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“I am an Anarchist”: The Social Anarchism of Lucy E. Parsons

By Willie J. Harrell Jr.¹

Abstract

A determined advocate of socialism anarchism, Lucy E. Parsons believed that inequities in society stemmed from unequal power relations between government and the people. Parsons delivered powerful orations and had an enormous influence in world history in general and US labor history in particular. This essay raises two issues: Parsons' view of human nature and the degree to which her ideas were rooted in a theory of historical progress. She maintained a staunch commitment to establishing and maintaining collective freedom and her allegiance was demonstrated by her perpetual critiques of any form of domination or subordination of the working class perpetrated by government.

Keywords: Anarchism, social anarchism, black anarchism, anarcha-feminism, anarcho-syndicalism, anti-jeremiad

Anarchists are peaceable, law abiding people. What do anarchists mean when they speak of anarchy? Webster gives the term two definitions—chaos and the state of being without political rule. We cling to the latter definition. Our enemies hold that we believe only in the former.

Lucy E. Parsons

“I am an anarchist,” 20 December 1886

On December 20, 1860, a revolutionary move ensued that transformed the maturing American government forever. South Carolina, one of the original thirteen colonies, seceded from the union, initiating a sectional conflict that would be known as the Civil War. Forming a self-governing country, citizens of South Carolina clearly believed that states had the right to gain autonomy and revolt if they were not content with the developing nation's present political and economic ideologies. Believing that their rights were being trampled upon, South Carolinians' audacious move abolished the perceived enforced authority government wielded over them. Establishing what would be known as the Confederacy, their succession, the first of many to come, represented what some labeled as anarchy, a political and theoretical dogma that advocated unwarranted forms of automatic rule or government. “Plainly the central idea of secession,” declared Abraham Lincoln in his First Inaugural Address on 4 March 1861, “is the essence of anarchy...Unanimity is impossible; the rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy or despotism in some form is all that is left.”¹

Twenty-six years after South Carolina's formal separation from the Union, on that same historic day, self-proclaimed “revolutionary socialist” (“Industrial workers of the world,” 2004, p. 80) Lucy E. Parsons delivered her infamous anarchist homily to a crowd of insurgents at Kansas City's Kump Hall, almost two months after “the dedication

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of the Statue of Liberty” (Foner & Branham, 1998, p. 656). Despite ideas of liberty and justice that saturated the nation’s democratic atmosphere, Parsons, the “mystery revolutionist” (Ahrens, 2004, p. 3), roared “I am an anarchist.” She beckoned her audience to “count the myriads starving; count the multiplied thousands who are homeless; number those who work harder than slaves and live on less and have fewer comforts than the meanest slaves.”

Parsons chided the American government for allowing the “victims of rank injustice” to permeate through “the system of government.” She avowed that there were “plenty of reasons for the existence of anarchists” in America (“I am an anarchist,” 1998, p. 657). An unfaltering activist of anarcho-syndicalism,² Parsons revealed that her beliefs stemmed from the unequal power relations between government and the people. At the core of her discourse of dissent, she argued that anarchism was the only way “to advance the cause of working-class emancipation.” Maintaining that government thwarts the progress of human development, Parsons challenged “wage-slavery and the repressive state” that supported it (Ahrens, 2004, p.12, 13).

In an effort to stimulate interests on the critical role Parsons played in America’s anti-government associations, this investigation explores her social anarchist discourse to discover how she attempted to bring about transformation through her discourse of dissent. In doing so, two issues are presented: Parsons’ view of human nature and the degree to which her ideas were rooted in a theory of historical progress. At first glance, Parsons’ social anarchism may seem to reiterate ideas already familiar with the anti-government movement in America. A closer examination will reveal that Parsons, in spite of her awareness of the exploitation of the working-class in capitalist society, illustrated that they could develop programs to prevent similar exploitation in a revolutionary society. Parsons’ social anarchism was primarily concerned with human liberation attained through political action.

Although anarchism has always been “notoriously difficult to define” (Suissa, 2001, p. 629), its proponents maintain a common accord: that society functions without forced authority and results from a failure of government to protect the people. “Amorphous and full of paradoxes and contradictions” (Miller, 1984, p. 2), anarchism generally avows that individuals must be free in order to develop their fullest potential. According to Williams (2007), not only was “anarchism generally conceived as a practical creed,” it was “primarily a creed formed in the context of activism” (p. 299). Anarchists were anti-authoritarian and criticized the “exercise of power” (Brown, 2003, p. 107). Derived from democratic ideas and principles (Crick, 1987, p. 6), socialism, on the other hand, insists that the community should own and manage the resources of society. Socialism endured because collective ownership of the economy under the democratic system of the working-class has not yet been successfully achieved. When she called the working-class to arms, Parsons combined the tenets of both anarchism and socialism to form her exceptional social anarchism. According to Baldelli (1971), social anarchism claims that “anarchism is intended” to be for the common good, “not for the exploitation of society” (p. 7). Social anarchism not only examines the organization of society from the point of view of an anarchist, but also views self-determination as “conceptually connected with social equality” and emphasizes “community and mutual aid” (Suissa, 2001, p. 629). Parsons did not apologize for advocating anarchism. “I have

no apology to make to a single man, woman or child, because I am an anarchist, because anarchism carries the very germ of liberty in its womb (“I’ll be damned,” 2004, p. 157).

