

Lucy Parsons: American Anarchist

Anarcho

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Lucy Parsons (c. 1853–1942) is worthy of a great biography. She took an active part in the American anarchist and labour movements from the 1870s to her death and should be better known to today's radicals. Anyone described by the Chicago Police Department as "more dangerous than a thousand rioters" is worthy of remembrance. So the reprinting of Carolyn Ashbaugh's *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary* should be welcome news – except that the book is so terrible.

Ashbaugh's right to note that "Lucy Parsons was black, a woman, and working class – three reasons people are often excluded from history." (6) However, this would be more convincing if Ashbaugh could bring herself to believe Parsons when she proclaimed herself an anarchist! Simply put, this biography excludes Parsons own voice and instead proclaims that while she may have called herself an anarchist for decades "in realty, she advocated a syndicalist theory of society" (174) and "her beliefs were syndicalist rather than anarchist." (201)

It gets worse. Not only was Parsons unable to understand her own politics, the Chicago Martyrs were equally confused about their own politics and we are informed that the "trade unionists of the International Working People's Association... had been more 'syndicalist' than 'anarchist.'" (181) Ashbaugh quotes two of the Martyrs last words invoking Anarchy (136) yet wants the reader to believe that they died not knowing what it meant!

The reprinting of this deeply flawed work is not surprising. There seems to be a tendency within American Leninist circles these days to claim the Chicago Anarchists as Marxists. This is because for most Marxists "real" anarchists are individualists who do not believe in the class struggle. As Ashbaugh's book will reinforce their incorrect ideas on anarchism it is useful to reiterate the basic ideas of revolutionary anarchism and show just how wrong it is on anarchism, syndicalism and Emma Goldman

Ashbaugh is very sure that Parsons was not an anarchist but a syndicalist. So sure she repeatedly puts anarchist into quotes ("anarchist") and argues that the Haymarket Martyrs "were labelled anarchists" because "it was easy to assume that divisions in the American movement would follow" the European split between "Marxian 'socialists' and Bakuninist 'anarchists.'" (45) She rejects this because "Bakunin's theories were orientated to 'mass' rather than to 'class,' and the Chicago revolutionaries were orientated to class and trade unions. By 1885 Lucy Parsons held a position which could be called syndicalist. She rejected the need for a state or political authority, but felt that 'economic' authority would fall under the jurisdiction of the trade unions." (58) The only flaw in this argument is that Michael Bakunin and the other revolutionary anarchists in

the First International advocated syndicalist ideas. We can easily show this by quoting Bakunin from sources that were available to Ashbaugh when she was writing her book.

Thus we find Bakunin arguing that workers can only free themselves by “the establishing of complete solidarity with their fellow-workers in the shop, in their own defence and in the struggle against their common master” and then “the extension of this solidarity to all workers in the same trade and in the same locality in their joint struggle against the employers – that is, their formal entrance as active members into the section of their trade, a section affiliated with the International Workingmen’s Association.” Socialism “can be attained” only “through the social (and therefore anti-political) organisation and power of the working masses of the cities and villages.” Like the later syndicalists, Bakunin argued that “unions create that conscious power without which no victory is possible” while “strikes are of enormous value; they create, organise, and form a workers’ army, an army which is bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world.” (*The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, 304–5, 300, 379, 384–5)

Bakunin also advocated other key syndicalist ideas. Thus we discover that “Lucy Parsons discussed the general strike” which was “the syndicalist germ of thought which she had had in the 1880’s” (218) yet Ashbaugh makes no mention of Bakunin’s arguments from the late 1860s that “a general strike” will produce “a great cataclysm, which will regenerate society.” (*The Philosophical Philosophy of Bakunin*, 383) Ashbaugh likewise states that the Chicago anarchists argued that the “radical unions which opposed wage labor were to be the building blocks of the future social order” (45) yet fails to mention that Bakunin had argued that the “organisation of trade sections, their federation in the International, and their representation by the Chambers of Labour... bear in themselves the living germs of *the new social order*, which is to replace the bourgeois world. They are creating not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself.” (quoted by Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, 50)

