labour as slave-tenants. Voltairine called it plantation culture without chattel slavery.

The brutality of the Mexican enslavement highlighted another aspect of slavery: racism. Comparing the conquest of Mexico and the appropriation of the common lands to the Norman Invasion of England, Voltairine observed the sentiments that accompanied the

Mexican government's appropriation of remaining common lands. The aim was to modernise by selling concessions to financiers and corporations, so attracting inward investment. It promised the systematic exploitation of natural resources and railways to facilitate it. It was a 'civilising mission' and it assumed that the indigenous people were backward because incapable of modernising by their own efforts and too stupid to see the benefits.

Voltairine's analysis of sex slavery was also rooted in an analysis of dependency. In this case, domination was explained by the dependence of men on women and the enslavement of women, seduced in one way or another by the arrangements that men made for their keep. Borrowing Proudhon's idea, she declared that women were property: slaves to men just as workers were enslaved to owners. Unequal pay, marriage laws, unpaid domestic labour, the presumption of women's intellectual incapability, paternity rights that granted ownership of children to fathers and awarded reproduction rights to husbands were some of the leading features of this regime.

The duty to protect, sanctified by the Church, provided the moral cover for this tyranny. It was suffocating and it operated as much in women's minds as it did through the cossetting institutions men created. Voltairine's conclusion was that domination would survive the abandonment of those institutions for as long as current behaviours were unaltered. In *They Who Marry Do Ill* Voltairine admitted that marriage law was generally repressive. However, the tough message of the essay was that slavery was reinforced by monogamy and cohabitation, not merely by state or Church control of intimate relationships. Women stripped themselves of their capacity to meet their own basic needs independently of their menfolk by accepting the role of homemaker. This was not a call for abstinence, though Voltairine anticipated that the birth rate would fall once women released themselves from male domination. The collapse of close communion was a requirement for the constant innovation she associated with anarchy. Women had to live separately to be truly independent.

Women's enslavement was not merely economic, not merely political, not merely social or sexual.

It was tied up with the regulation of human affections. Where domination reigned, love was a conservative force. Even in the most affectionate relationships, partners would stifle their better judgements to appease spouses and preserve the mundane friendships that passion bred. Turning love back into an emancipatory power meant loosening family bonds, celebrating fleeting romance, organising collective responsibility for childcare and fully recognising individual self-expression. Voltairine directed her remarks to other women but her views had implications for anyone who linked liberation to the extension of heterosexual rights and norms.

DIRECT ACTION AND RIGHTS

Voltairine's call for direct action followed from her analysis of the bankruptcy of the Republic. Law and government could not function as independent arbiters of justice because they were dependant on the exploitative capitalist systems they regulated. Nor could the existing systems be

appropriated by the oppressed and redeployed for revolutionary purposes, no matter how lyrically conventional socialist philosophers waxed to the contrary. The only way individuals could combat slavery was to assert themselves as free beings by taking direct action.

Direct action was a principle not a tactic. The difference between suffrage campaigners and anarchists was that the former worked outside the frameworks of institutional politics for instrumental reasons. Anarchists were committed to direct action because they believed in acting for themselves. Direct action established their independence. This was Voltairine's theme in *The Gates of Freedom*. Direct action meant taking liberty not waiting for deliverance, propagandising by words and deeds and by 'being what we teach'. It had whatever content activists gave it and it also meant asserting rights.

For someone who disputed the benefits of the suffrage, this defence of rights seems odd. Yet Voltairine had a particular conception in mind. Rights were not one-off permissions or entitlements granted by authority. They were temporary measures of justice and their power

derived from their general recognition. Rejecting the idea that there were any universal measures of right and wrong, justice and injustice, Voltairine nevertheless believed that it was possible to consider rights as mechanisms for social progression for as long as the demand challenged accepted practices and standards.

Demanding rights was inevitably disruptive. It compelled the enslaved to acknowledge their enslavement and expose the injustice of practices and behaviours that were generally believed to be natural, right and/or fair. Progress, Voltairine argued, was marked by the 'transition from content to discontent, from satisfaction to pain' and 'from unconsciousness to consciousness'. Individual will and collective force both had a place in the process. Conflict was always likely because actions that directly threatened entrenched interests would create a backlash. The colonised should expect masters to deploy extraordinary force to quell their rebellions. Men would likewise be hurt, albeit in a different way, when women pressed their demands, though physical violence was common in this realm, too. And it would take

time for everyone to adjust at every subsequent round of the struggle.

When Voltairine argued 'they have rights who dare maintain them' she understood the enormity of the barriers that inhibited change. Slaves couldn't run with their feet chained together, cry when they were gagged, raise their hands above their heads when they had already been pinned to their sides. She was enraged when she was asked why women put up with their enslavement. 'Will you tell me where they shall go and what they shall do?' In the days when the fugitive slave law compelled 'men to catch their fellows more brutally than runaway dogs', chattel slaves had had a fighting chance of making it to Canada. There was no such refuge for women. Wherever they were, they would have to dig their trenches and 'win or die'.

Voltairine maintained a strong belief that there was a tipping point for every injustice and that oppressed peoples would eventually find a way to strike out against their oppression. This is what she argued in her final poem, 'Written in Red (To Our Living Dead In Mexico's Struggle)'. The Biblical myth of Daniel's warning to the tyrannous

Belshazzar that this kingdom faced imminent
destruction, captured her thought that liberty
would tackle domination:

Written in red their protest stands
For the gods of the World to see;
On the dooming wall their bodiless hands
have blazoned “Upharsin,” and flaring brands
Illumine the message: “Seize the lands!
Open the prisons and make men free!”

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**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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