The general thrust of Parsons’ social anarchism was to challenge capitalism and its institutions. While she declared that a despotic society would eventually develop into an entirely egalitarian system and argued that the evolution from capitalism to socialism was an unavoidable part of the development of human society, Parsons emotionally forewarned that government was incapable of “awarding to each an exact return for the amount of labor performed.” The result would be “absolute communism [as] a necessity sooner or later” (*The Principles of Anarchism*, 2004, p. 36). The “Goddess of Anarchy” (Meyers, 1986, p. 35), Parsons advocated that “governments always stand for the ‘established order of things.’” Because of this, she believed, socialists used the word “*anarchy*, the negative of government” (“Anarchy: The negative of government,” 2004, p. 115; emphasis in original).

While Parsons’ social anarchism has been scarcely remembered and gone virtually unnoticed by conventional academia today, the legacy of her struggles and her influence within the socialist movements both in America and abroad have left behind a web of discourse filled with intense moral conflict. Arguably one of the most prevailing factors explaining the dearth of Parsons’ authority in current scholarship would be the fact that some have dubbed her “merely the shadow of her martyred husband” Albert Richard Parsons (Ahrens, 2004, p. 2). Because she was a woman, Parsons was “not viewed as equally threatening” as male anarchists (Meyers, 1986, p. 45). It’s not surprising that this kind of analysis has given a loud and contagious kiss of death to Parsons’ discourse and activism by placing her self-worth beneath her husband’s, suggesting that the only niche for her was in his shadow. Because she felt that the movement was more important than details about her past, aspects of Parsons’ life have continually remained elusive.

Of Mexican, Native American and African American ancestry, Parsons was born in Waco, Texas in 1853, probably a slave.³ She later married Albert, who, after serving first as a Confederate soldier, became a radical Republican. The couple moved to Chicago in 1873 and became heavily involved in organizing workers. After Albert’s arrest in connection with Chicago’s Haymarket affair in 1886, Parsons wrote, “My husband was no aider, nor abettor, nor counselor of crime in any cause” (“Foreword,” 2004, p. 68). Several people were killed during the riot in which thousands of McCormick Reaper Works laborers held a rally at Chicago’s Haymarket Square, protesting working conditions and against police brutality. A pipe bomb was thrown into the police ranks which resulted in the death of seven policemen and the injury of more than 60 others. Eight anarchists were charged.

A highly controversial trial resulted in which four of the men were executed—including Albert; another “committed suicide in his jail cell the day before his execution” (McKinley, 1987, p. 386); and three were later pardoned by the governor. While immortalizing her fallen colleagues, Parsons contended that Albert was neither involved “nor had anything to do with the preparation” of the riot. Albert’s “connection with the labor movement was purely and simply for the purpose of bettering the condition of his fellow men; that he gave his time, talents, and at last his life, to this cause” (“Foreword,” 2004, p. 68). Parsons took to the street on a lecturing tour and set out to instill pride in the movement and give hope that change would come someday. When she vigorously

campaigns on behalf of Albert and the other martyred comrades, Parsons painstakingly chronicled the events that occurred during the Haymarket tragedy. She connected the anarchists' struggles with the Founding Fathers' fight for sovereignty from the British, alluding to the shot heard around the world.⁴ "I was in Zeph's hall when I heard that terrible detonation" of "200 policemen" rushing "to do the anarchists up. It was heard around the world" ("I am an Anarchist", 1998, p. 658). Parsons' dedication to rallying the cause of the martyrs of the Haymarket tragedy resulted in "historic inspirations, creating a wave of anarchists worldwide" ("The Lucy Parsons Project," 2008), which attested to the power of her orations and writings to encourage others to support the cause.

Anarchism in America developed to traverse a wide range of nihilist philosophies, from individualist anarchism to anarchist communism and other lesser known forms. The framework of the movement was part of a sophisticated network including men and women anarchists who were organizing the threat of revolution. When black activists joined the network that was habitually dominated by white males, they advanced the movement by arguing that it was not enough to struggle against social class. Although black anarchists largely drew inspiration from their white American predecessors and other Western European movements, there were, however, two key characteristics that distinguished Black Anarchism from its American and European predecessors. First, because of their experience with American prejudice, black anarchists held more significant positions in social movements that fought against racism and bigotry. Ribeiro (2005) proclaimed:

It is a white, petty-bourgeois Anarchism that cannot relate to the people. As a Black person, I am not interested in your Anarchism. I am not interested in individualistic, self-serving, selfish liberation for you and your white friends. What I care about is the liberation of my people. ("Senzala or Quilombo")

Second, Black Anarchism sought to forge a movement that would represent black identity tailored to the black experience. Black anarchists, then, articulated that the traditional movement was racist and sought to repress black participation. Ribeiro (2005) declared:

What it is that prevents...people of color that have been feeling the brunt of police brutality, and have been living off the scraps of what capitalism leaves behind, why have they not joined the movement? The answer is simple: because it is not their movement. It can never be their movement while it is being created by and for white middle-class kids. ("Senzala or Quilombo")

In the hands of social anarchists like Parsons, a determined rhetoric developed critical of American prejudice that categorized government as the aggregate power operating in human society. Although her social anarchism was primarily concerned with labor activism, she was also a committed supporter of African Americans' civil rights. Parsons "preached justice for the poor by way of revolution" (Rice, 1995) when she lamented, "And to the Negro himself we would say your deliverance lies mainly in your own hands. You are the modern Helot. You sow but another reaps. You till the soil but for another to enjoy" ("The Negro," 2004, p. 55).

