

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



## Voltairine de Cleyre: An Introduction

Marian Leighton

The history of American radicalism requires much further in-depth exploration. This is particularly true of the American anarchist tradition. Ask an anarchist of today who he-she claims as radical intellectual forebears and, depending upon if he-she is of the left-wing or right-wing, they will reply Bakunin – Emma Goldman – Kropotkin or Benjamin Tucker – Josiah Warren – Lysander Spooner, respectively.

Interestingly, this reply would lead one to believe that right-wing anarchism is more indigenous a part of the American radical experience than left-wing anarchism which, based on the work of Bakunin, Goldman, Kropotkin, Berkman would seem more rooted in the nineteenth century European urban insurrectionary tradition. Is this in any way a fair distinction? Is it at all significant that the left-wing anarchist tradition intellectually seems to rely so heavily upon an imported radicalism that largely grew out of a European background? If this is true, does it matter in any way? Of course, it also remains to be seen just how much more “American” the right-wing or laissez-faire anarchist tradition is.

Marian Leighton  
Voltairine de Cleyre: An Introduction

Retrieved on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org)  
Originally published in issue 2 of the US anarchist journal  
Black Rose.

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

Motivation for interest in the above relationships has greater significance than an esoteric quibbling over historical antecedents. Nor do I pose the above questions on any chauvinistic assumption that a radical tradition that is “truly American” is superior to the “imported immigrant variety.” However, more legitimately, the relationship of contemporary left-wing anarchism to an ongoing American radical historical experience could be important for sorting out the bases for appeal that may or may not exist between anarchism and various American subcultures other than those of anarchism’s usual constituency of counter-culture youth and fairly sophisticated intellectual radicals. In addition to concern with “to whom and for what reasons does anarchism appeal”, there in the larger question of accounting for the experiential roots of American anarchism.

Just how much is glib historical simplification in streaming the relationship between left-wing anarchism and European anarchism and right-wing anarchism and American indigenous radicalism? After all the right-wing anarchists also emphasise their intellectual legacy from Adam Smith, Max Stirner, Nietzsche (as did Emma Goldman), and temporarily the Russian-born Ayn Rand. Left-wing anarchists affirm their interest in the home-grown radicalism of Thoreau, Eugene Debs, Big Bill Haywood, and other Wobblies. The point remains, however, that the anarcho-capitalists can legitimately “capitalise” on the strain of individualism in native American radicalism. The left-wing anarchists, in contrast, were most active and perhaps most effective in this country during a period when the Marxist-scientific socialist analysis and organisational policies had obvious relevance to urban immigrants faced with the horrors of the expanding factory system.

The comparatively greater knowledge of left-wing anarchism during this particular period, the labour and unemployment agitation of the 1880’s through the First World

War, should be no surprise. This was also probably the period when anarchism reached the greatest number of Americans. The principal anarchist agitators of that time are those still most well-known to us today. However, this association of left-wing anarchism at its height to scientific socialism should not preclude investigation by contemporary anarchists into left-wing anarchist antecedents in America prior to the 1880's. Nor should we, as has so often been the case, allow the judgements of European socialists to distort our vision of many of the radical scenes in this country prior to the European socialist impact here, particularly the socialist anti-clericalism in looking at American religious radicalism, the oldest radical tradition in this country

Although I do not concur with the author in all of her evaluations, a good basic work to read on anarchism prior to the period of Anarcho-communist activity is Eunice Schuster's *Native American Anarchism: A Study of Left-wing Anarchist Individualism*. Schuster's main point, with which I agree, is that the demise of the left-wing anarchist individualist tradition is in large part owing to its non-class-conscious appeal at a time when the industrial-labour situation increasingly required self-conscious immigrant labour spokespeople and organisations. In spite of this limitation, native American anarchists, like the Anarcho-communists of European background, "assailed the same evils, but in a different manner, and aimed at the same theoretical objective, but proposed to arrive there by different routes," according to Schuster. She further believes there is a valid analogy to be made between Anne Hutchinson's judgement and expulsion at the hands of her Massachusetts Bay Colony inquisitors and the treatment which Emma Goldman suffered from the US government nearly three hundred years later.

