Anarchism, May Day and Colonialism

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2026

May Day, the international Labour Day, traditionally honours and commemorates the Chicago Haymarket anarchists who were martyred by the State of Illinois in 1887 because of their participation in the general struggle for the eight-hour work day as well as their own particular struggle for communist anarchism.

Unbeknownst to many, including many of today's anarchists, May Day, through the Haymarket martyrs, also has a connection to Indigenous resistance. As a Métis-Cree anti-authoritarian, or in other words, an ᐅᑑᐲᒥᓯᐏ (otipêmisiw) person, this is of particular interest to me, because that connection happens to be to the Métis resistance of 1885 in what's now the province of Saskatchewan, where part of my family is from.

The Chicago martyrs, a couple of years before they were tried and executed for the thought-crime of being anarchists and the practical crime of being labour organizers, had themselves honoured other martyred social rebels, including Louis Riel, a prominent leader of the Métis people (our territory being on both sides of the Canadian-American border.)

Riel, in 1885, was illegally executed by the Canadian state for treason, despite the fact that he was by then an American citizen, had been living in Montana, and had been born in Winnipeg in 1844, more than two and a half decades before Canada's military invasion of the region in 1870.

The Chicago anarchists, in November of 1885, held a memorial event that paid "homage to the martyred heroes to human liberty, Julius Lieske [a German anarchist] and Louis Riel," as reported by Albert Parson's anarchist journal, The Alarm.

The soon-to-be martyred anarchists Albert Parsons and August Spies spoke on the occasion, as did their soon-to-be co-accused Samuel Fielden, who compared Louis Riel to the infamous American abolitionist John Brown. "There is need of such rebels today," proclaimed Fielden.

The Alarm paraphrased Parsons and other speakers as having said that "in the fate of these martyrs we could all read our own doom at the hands of those who exploit and enslave their fellow men." In hindsight, this turned out to be a sadly accurate case of foresight on their part.

The Chicago anarchists even had a direct connection to the Métis uprising through Honoré Jaxon, who had been born to an Euro-Canadian family but married into the Métis community in what's now Saskatchewan and was invited by the Métis to live with them and take part in the resistance in a secretarial capacity. After the resistance was crushed, Jaxon fled an insane asylum, crossed the border and eventually made his way to Chicago, where he joined the workers' movement.

The Alarm had already published articles on the resistance as it was happening, earlier in 1885. The Chicago anarchists were unambiguous well-wishers for the Métis side of the fight. "They are struggling to retain their homes of which the statute laws and chicanery of modern capitalism seeks to dispossess them," proclaimed The Alarm, "may their trusted rifles and steady aim make the robbers bite the dust."

The year prior to this, The Alarm had already made clear its editorial stance on colonialism and Indigenous autonomy. "Left to themselves, left to the exercise of free will and personal liberty — anarchy — the red man would be alive and prospering, dwelling in peace and fellowship with his Caucasian brothers," an article read.

Notwithstanding their deployment of the 'vanishing Indian' trope, the stance of the Chicago anarchists on Indigenous autonomy was beyond quibbling. For them, it was only right that Native peoples keep their land and freedom. The invading capitalist society of private property was a scourge, not just to each individual American worker, but also to Indigenous communities.

It did not matter to the Chicago anarchists whether the Métis were anarchists or not, what mattered was that they were resisting encroachment upon their land. The Haymarket martyrs and their comrades did not say that the Métis and Canada were equally bad or that anarchists shouldn't take sides in any war besides the class war.

Despite being proto-anarcho-syndicalists, the Chicago anarchists didn't reject the Métis fight for being a national liberation struggle rather than a workers' struggle. They recognized, on some level, that national liberation struggles are part of the overall class war. Besides being much more deeply involved in workers' struggles than most of today's anarchists, the Haymarket martyrs and their comrades were also, in this instance, less class reductionist.