This focus of economic struggle and union organisation was combined with a rejection of the “political action” urged by Marx, namely socialists standing in elections. Bakunin argued, rightly as history has shown, that the “inevitable result” of such a strategy “will be that workers’ deputies, transferred to a purely bourgeois environment, and into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois political ideas ... will become middle class in their outlook, perhaps even more so than the bourgeois themselves.” (*The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, 216)

If quoting Bakunin is not sufficient, perhaps a few words by Marx and Engels will help convince any Marxists still harbouring doubts about the facts of the matter. Marx attacked Bakunin for arguing that “working classes must not occupy itself with *politics*. They must only organise themselves by trades-unions” and would “supplant the place of all existing states” by the International. (*Collected Works* 43: 490) Engels dismissed the general strike as “the lever employed by which the social revolution is started” in the “Bakuninist programme” while suggesting they admitted “this required a well-formed organisation of the working class.” (*Collected Works* 23: 584–5) Thus Marx and Engels, if not many of his followers, recognised the key aspects of Bakunin’s anarchism – aspects which Ashbaugh seems to think of as syndicalist rather than anarchist.

This shows the weakness of Ashbaugh’s claim that “Albert Parsons made it clear that he considered the I.W.P.A a Marxist, not a Bakuninist organisation.” (58) We need only remember that quoting can be selective and that Parsons was a self-proclaimed anarchist whose book on anarchism (*Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Scientific Basis*) included the writings of such well known libertarians as Peter Kropotkin, Elisée Reclus, Dyer Lum and C.L. James. Moreover, Ashbaugh’s

summation that “Chicago leaders, as early as 1883, were syndicalists” because “they had given up political work for work in the unions which they believed would provide the social organisation of the future” (45) refutes her own claims as these positions on “political action” and unions are identical to Bakunin’s:

“Toilers count no longer on anyone but yourselves. Do not demoralise and paralyse your growing strength by being duped into alliances with bourgeois Radicalism... Abstain from all participation in bourgeois Radicalism and organise outside of it the forces of the proletariat. The bases of this organization... are the workshops and the federation of workshops... instruments of struggle against the bourgeoisie, and their federation, not only national, but international... when the hour of revolution sounds, you will proclaim the liquidation of the State and of bourgeois society, anarchy, that is to say the true, frank people’s revolution.” (quoted by K.J. Kenafick, *Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx*, pp. 120–1)

As such, there were good reasons for the Chicago anarchists to take that name, for their Marxist opponents to use it to describe them and for Lucy Parsons to call herself one for decades. So while Ashbaugh states that the I.W.W. “offered what Lucy Parsons wanted: a militant working class organisation which fought at the economic level with strikes and direct action rather than engaging in political campaigns” (218) Parsons’ comrade Max Baginski was correct to point out that it was Bakunin’s “militant spirit that breathes now in the best expressions of the Syndicalist and I.W.W. movements” and these expressed “a strong world wide revival of the ideas for which Bakunin laboured throughout his life.” (*Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman’s Mother Earth*, Peter Glassgold (ed.), 71)

So claims that Lucy Parsons’ “response was syndicalist” when she argued that “a trades union and the Knights of Labor are practical illustrations of the feasibility of Anarchism” (173) simply show an ignorance of anarchist theory. Parsons was simply expressing the basic ideas of revolutionary anarchism. This can be seen when Peter Kropotkin expressed the exact same idea at a commemoration meeting for the Chicago anarchists:

“No one can underrate the importance of this labour movement for the coming revolution. It will be those agglomerations of wealth producers which will have to re-organise production on new social bases. They will have to organise the life of the nation and the use which it will make of the hitherto accumulated riches and means of production. They – the labourers, grouped together – not the politicians.” (“Commemoration of the Chicago Martyrs”, *Freedom*, December 1892)