The crucial period to consider in the relationship of the two main strands which create American anarchism, native American left-wing individualism and Anarcho-communism

(later Anarcho-syndicalism), is the 1860's through the First World War. Not only was this the time of greatest immigrant labour activity and Anarcho-communist growth and agitation, but was also the scene of the left-wing anarchist individualist demise. Benjamin Tucker, probably the most important populariser of the tradition, left America in 1908 and never returned. The style of protest which he had known and many before him, that of stern ethical judgement and verbal protest and a course of withdrawal from and passive non-resistance to the unethical government, had been replaced by more active forms of protest, larger organised resistance, and direct actionism as a form of protest.

Certainly not all American left-wing anarchists left their homeland. Among those who stayed was Voltairine deCleyre, As a native American anarchist, her politics and ethical choices had been for the most part typical of those held by left-wing individualist anarchists of the period preceding great influence by European socialism. She was in her early anarchism both a pacifist and non-resistant, favouring individual solutions to social problems

During her early radical days she was a Free Thought lecturer stressing the rights of the individual against encroachment by larger social/political units. She relied for inspiration upon and was widely acquainted with the earlier American Republican ideals and their possible radical implications. Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson and their ideals furnished subjects for her free thought lecture.

She was thoroughly acquainted with notions of the rugged individualism of the American frontiersman and of the indomitable will of the individualist who would "move on" rather than allow his rights to be encroached upon by neighbours or politicians who didn't mind their own business. She was susceptible to the force of this image as part of the early American experience.

In her ideals at least, Voltairine deCleyre made a constructive transition from a style of fairly narrow left-wing individualist anarchism to an anarchism more attuned to the evolving economic realities of an expanding industrial age. However, it would be false to assume that she made her way to an acceptance of what in her time was called Anarchist Communism, Bakuninist Anarchism.

Faith in individual awareness as the crucial factor in the moulding of the social/political/economic environment is, and always has been, a major emphasis in native American radicalism. Voltairine deCleyre was able to make the cognitive leap from the narrow, frontierist conception of individuality to an understanding of the breadth of individuality in its more complex social context, and thence to direct actionism and expropriative rights and their implications. However, it is significant that in her essay on her close friend and co-worker, Dyer D. Lum, who was largely responsible for convincing her of the correctness of direct actionism, she stresses his belief in transcendence as the most basic positive force in individual development, rather than his labour agitational activities. Her insistence that individual consciousness must accompany social development and change is a synthesis with no less validity for anarchists today. As Voltairine deCleyre affirmed: *The free and spontaneous inner life of the individual the Anarchists have regarded as the source of greatest pleasure and also of progress itself, or as some would prefer to say, social change.* (p. 186, *Selected Writings of Voltairine deCleyre*).

Even after her rejection of religion and her turning to free thought, her view of life was strongly tinged with a basic religious idealism, a belief that the long-suffering and compassionate individuals “will win out,” having been supported against the evils of materialism, conformity, and apathy by the march of history. Consequently, a narrowly materialistic determination of the individual could never be compatible with Voltairine deCleyre’s temperament and politics. Mere desire for material betterment would never be sufficient motivation for the revolutionary, who must also basically be motivated by a devotion to a vision of life beyond the self.

Her choice of non-resistance as a form of protest is thoroughly American and very rooted in her religious ideology. “Non-resistance,” refusal to pay unjust taxes, refusal to military induction, refusal to participate in electoral practices of corrupt governments is as American as apple pie and has been a traditional form of protest adopted by such native American radicals as Quakers, antinomians, transcendentalists, abolitionists, Shakers, and so many others. Underlying this stance is the belief that the Good Man is he who waits, who is passive, who will not respond in kind to the wickedness and tyranny of the Malevolent Man. Goodness is manifested in passivity.