Parsons was one of the first minority activists to straightforwardly connect with left radical social movements. Although the anti-government movement was not a color race, Parsons realized that she could not continue the fight without bringing attention to the plight of people of color. Prior to her involvement with socialism, the race question had been neglected by white anarchists (Foner, 1977, p. 80). Parsons viewed racism as a consequence of capitalism (Pattanayak, 2010) and asserted that Southern whites sowed the seeds of their own destruction (McKean, 2006). When she added her unique voice to the anti-lynching crusade, for example, she declared, "Never since the days of the Spartan Helots has [sic] history recorded such brutality as has been ever since the war and as is now being perpetrated upon the Negro in the South." She argued that it was effortless for Americans to travel to Russia and "drop a tear of sympathy over the persecuted Jew." If Americans would "step across Mason's and Dixon's line," she continued, they would witness scenes of horror "before which those of Russia, bad as they are, pale into insignificance!...Where has justice fled?" ("Southern lynchings," 2004, p. 70). In 1892 when Frederick Douglass learned of Boston's black anarchists' involvement, he forewarned of apparent revolution, "If the Southern outrages on the Colored race continue the Negro will become a chemist... Anarchists have not a monopoly on bomb-making and the negro [sic] will learn to handle the terrible instrument of destruction unless the wrongs against him cease" (qtd. in Foner, 1977, p. 81). However, despite the parallels in strategic theory, relationships between African American activists such as Douglass and social anarchists like Parsons never developed. What seemed like an "exercise in liberation to one group struck the other as insipid and counterproductive" (McKean, 2006). Black anarchists, however, continued the fight.

In response to the lynching of 13 African Americans in Carrollton, Mississippi, published in the April 3, 1886, edition of the International Working People's Association (IWPA) weekly, *The Alarm*, Parsons recognized that the movement was "in the midst of organizations whose missions it is to depict the wrongs to which the propertyless class are [sic] subjected." Taking an unprecedented stand on race and the wage-system, Parsons argued that the outrages the black man suffered were not because of the color of his skin. "It is because he is poor. It is because he is dependent," she disclosed, "Because he is poorer as a class than his white wage-slave brother of the North." For Parsons, racial oppression was a manifestation of class oppression. "Are you deaf, dumb and blind to the atrocities that you are subjected to?...Is your heart a heart of stone, or its palpitations those of cowards, that you slink to your wretched abode and offer no resistance?" she heralded ("The Negro," 2004, p. 54, 55-56). Parsons' responses to racial violence were undoubtedly radical (McKean, 2006). To encourage black uplift and support self-determination, she went on to reveal that black resistance lay in the hands of the persecuted African American:

Who is this other one who continues to enjoy the fruit of your industry? Are they not the idle few who you but lately acknowledged as your masters, and are not thesis loafer practically your masters yet in some far as absorbing all your labor project without even being compelled to return you sufficient to keep you in descent food and clothes? For they are even actuated by the monied [sic] interest with they had in you in former years. The overseer's whip is now fully

supplanted by the lash of hunger! And the auction block by the chain-gang and convict cell. (“The Negro,” 2004, p. 55)

By making such statements, Parsons expressed her belief that when African Americans supported socialist movements, their actions were fundamental to the struggle against American prejudice. She addressed African American affliction from “racial violence in the same terms in which she addressed” the working-class: both suffered from “extreme material deprivation, lacked any recourse for justice within legitimated avenues such as the state, and were prevented by a variety of circumstances from creating traditional oppositional political formations” (McKean, 2006). Her opposition to racism, however, flowed from her understanding that discrimination against one group of the working-class would undermine all workers.

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 simply have sold you if they did not like you. Verily your situation is still deplorable. (“The Negro,” 2004, 55)

Parsons viewed black prosperity as a tool that revealed indisputable proof of African American self-reliance and accomplishment. She argued that a “revolution to dissolve the state and end capitalism was a necessary condition for the creation of an anti-racist society” (McKean, 2006). Parsons inquired, “Do you need something to nerve you to action?” (“The Negro,” 2004, 55). If this was the case, she assured blacks that they did not have to look far to find an overabundance of reasons to get involved:

Then look in the tear-stained eye of your sorrowing wife and hungry children, or think of your son, who has been sent to the chain-gang or perhaps murdered upon your door-steps. Do you need more horrible realities than these to goad you on to deeds of revenge that will at least more your oppressors dread you?...You are absolutely defenseless. (“The Negro, 2004, p. 56)

According to McKean (2006), Parsons “urged armed self-defense against racist violence” and called African Americans “to not limit themselves to self-defense.”