Thus Kropotkin shared the same “vision of a future society” as Parsons and so Ashbaugh was wrong to suggest that Parsons “chose to call this system ‘no government,’ but in reality, she advocated a syndicalist theory of society. She advocated workers’ ownership and control over the means of production and distribution through their unions.” (174) As if anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin did not! Similarly, they opposed, like Parsons, those who “advocated state control of the means of production and distribution” and “working through the electoral process to achieve state power.” (174) As well as the same goal, Kropotkin shared the same means as Parsons and Bakunin. While Caroline Cahm’s excellent *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary*

Anarchism 1872–1886 is the best work on Kropotkin's ideas on the labour movement, the Russian revolutionary ably summarised his position thusly in 1910:

“the anarchists ... do not seek to constitute, and invite the working men not to constitute, political parties in the parliaments. Accordingly, since the foundation of the International Working Men's Association in 1864–1866, they have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation.” (*Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 287)

Unsurprisingly Kropotkin expressed his support for the Chicago anarchists' activities many times: “Were not our Chicago Comrades right in despising politics, and saying the struggle against robbery must be carried on in the workshop and the street, by deeds not words?” (“The Chicago Anniversary”, *Freedom*, December 1891) Years later, he wrote in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of “the execution of five Chicago anarchists in 1887” and considered “Spies, Parsons and their followers in the United States” as advocates of “anarchist-communist ideas.” (*Anarchism*, 295, 297) Given that the focus of the conflict between Bakunin and Marx in the First International was precisely on “political action” by parties versus economic struggle by unions, it is clear that Parsons, like the other Chicago Anarchists, rejected the ideas of the latter in favour of those of the former.

Significantly, when Lucy Parsons visited London in 1888 she did not visit Engels but Kropotkin (Engels never wrote more than a few words, publicly or privately, about the Haymarket events which should give those seeking to turn the Martyrs into Marxists pause for thought). Kropotkin also spoke at a meeting organised by anarchists in her honour, talking of how the Martyrs “had joined the Anarchist movement, they gave themselves to it, not by halves, but entirely, body and heart together” and how they had died “loudly proclaiming their Anarchist principles before the judges.” (“Before the Storm”, *Freedom*, December 1888) How did Ashbaugh describe this event? Showing her complete ignorance of Kropotkin's ideas, she writes of how Parsons “shared the platform” with “the world famous geographer and gentle anarchist theoretician of non-violence!” (160) Similarly, she proudly recounted how Parsons was asked to write on the IWW and the American union movement for “the French paper *Les Temps Nouveau*” (221) yet somehow failed to mention this was France's leading communist-anarchist journal and intimately associated with Kropotkin!

Yet more evidence on Parsons being an anarchist can be seen when she reprints the manifesto issued at the I.W.P.A.'s Pittsburgh Congress of 1883 which urged the “[d]estruction of the existing class rule, by all means, i.e. by energetic, relentless, revolutionary and international action,” a “free society based upon co-operative organisation of production” with “all public affairs” regulated “by free contracts between autonomous (independent) communes and associations, resting on a federalistic basis.” (44) While much of this is shared by anarchists and Marxists, the last reflects the ideas of Bakunin and Kropotkin and not Marx. As Bakunin stressed, a “truly popular organisation begins... from below” and so “federalism becomes a political institution of Socialism, the free and spontaneous organisation of popular life.” Thus anarchism “is federalistic in character.” (*The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, 273–4, 272) If in doubt, here is Emma Goldman arguing that anarchy is “a society based on voluntary co-operation of productive groups, communities and societies loosely federated together, eventually developing into a free communism, actuated by a solidarity of interests.” (*Red Emma Speaks*, 50)

So we are left with one of two positions: either Lucy Parsons, the Chicago Martyrs and Peter Kropotkin were wrong about anarchism or Ashbaugh is. The evidence (and plain commonsense!) is clear that it is Ashbaugh who is wrong rather than world famous anarchists like Lucy Parsons or Peter Kropotkin.