Voltairine deCleyre’s ideas on how radical social change can be effected were altered drastically during her lifetime, just as the “American System” itself was undergoing drastic transformation. The Haymarket Square legal atrocities and subsequent martyrdom of several anarchists not only outraged members of the immigrant labour population like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, but also outraged native American radicals who, as regards the needs of labour, had been bred in another age. Thus, as a result of the Haymarket incident, Voltairine deCleyre records her first recollection of total disillusionment with the “justice” of the American legal system.

With the passage of time, she came to feel that her emphasis upon the virtues of Americans bred in isolated, self-sustaining,

independent pioneer communities had little relevance to an America whose trends in labour were directed toward construction of huge manufacturing conglomerates. This trend made evident the need for new radical solutions to the needs of labour. Concomitantly, she ceased to believe in the effectiveness of lecturing, as she had in her Free Thought days, on the virtues of the American Revolutionaries of 1776. In summary, she felt that during the American colonial and pioneer period, the harshness of making a life in a new land had fostered a kind of sectarian independence jealously guarded, that being thrown upon their own resources the settlers had been made into well-rounded and well-balanced individuals, and that this experience had also made strong such social bonds as existed in the comparative simplicity of their small communities.

But this old Golden Age had virtually disappeared and the new reality of America, she felt, was its huge manufacturing plants, and the terrifying and depersonalising experience of urban poverty and isolation. With good reason Voltairine deCleyre could testify to the latter realities in her role as English teacher among the urban immigrant poor of Philadelphia. Amid material conditions of utter deprivation, she was forced to choose teaching as her only means of subsistence. (Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 2, p. 504).

In her social activist vision of a transformed future, there was a constructive transition made in her thinking that mirrored her analysis of her country's changes. Voltairine deCleyre did not — as many individualist anarchists did and continue to do posit as a solution the restoration of that state of pioneer sovereign individuality. (Modern anarcho-capitalists behave as if they believed money, “running your own little capitalist enterprise”, has the power of bringing back the golden days of the Great American Individual, as if the frontier had never disappeared.) Instead, she felt “...the great manufacturing plants will break up, population will go

after the fragments, and there will be .seen not indeed the hard self-sustaining, isolated pioneer communities of early America, but thousands of small communities stretching along the lines of transportation, each producing very largely for its own needs, able to rely upon itself, and therefore able to be independent.” (p. 134. *Selected Writings of Voltairine deCleyre*). Is this not similar in some respects to what many anarchists are now attempting by decentralising new technologies, alternate energy and food production systems to make smaller neighbourhood areas more nearly autonomous by means of co-operation among the neighbourhood residents? The result of her thinking, thus, pointed neither to resurrection of the ideal of isolated frontier individualism, nor to the faceless bureaucracy of State Socialism.

Toward the end of her life, Voltairine deCleyre came to accept “direct actionism” as a form of public protest, thus obviously revising her earlier stance of pacifist non-resistance. Even after her acceptance of direct actionism, Voltairine deCleyre, unlike Emma Goldman, could not approve of advising anyone to do anything “involving a risk to herself, “ since each individual can only assume such great responsibility over their own lives ultimately; she nonetheless declared that the “spirit which animates Emma Goldman is the only one which will emancipate the slave from his slavery, the tyrant from his tyranny — the spirit which is willing to dare and suffer.” (pp. 9–10, Hippolyte Havel’s introduction to *Selected Writings of Voltairine deCleyre*) In 1894, with such words as the above, she greeted the unemployed of Philadelphia as stand-in for Emma Goldman who had been arrested a few hours earlier for her expropriation speech to unemployed New York workers the previous night. Thus, Voltairine deCleyre lent her support to the expropriation of private property, a far cry from the traditional individualist anarchist stance on the sanctity of private property.