Forward By Way of Glancing Backward

Attention, for better or worse, to Indigenous peoples and colonialism was not the domain of the Illinois anarchists alone. Honoré Jaxon, before arriving in Chicago, had met the anarchist Charles Leigh James in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. It was James, in fact, who arranged Jaxon's subsequent contact with Parsons in Chicago.

In Eau Claire, James discussed Indigenous resistance with Jaxon, drawing upon "his military reading for a remarkably farsighted discussion of the tactics which, in case of a renewal of the Metis struggle, might profitably be employed by a people weak in numbers, but possessing the facility of movement developed by the nomadic life," according to Jaxon's retelling.

James, in his 1886 pamphlet, Anarchy: A Tract for the Times, wrote that "governments are not of universal institution," adding that "many primitive nations are without them."

"One of these is the Esquimaux," said James, "but there are also numerous others." Despite his use of an inappropriate exonym for the Inuit and Iñupiat, James also claimed that they were more intelligent and civilized than other Native peoples that do have governments.

However, he went on to assert, both sweepingly and wrongly, that "savages" are "very warlike, often living on human flesh, by the slave trade, or by pillage," and that Natives are further back in the timeline of the "progress of civilization."

Still, James also held few illusions about the colonial history of the American state. He suggested that his readers should follow up by reading books and articles by others that show that "our government, like others, sprang from war and oppression; that it was organized to drive out the Indians, to enslave the negroes, and to prevent others from sharing the spoil; that for a hundred years our flag enjoyed the honor of being the only one which fostered the growth and extension of slavery; and that since this accursed evil was abolished (because it did not suit

northern capitalists so well as tenant farming) the same flag has the proud exception of being the only one under which landlordism is increasing."

One of the books he suggested was A Century of Dishonor, written by the non-anarchist Helen Hunt Jackson and published in 1881.

A Century of Dishonor was also later referenced and quoted by Chicago anarchist Emily G. Taylor in 1901, in an article she wrote for the anarchist periodical Discontent, which was based out of the distant Home Colony in the State of Washington. Taylor, in her own words, wrote that "it has been the claim of the Indian always that falsehood, perfidy and dishonesty characterize all transactions of the United States government with them."

However, Taylor also saw fit, in that same article, to laud the slave-owning colonial official Thomas Jefferson, and to refer to her own ideological kin as "Jeffersonian anarchists." Despite her avowed sympathy for Indigenous peoples and attention to American colonial atrocities, Taylor was still either unaware of or unconcerned with Jefferson's explicit call, in his letters, for genocide against Indigenous peoples. Taylor somehow also didn't see any contradiction in a brand of anarchism in part derived from a head of state who owned humans as property and very publicly slandered slaves' attempts to free themselves.

Yet, Parsons, James and Taylor's folly in these instances only scratches the surface of the flip side to American anarchist criticism of colonialism, American anarchist contempt toward Indigenous peoples, as displayed, for example, by other writers associated with Chicago and the far-flung western settler colony called Home, which had been founded by non-native anarchists under the laws of the State of Washington.

There's No Place Like Home On Native Land

Jay Fox was an anarchist who in his youth had witnessed the 1886 Chicago Haymarket bombing for which the martyrs were framed, before he went on to take an active part in the colonization of the lands of Lushootseed-speaking communities way out west. In a 1914 issue of the Tacoma, Washington, anarchist journal, Why?, Fox wrote a vile racist screed titled Civilized or Savage? The State, as a form, according to Fox, was founded on "barbaric, savage instinct."

"War is the delight of the savage, often his only means of subsistence," he continued, as only a true American ignoramus and chauvinist could. The fact that Fox went on to abandon anarchism for statist socialism serves as little solace.

In an issue of the Home colony's periodical, Discontent, from back in the year 1900, anarchist Henry Addis of Portland, Oregon, put his town's present-day clueless anarchist hipsters to shame in an article titled Savagery and Anarchy. Worried that non-anarchists thought that anarchists wanted "to live like the Indians" and "go back to savagery," Addis was only too happy to reassure his readers that this was not in fact the case. Conceding that some anarchists had pointed to the greater happiness and freedom found among Indigenous peoples, he countered by stating that whatever the truth behind those claims, he did not know of anyone who "really desires to take up the savage mode of living or see a general return to savagery."