Thus it is uncontroversial to note that the Chicago Martyrs were also syndicalists. This is because, being revolutionary anarchists, they like Bakunin and Kropotkin advocated revolutionary unionism as a strategy to create an anarchist (libertarian socialist) society. This can be seen by Goldman noting that “in this country five men had to pay with their lives because they advocated Syndicalist methods as the most effective in the struggle of labor against capital.” (*Red Emma Speaks*, 87) Where Ashbaugh goes wrong is her assumption that anarchism and syndicalism are mutually exclusive rather than the latter being a longstanding strategy of the former.

And it must be noted that Ashbaugh’s attempts to bolster her case by stating that “Lucy did not separate ‘anarchist’ from socialist thinkers” (58) falls for much the same reason. Familiarity with anarchist thinkers would show that “Kropotkin, Bakunin, Proudhon” (58) all considered themselves socialists – perhaps we can add *them* to the long list of “alleged ‘anarchists’ [who] also called themselves ‘socialists’” (157) – along with the “Chicago ‘anarchists’”! Similarly, their respect for Marx’s analysis of capitalism hardly automatically excludes them from anarchism – if it did then Bakunin would join them given his praise for Marx’s *Capital* and other contributions to socialist thought.

Similar comments can be made against the book’s claims on Emma Goldman. It is clear that Ashbaugh assumes that the reader is not familiar with her ideas and works, otherwise how do you explain the continued distortions inflicted upon her? She proclaims that “Goldman became interested in the freedom of the individual” while “Parsons remained committed to the freedom of the working class from capitalism” (200) and “believed that women would be emancipated when wage slavery in the factories, fields, and mines of capitalism had ended.” (202) Their differences “were the result of different backgrounds and social milieus” (203)

Yet reading Goldman shows that she placed her feminism within a class context and recognised the need to end capitalism to ensure genuine liberty and equality. This can be seen when she argued for “a complete transvaluation of all accepted values – especially the moral ones – coupled with the abolition of industrial slavery.” Thus women’s suffrage was of no use “to the mass of women without property, the thousands of wage workers, who live from hand to mouth.” She rightly asked: “As to the great mass of working girls and women, how much independence is gained if the narrowness and lack of freedom of the home is exchanged for the narrowness and lack of freedom of the factory, sweat-shop, department store, of office?” (*Anarchism and Other Essays*, 194, 201, 216)

So much for Goldman’s feminism becoming “separate from its working class origins” and taking on “an abstract character of freedom for women in all things, in all times, and in all places”! (202)

As for the claim that there “was a major difference between Emma Goldman and Lucy Parsons on the basic question of class consciousness” (181) it is significant that Ashbaugh fails to explore Goldman’s advocacy of syndicalism. She is aware of it, mentioning (in passing) that Goldman’s lectures included “Syndicalism, the Strongest Weapon of the Working Class, a Discussion of Sabotage, Direct Action and the General Strike.” (233) This lecture was reprinted as a pamphlet, with Goldman stating that in the First International “Bakunin and the Latin workers” forged ahead “along industrial and Syndicalist lines” and that syndicalism “is, in essence, the economic expres-

sion of Anarchism” and that “accounts for the presence of so many Anarchists in the Syndicalist movement. Like Anarchism, Syndicalism prepares the workers along direct economic lines, as conscious factors in the great struggles of to-day, as well as conscious factors in the task of reconstructing society.” (*Red Emma Speaks*, 89, 91, 90)

This was not the only place Goldman expressed syndicalist ideas, arguing that anarchism “stands for direct action” and that “[t]rade unionism, the economic arena of the modern gladiator, owes its existence to direct action.” She noted approvingly how internationally “direct, revolutionary economic action has become so strong a force in the battle for industrial liberty as to make the world realise the tremendous importance of labour’s power. The General Strike [is] the supreme expression of the economic consciousness of the workers ... Today every great strike, in order to win, must realise the importance of the solidaric general protest.” (*Anarchism and Other Essays*, 65–6)