Since anarchism has always been about advancing certain principles, anarchists viewed “the state, their corporate masters, and the myriad of oppressors which result from these institutions as not only unnecessary, but counter-productive to human freedom and aspirations” (“Anarchism,” 2003). Miller (1984) argued that while “the state exerts an immense influence on social relationships generally,” anarchists “envisage a social order with this influence removed, and in some cases with other major transformation as well—for instance the disappearance of the economic market” (p. 62). For example, in her social anarchist manifesto, *The Principles of Anarchism*, Parsons held that anarchism was “the usher of science—the master of ceremonies to all forms of truth” (2004, p. 31). She audaciously declared:

The philosophy of anarchism is included in the word 'Liberty,' yet is it comprehensive enough to include all things else that are conducive to progress. No barriers whatever to human progression, to thought, or investigation are placed by anarchism; nothing is considered so true or so certain, that future discoveries may not prove it false; therefore, it has but one infallible, unchangeable motto, 'Freedom': Freedom to discover any truth, freedom to develop, to live naturally and fully (*The Principles of Anarchism*, 2004, pp. 30-31)

Obviously the concepts of autonomy occupied a central place in Parsons' definition of anarchy. As Brown (1989) argued, "liberty and freedom" was at the heart of anarchist philosophy as a whole (p. 7). Parsons, however, took ideas of sovereignty a step further and argued that being governed by self-perpetuating elite was detrimental to human development. "It is becoming more and more apparent that in every way," she declared, "we are 'governed best where we are governed least.'"⁵ Parsons believed that a socialist society would be far better for the majority of the populace than its capitalist counterpart. She argued that government was "another barrier in the way of coming generations" (*The Principles of Anarchism*, 2004, p. 32).

Parsons argued that the problem of unemployment cannot be solved unless government abolished production based on profit, substituting it with a kind of need-based production. Under such a system, working-class would no longer be wage slaves. In Parsons' view, "only a well-organized mass working-class movement could realize the revolutionary dream of a free society" (Ahrens, 2004, p 13). One of the chief ideological disputes Parsons carried was the anarchists' insistence that social revolution should continue until the anarchists' ideological war was won. Parsons' existential collectivism placed the responsibility for achieving independence from government hegemony unwaveringly on the shoulders of the working-class; her impression of self-determination was one of involvement where the working-class fought for and fashioned their invectives. Parsons' ideas concerning sovereignty from capitalism would not be implicit but rather a vigorous triumph. For example, in "Our Civilization: Is it Worth Saving?" (2004) Parsons engaged in a similar revolutionary tone David Walker employed in his 1829 *Appeal*. She wrote:

Oh, working man! Oh, starved, outraged, and robbed laborer, how long will you lend attentive ear to the authors of your misery? When will you become tired of your slavery and show the same by stepping boldly into the arena with those who declare that 'Not to be a slave is to dare and DO?' When will you tire of such a civilization and declare in words, the bitterness of which shall not be mistaken, Away with a civilization that thus degrades me; it is not worth saving it? (p. 45).

Parsons oftentimes relied heavily on historical narratives as a means of connecting with and advancing the present plight of the working-class. She was certain that if the working-class understood their own exploitation, they would begin to organize. To remedy the disparity between capitalists and the working-class, Parsons advocated that a working-class revolution would be inevitable if they took control and implemented reforms to benefit their class. "We have no new shackles to propose," she proclaimed. "We seek

emancipation from shackles.” The socialists’ movement required “no legislative sanction” and asserted that “in freedom of the special unit lies the freedom of the social state” (*The Principles of Anarchism*, 2004, p. 37).

Although they sought to “identify power imbalances and oppression and challenge their legitimacy” (“Anarchism,” 2003), antichrists felt it essential to outline the philosophical and scientific basis of the modern labor movement. Discussing the concept of capitalism illustrated that anarchists believed that it did not promote any form of social justice. For example, Parsons forewarned:

The capitalist understands full well that his power consists solely of his privilege to dictate the terms and conditions to those who bring to him their commodity-labor-for-sale, and any organization, it matters not under what name, which attempts in any way to limit or deny this privilege, *viz*: the power of the possessing class over the non-possessing producing class...The capitalist class...manage to keep an army of laborers in compulsory idleness. (“What anarchy means,” 2004, pp. 60, 61)

Parsons was known for her audacious speeches, for her bravery as a nonconformist and for her obdurate commitment to social justice. In “To tramps: The unemployed, the disinherited, and miserable,” she supported “propaganda ‘by the deed,’” a philosophy that held that only violent direct action or the danger of such action would defeat capitalism in due course (Ashbaugh, 2004). Parsons’ message took on uncompromising characteristics. She illustrated a Marxist analysis of capitalism:

Awaken [your employers] from their wanton sport at your expense! Send forth your petition and let them read it by the red glare of destruction.... you can be assured that you have spoken to these robbers in the only language which they have ever been able to understand, for they have never yet deigned to notice any petition from their slaves that they were not *compelled* to read by the red glare bursting from the cannon’s mouths, or that was not handed to them upon the point of the sword. (“To tramps,” 1884, emphasis in original)

As Marxists believed that capitalism led to the oppression of the proletariat, Parsons believed that the exploitative and irreclaimable nature of capitalism was undermining collective freedoms. She argued that “systematic agitation must go steadily forward” to thwart the ills of capitalism (“Capitalist conspiracy in Idaho,” 2004, p. 118). Continuing to illustrate the urgency of government restriction, Parsons later encouraged:

If you do not wish to see American soil again stained with the blood of innocent workingmen; if you do not wish to again hear the sound of the accursed gallows as it strangles their voices and forever silences them, then waste not an hour, bestir yourselves! Action now!
Let your voices be heard in protest from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Maine to Mexico. Serve notice upon the murderous capitalistic class that you will not

again stand idly by and see your brothers made victims because they so will it, and they will dare not do it! (“The proposed slaughter,” 2004, p. 75)

With the 1890’s came the development major divisions between Parsons and others in the movement, especially Emma Goldman, a white anarchist who played a pivotal role in the development of anarchist political philosophy in North America and Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike Goldman, Parsons understood that the working-class sustained society, not vice versa. “When will the people see the real cause of all of their woe—the private ownership of the means of life?” Parsons demanded (“Ominous times,” 2004, p. 71). Goldman, however, who argued the “human individual is capable of self-conscious free expression,” believed that the “individual is irreducible, valuable in and of itself, reaching out towards freedom and self-determination, the individual creates life and meaning” (Brown, 1993, p. 120, 121). She supposed:

The individual is the true reality in life. A cosmos in himself, he does not exist for the State, nor for the abstraction called ‘society,’ or the ‘nation,’ which is only a collection of individuals. Man, the individual, has always been and necessarily is the sole source and motive power of evolution and progress. (*Red Emma speaks*, 1983, p. 111)

Goldman’s and Parsons’ “relations were tense and competitive” (Wexler, 1986, p. 157). Goldman’s “existential individualism” stood in contrast with Parsons’ existential working-class, collective anarchism (Brown, 1993, p. 121).

The anarchist movement was “brutally suppressed” after the Haymarket affair and did not “emerge again as a mass-movement” until the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was organized in 1905 (McKean, 2006). At the founding convention, Parsons spoke at length about women’s roles in society. She maintained:

Let me say to you brothers and sisters....remember that we are here as one brotherhood and one sisterhood, as one humanity, with a responsibility to the downtrodden and the oppressed of all humanity, it matters not under what flag or in what country they happened to be born. Let us have that idea of Thomas Paine, that ‘The world is my country, and mankind are [sic] my countrymen. (“Industrials workers of the world,” 2004, p. 78)

Parsons attempted to triumph through historical correlations over an order that she could not overcome by force. She believed that because of the multitudes of poverty and starvation, the American wage system no longer satisfied the needs of the American people. The current wage system was a betrayal of working-class freedom and self-determination in favor of degradation and bondage. The problem with government, as Parsons internalized it, was that it became a vehicle for authoritarianism to proposer in which corruption was breed where the ruling class disconnected from the people. She argued, “The American republic is a good illustration here we have a semblance of a republic, of a democracy, but it has fallen into the hands of a powerful few, who rule with a despotism.” As with revolutionaries before her, Parsons believed that change would

only come forcibly. “All signs of the times show that the fight will begin” in America when “the final great struggle of the masses against the moneyed powers takes place” (“Lucy E. Parsons on anarchy,” 1887, p. 111, 110). Operating from a position of “relative institutional powerlessness,” anarchists adopted vocabularies of other persecuted revolutionaries in an effort “to turn the state’s power of punishment to their advantage, using it as a means to testify publicly to their beliefs” (Gabriel, 2007, p. 35). The anti-jeremiad became a useful vehicle in which to criticize government authority.

Through the tradition of the anti-jeremiad, Parsons argued that it was only through free and voluntary association that the working-class could reach its human potential to become self-determined and autonomous. The rhetoric of anti-jeremiad contained a disapproval of all ideas, religious and profane, that America was founded on the principles of liberty, justice, and freedom. Bercovitch (1978) interpreted the “anti-jeremiad,” as a phenomenon which evoked the “ubiquity of the national symbol” by “reading into America the futility and the fraud of hope itself.” The anti-jeremiad, was not “so much a rejection of the culture as it is a variation on the central cultural theme” (p. 191, 194). While the jeremiad absorbed the optimism of America into the meaning of the idea of democracy that evoked the country’s spirit, the anti-jeremiad called America to be accountable for its senseless treatment of its countrymen. Murphy (2009) suggested that “all jeremiads represent efforts as persuasion, in which speakers attempt to fire the imaginations of their listeners and call them to action by using skillfully crafted political narratives” (p. 110). Throughout her social anarchism, Parsons employed the anti-jeremiad to prophesize imminent revolution toward government. Her use of prophecy was closely aligned with a particular vision of the future of the working-class and of a particular political agenda designed to advance their plight. Without the influence of government, for example, Parsons prophesized, “Every man will stand on an equal footing with his brother in the race of life, and neither chains of economic thralldom nor menial drags of superstition shall handicap the one to the advantage of the other.” Her prophecy included both masculine and feminist discourse. Parsons argued that “we have a higher and truer standard of manhood and womanhood” (*The Principles of Anarchism*, 2004, p. 33). She argued that without government:

The actual, material things that man needs would still exist; his strength and skill would remain and his instinctive social inclinations retain their force and the resources of life made free to all the people that they would need to force but that of society and the opinion of fellow beings to keep them moral and upright” (*The Principles of Anarchism*, 2004, p. 37).