Addis even claimed, most ridiculously of all, that "instead of a race of savages, we would have in Anarchy a race of art lovers and art producers," as if Natives didn't have their own artistic and cultural practices, that they in reality valued more highly than settlers did.

"In Anarchy we will enjoy greater liberty, or at least greater leisure, than is possible in savagery because production will be so much greater," Addis adjoined, failing to consider that greater production could lead to greater drudgery, not to mention the destruction of the biosphere that we're experiencing today.

In that very same issue of Discontent, Chicago anarchist Lizzie Swank Holmes, who had at one time been Albert Parsons' assistant editor on The Alarm, made a spurious claim even worse than Addis had when she purported that "the savages had no more idea of equal liberty, and the endeavor to maintain it, than have the government lovers of today."

If there were other anarchists associated with the Home Colony, such as James F. Morton Jr., who spoke out against racism in general, or Andrew Klemenčič, who wrote back Home in support, in some sense, of Native Hawaiian (Kānaka Maoli) autonomy, there were still those spewing anti-native sentiments, rendering inconsistent Home's overall stance on racism and colonialism. Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising given Home's very existence as a project of colonization and a corporation under the laws of the State of Washington, with persons in the colony living in an "individualistic" and not "communistic" form, as was admitted in the pages of Home's own periodicals.

The anarchist settler colonists of Home seemed to have little to no consciousness of their role as home invaders rather than mere home builders. They did at times write about Indigenous peoples in other places but tellingly they avoided writing about the very Native communities on whose land they lived.

Liberty Enlightened By the New World

Some of the most prominent anarchists of the Old World, even one who came to live for a time in America, also displayed contradictory and racist thinking on colonialism and Indigenous peoples.

English proto-anarchist William Godwin wrote in 1793 that "little good can be expected from any species of anarchy that should subsist, for instance, among American savages." He did not outright deny that Indigenous peoples in North America could be living in freer and more egalitarian societies, only that this was not the kind of anarchy he wanted.

French proto-anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in 1849 wrote that "primitive men" had such "savage minds" that the only sanctions they could understand were those of "religion by its promises and its threats" and "the State by its tribunals and its armies."

"Anarchy is the condition of existence of adult society, as hierarchy is the condition of primitive society,' Proudhon claimed, adding that "there is a continual progress in human society from hierarchy to anarchy." Indigenous peoples were backwards and were bound to be left behind, according to the notably determinist Proudhon, who also happened to be a misogynist as well as a racist.

A critic of Proudhon's misogyny, fellow French proto-anarchist Joseph Déjacque, once he was exiled in the United States, wrote and published articles against slavery and colonization in his periodical, Le Libertaire, but at the same time, he maintained a certain European chauvinism and perspective of linear Western progress.

"A socialist era" would have won the Natives over to "agricultural and industrial production; it would have brought them in, by the attraction of free and fruitful labour, to universal human solidarity," Déjacque claimed in an article in 1860.

Nonetheless, Déjacque in his article was also clear that it was "dignified and sensible" for the War Chief Winnemucca to demand "a place in the sun" for his people, the Northern Paiute (whose territory is occupied by the states of Oregon, Idaho, Nevada and California.) Déjacque didn't condemn Indigenous peoples' national liberation struggle, their fight for self-determination, nor did he crudely conflate that struggle with nationalism (an ideology of superiority, not liberation). Just the opposite.

Also in 1860, Déjacque published an article by F. Girard on the brutality of colonialism. Girard noted that "wherever civilization has spread across the globe, it has always been with the cross or the Bible in one hand and the sabre or the rifle in the other, treading in blood and strewing with corpses the road along which it has passed."