Thus, just like Parsons, Goldman argued that it was the “war of classes that we must concentrate upon” and those “who appreciate the urgent need of co-operating in great struggles ... must organise the preparedness of the masses for the overthrow of both capitalism and the state” as this “alone leads to revolution at the bottom” which “alone leads to economic and social freedom, and does away with all wars, all crimes, and all injustice.” She was well aware of the need for the “liberation of the human body from the domination of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government.” Wealth “means power; the power to subdue, to crush, to exploit, the power to enslave, to outrage, to degrade” and property was “not only a hindrance to human well-being, but an obstacle, a deadly barrier, to all progress.” A key problem of modern society was that “man must sell his labour” and so “his inclination and judgement are subordinated to the will of a master.” Anarchism, she stressed, was the “the only philosophy that can and will do away with this humiliating and degrading situation... There can be no freedom in the large sense of the word... so long as mercenary and commercial considerations play an important part in the determination of personal conduct.” (*Red Emma Speaks*, 355–6, 73, 66, 50)

So in terms of all the key issues – syndicalism, direct action, general strike, class struggle – Goldman and Parsons *were in agreement*. This can be seen from the awkward fact that Parsons sold “pamphlets by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, the majority of Kropotkin’s works” (227) Likewise after economic crisis in 1907–08 and 1914–15, Parsons “now concentrated her work in unemployment organising” (232) as did Alexander Berkman.

Of course there are personal conflicts at work here which can distort the level of agreement between individuals and groups (see the conflicts between Leninist Parties, as an obvious example). Parsons and Goldman did not seem to get on so assuming, as Ashbaugh does, that the former is completely objective on the latter and her ideas is problematic, to say the least. If it is a case that Parsons “wanted to remain the unquestioned leader of the anarchist movement, but the leadership changed and with it the direction of the movement” (206) then her comments against Goldman should be questioned, not accepted at face value. This becomes petty in the extreme at time, as can be seen when Ashbaugh quotes Parsons’ thoughts on Goldman’s *Living My Life* as a flawed book “beginning and ending with Emma, Emma” (254) – as if an autobiography could be anything else!

So Ashbaugh’s book is not a serious critique of Goldman’s ideas by any means. Its attempts to contrast the “free love” individualistic anarchists with Parsons no-nonsense syndicalism fails if you have even a basic awareness of Goldman’s politics. Luckily, Ashbaugh could rest easy as few Marxists know much about Goldman’s ideas – as can be seen, for example, by *International*

Socialist Organisation (ISO) member Lance Selfa's error-ridden article "Emma Goldman: A life of controversy" (*International Socialist Review*, no. 34, March-April 2004) which also fails to mention her syndicalism.

As such, claims that Parsons' paper the *Liberator's* "message was of strikes and industrial conflict, orientated to the class struggle" while *Mother Earth* "dealt with all facets of life and social revolution – sex, women's emancipation, literature, art, theatre" and found its "readership in the avant garde of the literary and artistic world" (221) is simply inaccurate. In reality, *Mother Earth* covered the class struggle in articles like Max Baginski's "Aim and Tactics of the Trade Union Movement" and Voltairine de Cleyre's "A Study of the General Strike in Philadelphia" (see *Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth*, Peter Glassgold (ed.)) It also reprinted "The Basis of Trade Unionism" by leading French syndicalist Emile Pouget.

To state that the success of *Mother Earth* "reflected the dissociation of anarchism from strictly class struggle movements" (225) is simply nonsense. How could it be when articles like de Cleyre's argued that "the weapon of the future will be the general strike" and is it not clear that "it must be the strike which will *stay in* the factory, not *go out*?" (*Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth*, Peter Glassgold (ed.), 311) were printed?

At best it could be argued that by not being totally focused on unions and labour struggles *Mother Earth* made a mistake, but that would be wrong. Indeed, few Leninist newspapers today would be so narrowly focused (as can be seen by the ISO's own journal). So if Parsons were "outraged that an anarchist paper would deal with such questions" like free love "for her advancing the working class revolution came first at any cost" (203) then this showed a weakness in her politics rather than a flaw in the rest of the American anarchist movement.