Government hindered humanity from achieving a truly free society. If government loosened its hold on society, “Wealth will be par, and it will be found that men and women will not accept it for pay, or be bribed by it to do what they would not willingly and naturally do without it. Some higher incentive must, and will, supersede the greed for gold.” Parsons belittled the complexity between the relationship of freedom and capitalism, “The manifestations of discontent now looming upon every side show that society is conducted on wrong principles and that something has got to be done soon or the wage calls will sink into a slavery worse than was the feudal serf” (*The Principles of*

Anarchism, 2004, p. 35, 38). If capitalism would continually go unchecked, wage-based slavery would be the end result:

Liberty has been named anarchy....You and your children will be slaves. You will have liberty if you can pay for it. If this verdict is carried out, place the flag of our country at half mast and write on every fold 'shame.'...Break the two fold yoke. Bread is freedom and freedom is bread. ("I am an Anarchist," 1998, p. 660)

Parsons fervently believed that the American people did not fully realize the significance of, and the class interest of, the working-class. In this regard, she contended that anarchists could not afford to be permissive in the movement. "Passivity while slavery is stealing over us is a crime," she purported, "we are willing to work for peace at any price, except at the price of liberty" (*The Principles of Anarchism*, 2004, p. 31). According to Brown (1993), anarchists generally opposed the idea that authority and domination were necessary for society. Instead anarchists advocated "more co-operative, anti-hierarchical forms of social, political and economic organization" (p. 106). Parsons argued that anarchists did not look to government for relief "because we know that force (legalized) invades the personal liberty of man" (*The Principles of Anarchism*, 2004, p. 31). In an interview to the *New York World*, Parsons prophesized what she believed would occur if government extinguished the middle class:

The revolutionary period will be reached when the great middle classes are practically extinct....There will come a time when there will be in this world only two classes—the possessing class and the non-possessing but producing classes, the middle classes have been forced into the wage class, owing to the enormous capital now needed to remain in the field of production. These two classes will therefore find themselves arrayed against each other; a struggle, the revolutionary stage will come and the order of things in the world will be changed by the people themselves. ("Lucy E. Parsons on anarchy," 1887, p. 109-110)

Despite the hazy academic attention given to Parsons' life, activism, and rhetorical discourse, African-American women have participated in revolutionary traditions in American politics. Brown (1990) concluded that while "anarchism is a political philosophy that opposes all relationships of power, it is inherently feminist" (p. 208). It was within this context that Parsons' speeches and writings offer an uncompromising vision of American anarchism. An ardent feminist, Parsons infused feminism in her social anarchism as a means of advancing the plight of the workingwomen. She decreed that because of unlawful acts, such as prostitution, free and voluntary labor was practically unfeasible to attain:

The terrible conditions under which labor is performed, the awful alternative if one does not prostitute talent and morals in the service of Mammon; and the power acquired with the wealth obtained by ever-so-unjust means, combine to

make the conception of free and voluntary labor almost an impossible one. (*The Principles of Archaism*, 2004, p. 35)

Ashbaugh (1976) maintained that “radical feminism was a working-class development which came out of the analysis of the role of women under capitalism” (p. 202). Understanding that women would continue to be dominated in the work place until such time when the wage system was abolished and replaced with a system of free and voluntary associations, Parsons insisted, “We, the women of this country, have no ballot even if we wished to use it...but we have our labor...Wherever wages are to be reduced the capitalist class uses women to reduce them” (“Industrial workers of the world,” 2004, p.82).

According to Marsh (1981), the fundamental position of anarchist philosophy involved anarchists-feminists making their most “radical contribution by declaring that if gender ought not inhibit women from participating in the economic and political life of the society, neither were they valid in determining roles within our most intimate institutions” (p. 173-174). Parsons’ anarcha-feminism, a combination of anarchism and feminism, considered women’s oppression as a function of capitalism and was “founded on working-class values” (Ashbaugh, 1976, p. 202). In a letter to the editor of *The Socialist* (Chicago), Parsons argued “for the benefit of workingwomen” and felt it essential to oppose ideas previously published in an article titled “Hints to Young Housekeepers.”⁶ The author of the article sought to give advice to households on the choice, engagement, treatment and duties of “servants.” Dismissing this interpretation, Parsons advised working women that they could choose how they were “to be fed while in the bondage of aristocracy.” Her critique of workingwomen was only the beginning of the difficult task women endured as part of the working-class. As Marsh noted (1981), anarchists-feminist “developed directly from the cornerstone of anarchist philosophy: the primacy of complete personal liberty over all else” (p. 45). Parsons sought to arouse women to voice their opinions about the issue. “I am in hopes the above items will draw from some of your many lady readers,” she wrote to the editor, “a far more pungent comment that I am capable of rendering” (“Workingwomen,” 2004, p. 43). She believed that if workingwomen’s voices were heard, they could transform workingwomen from an excluded and oppressed group within the working-class to its most advanced. For her, the “women’s question” was problematic. As Ashbaugh (1976) noted:

She had three strikes against her from birth: poor, non-white, woman. She felt poverty the most acutely, and she put the fight against racism and sexism secondary to the class struggle. She believed in monogamous marriage and the nuclear family as fundamental ‘natural’ principles and argued that the problems of marriage resulted from the economic system, not from flaws in the institution itself. (p. 201)

In her 1905 orations at the IWW conference, Parsons’ anarcha-feminism became more defined. She covered two salient points: self-determination and political organization for women. While honoring the important role women played in the anti-government movement, Parsons offered her sisters in arms practical advice:

I wish to show my sisters here that we fasten the chains of slavery upon our sisters, sometimes unwittingly, when we go down to the department store and look around so cheap. When we come to reflect it simply means the robbery of our sisters, for we know that the things cannot be made for such prices and give women who made them fair wages. (“Industrial workers of the world,” 2004, p. 79.)

Importance on “the robbery of our sisters” revealed Parsons faith that women would not truly be free until women globally were free. Believing that it was “important to educate the women,” Parsons maintained that the only power women wielded was deferred through men. “You men have made such a mess of...representing us,” she revealed. If men have been slaves to capitalism, women “are the slaves of the slaves.” She declared, “We are exploited more ruthlessly than men. Wherever wages are to be reduced the capitalist class use women to reduce them, and if there is anything that you men should do in the future is it or organize the women.” Parsons’ anarcha-feminism set out to give strength to the “young people” and call them to action (“Industrial workers of the world,” 2004, p. 79, 80). Historically, Parsons pronounced man as the anchor to the “women’s question”:

As man ascended in the social scale of development, he began to acquire property, which he wished to transmit along with his name to his offspring—then woman became his household drudge. She was regarded as a sort of necessary evil; as something to be used and abused; to be bought and sold—as a thing fit only to cater to his pleasures and his passions—this was woman’s lowly position. For countless centuries, the drudge went her lonesome, weary way, bore the children—and man’s abuse—but the long sweep of the centuries was to bring relief at last! (“Woman: Her evolutionary development,” 2004, p. 93)

Parsons believed that women were the backbone of society and should not lower themselves to the drudgery of man any longer. Parsons supported the organized women’s movements by asserting that women were allowing themselves to be “used to reduce the standards of life by working for lower wages than those demanded by men; this she will have to rectify, else her labor will become a detriment instead, of a blessing or a help either to herself or her fellow workers” (“Woman: Her evolutionary development,” 2004, p. 93).

Traditionally, anarchists opposed the authoritarianism of religion. When they relied on religious dogmas, anarchists “drew attention to the oppressive aspects of the judicial and penal systems that tried them, encouraging not only socialists but liberal reformers to confront the injustices of even ostensibly liberal states” (Gabriel, 2007, p. 37). Goldman (1917), for example, proclaimed, “Religion! How it dominates man’s mind, how it humiliates and degrades his soul” (“Anarchism: What it really stands for?”). For the most part, Parsons avoided using religion as a vehicle of uplift. When religion did appear in her anarchist discourse, it was more political than religious. “Let us sink such differences as nationality, religion, politics...There is no power on earth that can stop men and women who are determined to be free at all hazards,” she asserted. “There is no

power on earth so great as the power of intellect. It moves the world and it moves the earth” (“Industrial Workers of the World,” 2004, p. 80). Parsons’ “religion” revolved around running the “guillotine to cut off the hands of the capitalists” (qtd. in Meyers, 1986, p. 39). Many organized religions were hierarchical and aligned with contemporary power structures similar to those found in state hierarchies. Skeptical of organized religion, Parsons envisioned God’s intervention as a natural replacement for the state:

The ‘all-wise’ and ‘all-merciful’ God is adding his quota to the sum of human wretchedness, for he is having the ‘windows of heaven’ all thrown open and pouring down floods upon the bowed heads of his most devout worshipers—the Negroes of the South and the farmers of the West—in the most awful devastation and death! What, with floods, famine, lockouts, strikes, and the unemployed millions, can we expect of the near future? (“Ominous times,” 2004, p. 71)

She warned the working-class that prayer and idly sitting by while injustices are being committed against them would not aid in their uplift. In her analysis, uplift belonged in the hands of the oppressed:

But your course in future, if you value real freedom, is to leave politics to the politician, and prayer to those who can show wherein it has done them more good than it has ever done for you, and join hands with those who are striving for economic freedom. (“The Negro,” 2004, p. 55)