This was seven years before the statist socialist Karl Marx, in his magnum opus, Capital, would go on to describe colonialism and original accumulation in terms of capital coming into the world "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt."

In 1869, Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, Karl Marx's nemesis, despite having previously declared his support for self-determination for all nations, also called the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic "wretched" and asked "what could be more miserable and less human" than an Arctic Native person's existence.

The Swiss anarchist periodical, Le Révolté, in 1884 published an article titled Nos Colonisations, in which it was proclaimed that "no people has the right to oppress another; let each one arrange his home as he sees fit." However, the article also wrongly asserted that "the worker has nothing to gain from these so-called conquests of civilization," eclipsing some very important things European workers did in fact have to gain from colonizing other countries, namely, cheaper (if not free) land, a new life and a new identity of superiority over the Natives and the land itself.

In 1886, the Paris Communard turned anarchist Louise Michel published her Mémoires, in which she remarked on her forced exile on the island of Kanaky and her support for the Indigenous resistance that erupted during her stay there.

"Well, yes, those who accused me, at the time of the revolt, of wishing for them [the Kanaks] the conquest of their freedom, were right," Michel admitted before proclaiming, "let's end the superiority that only manifests itself in destruction!"

Yet, Michel, like Déjacque, maintained a progressivist outlook, as well as a pessimistic view regarding the Kanaks ability to beat the French and maintain Kanak culture without mixing it with that of the French. She failed to consider that betterment could be the enemy of good and that Native peoples would be more persistent than she'd pondered.

Primary Contradiction

Quintessentially American anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre, in her 1901 Haymarket memorial oration delivered in Chicago, bravely admitted that at the time of the historic Haymarket events, she had thought the anarchists were guilty and believed that they should be hanged. Over time, she had learned from her mistake and come to embrace their struggle.

In a 1912 article, De Cleyre also displayed this same admirable humility when describing her work in Chicago, alongside the old rebel Honoré Jaxon, to drum up support for the Mexican Revolution, including its anarchist protagonists (some of whom were also Indigenous). The American anarchist movement, in general, was not doing enough for the Revolution, and she included herself among the guilty. "I who write have been as much to blame as any," she offered, "let me shake off my blame by stirring you to awaken now."

Unfortunately, De Cleyre was never able to come to the point of recognizing her own mistakes when it came to her various writings, across her lifetime, that touched upon colonialism and white supremacy. Her contradictory stances are particularly extreme in this case, and due to that, especially instructive. As we've seen with the other anarchists mentioned so far, simply being aware of colonialism, or even taking a stand against it, does not preclude the non-native anarchist from also harbouring anti-native views. De Cleyre showed just how far this can go, in

both directions at once. Anarchist universalism has never been a readymade or surefire solution to colonial particularity, whether in North America or in Palestine (see Emma Goldman and Joseph Cohen's disregard for British imperialism there).

When it came to North American history, De Cleyre lamented the brutality of the colonizers and the dispossession of Native peoples. At various points, she also denounced the bloody American occupation of the Philippines. As an outspoken admirer of Charles Leigh James, she likely read his 1886 tract on anarchy, with its admonition of American colonialism and suggestion to his readers to continue with self-directed study in that area.

In her 1897 column in the British anarchist journal Freedom, De Cleyre discussed the Klondike gold rush in northern Canada and criticized the "settling up" policy of the Hudson's Bay Company, the expulsion of the Native hunter from his land, the partitioning of that land and the installation of capitalist property and government.

In her lecture titled Anarchism, published as an article in the Chicago journal Free Society in 1901, she made an important distinction between Europe and America. "There was no gradual change from the mode of life of the native people to our own; there was a wiping out and a complete transplantation of the latest form of European civilization," she explained, unabashedly.

In 1899, De Cleyre translated French anarchist Jean Grave's book, Moribund Society and Anarchy, including its chapter dedicated to criticizing colonization.