Simply put, if it is a case that "Lucy did not share Emma's ideological position on sexual freedom, and she had never considered women's emancipation as important as class struggle" (255) then Goldman was right – the struggle against patriarchy is as important as the struggle against capitalism and the state. This applies to other forms of social oppression like racism and homophobia as well. We are well aware that a theoretical commitment to social equality by socialist organisations need not be reflected in practice while arguing that everything will be fine after the revolution will ensure that social hierarchies like sexism, racism and homophobia will *never* be addressed.

This does not mean, of course, that social hierarchies can be ended without ending capitalism and the state. As can be seen, Goldman was well aware of the limitations of women's liberation within capitalism – being free to become a wage slave is not much of a step-up from being a slave to a husband. Similarly, all having the chance to be a boss may be a form of equality but it is a limited one. True social equality means no bosses.

As such, there is a kernel of truth in Parsons' position – a kernel which Goldman shared. However, Parsons' conclusions were flawed and given this, it is little wonder Ashbaugh distorts Goldman's ideas and the wider anarchist movement's position!

There is, however, another issue upon which Parsons and Goldman took radically differing positions, namely the Russian Revolution. Ashbaugh notes how Parsons "took a hard Communist Party line against Goldman's and Berkman's perceptions of Soviet Russia" (255) and ignored the persecution of anarchists and the destruction of the Kronstadt revolt. She presents a wonderfully self-contradictory discussion of Parsons' position on the Soviet regime, that she thought the "workers had seized power in Russia" (255) before asserting that she "did not ask whether there was freedom or workers' democracy under the new regime." (255–6) That raises the question

of how the workers could have “seized power” without there being any “freedom or workers’ democracy”? Goldman and Berkman were actually in Russia and saw that there was neither freedom nor democracy for the working class, that it was a party dictatorship (as happily admitted by such leading Bolsheviks as Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev) and drew the obvious conclusions. As Goldman summarised:

“There is another objection to my criticism on the part of the Communists. Russia is on strike, they say, and it is unethical for a revolutionist to side against the workers when they are striking against their masters. That is pure demagoguery practised by the Bolsheviks to silence criticism.

“It is not true that the Russian people are on strike. On the contrary, the truth of the matter is that the Russian people have been *locked out* and that the Bolshevik State – even as the bourgeois industrial master – uses the sword and the gun to keep the people out. In the case of the Bolsheviks this tyranny is masked by a world-stirring slogan: thus they have succeeded in blinding the masses. Just because I am a revolutionist I refuse to side with the master class, which in Russia is called the Communist Party.” (*My Disillusionment in Russia*, xlix)

Clearly it is a travesty to proclaim that “[m]any ‘anarchists’ who had been orientated to the class struggle came into Communist Party circles. Those with individualistic and libertarian views like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, who became disillusioned with Soviet Russia, did not.” (250) Goldman and Berkman opposed Soviet Russia precisely *because* they were “orientated to the class struggle” and sided with the Russian workers and peasants against their new rulers. Moreover, many anarcho-syndicalists (“anarchists” like Rudolf Rocker and Armando Borghi) saw through (to use Berkman’s title) *The Bolshevik Myth*.

In short, if Parsons “analysed society in terms of class struggle” (256) then she should have done so with regards the Bolshevik regime and, like Goldman and Berkman, have recognised that there was a new ruling class in Russia, the party and state bureaucracies and, like them, supported the strikes, protests and uprisings of the workers against their new masters. Like Goldman she should have also argued that in “the economic field” social transformation “must be in the hands of the industrial masses” as the “industrial power of the masses, expressed through their libertarian associations – Anarcho-syndicalism – is alone able to organise successfully the economic life and carry on production.” (*My Disillusionment in Russia*, 253)

Suffice to say, it is Goldman and Berkman who were proved right by history not Parsons. The real question is why Parsons sided with the Bolsheviks? Sadly, Ashbaugh does not present much explanation for this (presumably because she thought Parsons was right).

And talking of the Communists, Ashbaugh claims that Parsons “join[ed] the Communist Party in 1939.” (261) Yet there is good reason to question this claim. Significantly, the Communist Party did not announce her membership in its press nor did its obituary make the claim that she had been a member. As such, it is hard not to conclude that there is a reason why Ashbaugh’s comment had no supporting evidence, namely that there is none and Parsons did *not* join the Communist Party at any time.