Finally, because Parsons advocated government was “stationary” and “social growth” was progressive (“Anarchy: The negative of government,” 2004, p. 115), her anarchists discourse was not only determined to persuade an audience to consciousness and action, but also involved an analysis of the economy. Joll (1970) argued that anarchists “have shown themselves opposed to the dominating trends of contemporary economic organization” (p. 142). Parsons saw power through hierarchy and domination as extending beyond economic structures and social institutions. She argued that collective freedom was compromised by a system based on capitalism. Condemning capitalism as forms of economic organization that were inherently hierarchical and therefore inappropriate for the free development of the working-class, Parsons lamented that governments become a barrier to economic progress. In America, government was the “*creature* of existing economic conditions” (“Anarchy: The negative of government,” 2004, p. 115; emphasis in original). According to Parsons’ reasoning, “there may be room for politics” in the anti-government movement, “but it is a bread and butter question, an economic issue, upon which the fight must be made.” Parsons believed that if the working-class determined that they “shall have that which of right belongs to them,” nothing could stand in their way of economic organization (“Industrial workers of the world,” 2004, p. 81, 82). She believed that the labor question was “a vital question at all times.” Laborers were employed to “reproduce or create more wealth” for the “wealth-producer and the profit-maker” (“The IWW,” 2004, p. 121, 120).

As one of the most significant and commendable labor activists in America, Parsons demanded and preserved her individual reputation via public speaking

engagements and actions that allowed her to maintain a staunch commitment to establishing and maintaining freedoms for the working-class. Her allegiance was demonstrated by her perpetual critiques of any form of domination or subordination of the working class perpetrated by government. A “fearless revolutionary, an anarchist who was supremely focused on the schisms class divisions that blotted American society during her lifetime” (Thorarajoo, 2000, p. 30), Parsons fought against the injustices of poverty, racism, capitalism and the government, for a society where authoritarian ideas were not needed. She challenged government in a concrete way—by showing where it obstructed social progress and by leading the opposition to it at every opportunity. By the late 1930s, however, Parsons began to feel that the anarchist movement had no future and that it no longer actively advocated revolution. In her view, the movement “lacked concentration of effort, and a vivifying force to lend energy and direction toward a common aim.” Anarchism had become too far removed from the “mental level of the masses” (“A wise move,” 2004, p. 130). Nothing, she argued, had been “added of a fundamental nature to the labor movement” in four decades (“I’ll be damned,” 2004, p. 156). Lack of organization led Parsons to not only lose faith in anarchism but to also question its substance. “Really, what evidence have we of a genuine growth of Anarchism?” she beckoned (“A wise move,” 2004, p. 130). She further contended that anarchism was “a dead issue in American life” (“U.S. Anarchism,” 2004, p. 161). Nevertheless, Parsons still held faith that the movement would recuperate. “I trust...we will have a movement in fact instead of one only in name” (“A wise move,” 2004, p.131). To aid in fulfilling the purposes of the movement, she openly “connected with the Communists.” “I am a real Red,” she revealed. She hoped that communism would one day rise “above the ramparts of capitalism” (“I’ll be damned,” 2004, p. 156, 158). Parsons’ resilient politics and beliefs remained obdurate with her support of civil liberties for the working-class, women, minorities, and the unemployed. Her involvement in anti-government movements signified that resistance was more than just a movement; it was a way of life as she positioned herself as a symbol for optimism for the working-class. Parsons remained radical to the end. “Oh, Misery, I have drank thy cup of sorrow to its dregs,” she bemoaned, “but I am still a rebel” (“November 11,” 2004, p.165).

Notes

¹ See the full transcript of Lincoln’s “First Inaugural Address” at <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/1inaug.htm>.

² Anarcho-syndicalism focuses on the labor movement and views labor unions as a feasible way to achieve revolutionary social change. Anarcho-syndicalists seek to substitute capitalism and the state with a new democratic society self-managed by workers.

³ According to Foner (1977), although the African American press “condemned” Parsons’ views, they nonetheless viewed her as a “member of the race” (*American socialism and black Americans*, p. 380).

⁴ Referring to the beginning of the American Revolutionary War, the phrase was originally published in the opening stanza of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Concord Hymn” (1837). The war began after aggravating confrontations and civil disorder turned into an armed stand-off, which resulted in the battles of Lexington and Concord. For more on the

Haymarket matter, see Bernard R. Kogan's (1959) *The Chicago Haymarket Riot: Anarchy on trial* (Boston: Heath); Paul Avrich's (1984) *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP); Bernadette Brexel's (2003) *The Knights of Labor and the Haymarket Riot: The fight for an eight-hour workday* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group; and James Green's (2007) *Death in the Haymarket: A story of Chicago, the first labor movement and the bombing that divided Gilded Age America* (New York: Anchor).

⁵ As an aphorism, scholars have argued that this phrase was coined by Thomas Jefferson, "That government is best which governs the least, because its people discipline themselves" or by Thomas Paine: "That government is best which governs least." The phrase appears in Henry David Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience" published in 1849: "I heartily accept the motto, 'That government is best which governs least;' and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly."

⁶ The article was published in *Scribner's Magazine*, January 1879, pp. 441-444.

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