In her 1908 text, Anarchism and American Traditions, De Cleyre returned to an old theme, America's Founding Fathers, heaping praise on both the Thomases, Jefferson and Paine. Like Emily G. Taylor before her, nowhere in the article does she mention that Jefferson was a slave master who had openly fretted over slave rebellions, or that he was an advocate, in his letters, of ethnic cleansing against Indigenous peoples.

Nowhere did Voltairine de Cleyre mention the counter-revolutionary grievances of the Declaration of Independence, the complaints against Britain for restricting the theft of Native lands and for supposedly inciting Black and Native people to rebellion (as if the Patriots hadn't already done the incitement). Nor did she mention the ethnic cleansing campaigns that American Patriots carried out against Haudenosaunee, Lenape and Cherokee peoples during the Revolutionary War. She even claimed the very opposite of the truth, that "the spirit of liberty was nurtured by colonial life" and that it's "American tradition that we keep out of the affairs of other nations."

Nowhere did De Cleyre so much as mention, let alone critique, the line in Common Sense where Paine inspired Jefferson by claiming that, at the time of the American Revolution, with regard to the British, there were "thousands, and tens of thousands, who would think it glorious to expel from the continent, that barbarous and hellish power, which hath stirred up the Indians and Negroes to destroy us."

Plumbing the Depths

In the July 1909 issue of the anarchist journal Mother Earth, De Cleyre's speech, On Liberty, was printed, including her starkly callous opening lines in which she first reminded her reader, "you know the brutal saying of some white man about Indians: 'The only good Indian is a dead Indian,'" before she added, "in my opinion, the only 'good' government is a dead government."

In her 1912 pamphlet, Direct Action, De Cleyre sank to her lowest point yet, as she upheld the explicitly genocidal rebellion led by Nathaniel Bacon in the 1670s. De Cleyre claimed, arguing from authority, that "all our historians certainly defend the action of the rebels in that matter, for they were right."

She continued by stating that "for the benefit of those who have forgotten the details, let me briefly remind them that the Virginia planters were in fear of a general attack by the Indians; with reason."

As if the settlers hadn't provoked the situation in the first place, as if Bacon's call to "extirpate all Indians in General" could ever be justified by anything (bringing to mind the current-day American-backed Israeli genocides committed against the Palestinian, Lebanese and Iranian peoples, also justified by the perpetrators with the pretense of an imagined threat to their colonial occupation and expansion.)

De Cleyre's deeply contradictory worldview was highlighted in this very same time period with her article, The Mexican Revolution, published in Mother Earth in three parts, from December 1911 to February 1912. In that text she explains that out of the Mexican population of 15 million, four million are Indigenous, and she praises them as people "somewhat similar in character to the Pueblos of our own southwestern states, primitively agricultural for an immemorial period, communistic in many of their social customs, and like all Indians, invincible haters of authority."

"The Indian population—especially the Yaquis and the Moquis—have always disputed the usurpations of the invaders' government, from the days of the early conquest until now, and will undoubtedly continue to dispute them as long as there is an Indian left, or until their right to use the soil out of which they sprang without paying tribute in any shape is freely recognized," De Cleyre further detailed.

"The communistic customs of these people are very interesting, and very instructive too," De Cleyre explained, "they have gone on practising them all these hundreds of years, in spite of the foreign civilization that was being grafted upon Mexico (grafted in all senses of the word); and it was not until forty years ago (indeed the worst of it not till twenty-five years ago), that the increasing power of the government made it possible to destroy this ancient life of the people."

When it came to matters on the other side of the border, De Cleyre celebrated Indigenous resistance, while on her own side, despite knowing and writing something about the bleak history of American colonization, she praised genocidal acts of settler violence against Indigenous peoples as well as the founding genocidaires themselves. In this sense, De Cleyre provides perhaps the starkest possible proof that engaging with colonialism on a superficial level is not enough, that deeper examination and transformative action are also necessary, and that American patriotism is particularly pernicious when not actively weeded-out.