Moreover, Ashbaugh did not ponder the illogical nature of her assertion. She notes that left-wingers in 1919 “found themselves expelled from the Socialist Party” and joining the Communist

Parties “was the only route left open to them.” (247) However, Parsons did not join then. Why wait 20 years to join the Stalinist Communist Party during its Popular Front phase? That goes against the class struggle nature of Parsons’ politics which Ashbaugh is so keen to praise everywhere else in her book. And why do neo-Trotskyists like the ISO point to this apparent support for Stalinists as a good thing? It seems strange, for example, to applaud how syndicalist William Z Foster became a Leninist and yet remain silent on how he became a Stalinist.

As well as a blindness to the Soviet Regime, Ashbaugh has a rosy view of Social Democracy. She does not seem that keen to learn the lessons of history. Yes, the Socialist Party of America may have become “a mass organisation rather than a small socialist sect” (209) but it became reformist, expelling the likes of Big Bill Haywood as part of a “break” with the IWW. (229) Parsons was right to argue that workers had “to strike and remain in and take possession of the necessary property of production” (218) and to mock those who believed in political action favoured by Marx and his followers like the Socialist Party: “Do you think the capitalists will allow you to vote away their property? You may, but I do not believe it... It means a revolution...” (218)

It is also important to stress that it is pure assumption for Ashbaugh to proclaim that “the I.W.W. and the Socialist Party never fully cooperated with each other, a fact which limited both.” (218) There is little basis for such assertions and much evidence against it – look at the history of Social Democracy and contrast it with that of syndicalism. Many radicals embraced the latter precisely because of the reformism and bureaucracy of the latter and its tame unions. In other words, Bakunin was proven right.

So, in conclusion, while some anarchists will be sympathetic to comments about “restoring the working class movement called anarchism to the dimensions of 1886” and how Parsons “complained that anarchism had moved too far from the working class” (226), it is not the case that anarchism is somehow fundamentally different from syndicalism. As such, it simply shows an ignorance of anarchism to argue, as Ashbaugh does, that Parsons “believed her husband had died for anarchism, and she was prepared to defend and die for anarchism. Although her beliefs were syndicalist rather than anarchist, she tried to cling to the ‘anarchist’ movement as it changed shape.” (201) Revolutionary anarchism has advocated syndicalism since Bakunin.

Moreover, if it is the case that “[w]hile the anarchist movement became more and more involved with women’s emancipation, sexual freedom, and individual liberties, Lucy Parsons became involved in the Social Democracy” (200) then this is a mark against her (and Social Democracy!) rather than anarchism. And if Parsons “was a member of this new party” (209) (the Socialist Party) then it was for a very short time and she quickly returned to anarchist ideas on direct action and revolutionary unionism. As such, it is untenable to suggest, as Ashbaugh does, that Goldman and Berkman were at the forefront of removing the class struggle focus of anarchism. Looking at their works it is clear that they shared the same politics as Parsons – communist-anarchism.

This is a seriously flawed book. Lucy Parsons, for all her faults and mistakes, deserves better than this. Ashbaugh’s understanding of anarchism is non-existent yet she inflicted her ignorance onto the world. This has consequences as her book has been used by a member of the ISO in America as the basis of a recent article and pamphlet on Parsons which was obviously an attack on anarchism to try and draw activists away from it into Leninism (this plagiarised work embellished her numerous inaccuracies, including proclaiming Kropotkin a pacifist!). That this book is reprinted by a press associated with that sect and called Haymarket Books besmirches her and her husband twice fold!

So please do *not* buy this book. If you are interested in Lucy Parson then there is an excellent an anthology of her writings edited by Gale Ahrens called *Freedom, Equality & Solidarity: Writings & Speeches, 1878–1937* (Charles H. Kerr, 2003). Allowing Parsons voice to be heard without commentary (although it does have an useful Introduction by Ahrens and Afterword by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz), it is a more reliable introduction to her life and ideas.

Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary

Carolyn Ashbaugh

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