Twenty Four Hours For What We Will

Nowadays, May Day is deemed to be all about the dignity of labour, but the Chicago Haymarket anarchists were a little more farseeing than that, contending with colonialism and the land, not just with work. The eight-hour day was a scrap, in both senses of the word, along the way to brighter days, better meals, and a different way of life. The struggle was not just to work less, but ultimately to not work at all. The goal wasn't just to seize the workplace but to reclaim land and freedom.

"Humanity isn't craving hard toil ten hours of every twenty-four," explained Chicago anarchist Lizzie Swank Holmes, "but rather leisure to grow and expand, and for every two hours labor full two hours' results."

Yet, more than a century later, some of today's anarchists still fail to rigorously critique capitalist institutions such as work or statist institutions such as colonialism. They're too busy reducing anarchism to a mere aesthetic, slapping an anarchist patch onto the soldier's uniform issued to

them by the Ukrainian state (a government armed to the teeth by the imperialist states of America, Germany and Israel) and calling it anarchist pragmatism. Or else cheerleading for those who do, even if they make excuses for conscription, as ex-anarchist Dmitry Petrov did in an interview with the German media outlet, Taz, in an interview in 2023.

The Chicago anarchists of more than a century gone-by stood in sharp contrast to that kind of waffling. Haymarket martyr, Louis Lingg, who infamously cheated the hangman by killing himself, in his autobiography explained, "I had no desire to spend three of the best years of my youth in military service [in Germany] for the defence of throne, altar and money-bag, or even to satisfy the caprices of some crowned idiot in causing wholesale murders, commonly called wars."

Albert Parsons' The Alarm once suggested that "when soldiers are wise enough to go on strikes, kings and aristocrats will be compelled to do their own fighting."

Emily G. Taylor once directly connected militarism to colonialism, asking, in notably archaic language, "which makes the greater savage, the blanket or the uniform?"

All the aforementioned shows that we must deal with the anarchist movement, both past and present, as it really is, and not just as what we wish it had been. While it's only right to celebrate the moments when historical anarchists valiantly tussled with capitalism and colonialism, we also need to own up to our predecessors' (and our contemporaries') mistakes, be they regarding colonialism, work, militarism, or anything else. Facing up to these mistakes is the only way to truly push forward as a movement. We can learn much from the humility of a comrade like Voltairine de Cleyre in that regard, but we also need to continue the work. Today's non-native anarchists owe as much, not just to themselves, but to Native anarchists, and Indigenous peoples in general.

The comrades who precede us have already done some of the crucial work of documenting anarchist history, and this is particularly the case with the history of May Day. For the 1986 centennial of Haymarket, Chicago social rebel, Franklin Rosemont, published the vital and invaluable Haymarket Scrapbook, reviving the connections between the Chicago anarchists and the struggles of Native and Black peoples, some of which have been mentioned in this article. Two years prior, the much respected historian of anarchism, Paul Avrich, had published his magnum opus, The Haymarket Tragedy, a hefty and deeply inspiring text that's as readable as it is relevant.

As state repression in America has escalated in the context of the heightened genocidal attacks on the Indigenous peoples of South West Asia and Africa; as people both with and without citizenship are racially profiled and imprisoned based simply on their race or place of birth; and as thought itself is turned into a crime once again (see the cases of Leqaa Kordia and the Prairieland 19, among others), much as it was against the Chicago Haymarket anarchists back in the day; the task of learning from our history and using it in the present has been left to us to pick up and run with.

Not run as in run away to a settler colonial land project, but run as in dash headlong into the fray in whatever way seems most thoughtful and practical, in solidarity with all oppressed peoples, with the awareness that the freedom of other people is also our own freedom, that an injury to one is still an injury to all, that maybe we're still crazy after all these years.

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Retrieved on April 27, 2026, from historyiswhat.noblogs.org
This article is an amalgamated, updated and edited version of two previous articles, May Day and Colonialism and Voltairine De Cleyre and Colonialism. List form references and sources at: historyiswhat.noblogs.org

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