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This slim volume of eleven essays, edited by the recently deceased Nicolas Walter of England's Freedom Press, is an important new addition to the body of anarchist works originating from the turn of the century period that boasts such thinkers as Kropotkin, Elisee Reclus, etc. Although at times a little redundant, as Wilson tried to rephrase certain key ideas about authority, property, work, etc, towards different audiences, her essays are thoughtful and clear, and in some cases foreshadowed essays by other more well known thinkers, such as Kropotkin. 'Justice' (1885), for example, was a precursor to Kropotkin's 'Organized Vengeance called Justice' (1900).

Little known in U.S. anarchist circles, and overlooked by anarchist historians in general, Charlotte Wilson essentially introduced anarchist-communism to an English audience. With her close comrade Peter Kropotkin, she founded Freedom in 1886 — still England's longest running anarchist paper — and she was its primary editor and publisher for over eight years.

She was also involved in establishing anarchist discussion groups in London and encouraging other local groups, and was an active lecturer and debater. Interestingly, she was the model for characters in a number of political novels, including A Girl Among the Anarchists and John Henry Mackay's The Anarchists where she is most commonly described as a "little woman dressed becomingly in black."

Having been highly educated even for men's standards, she proceeded to become more politicized — the highly public trials of the French anarchists (including Kropotkin) in 1883 seemed to be the catalyst for Wilson's acceptance of both Socialism and Anarchism as her own ideology. Wilson worked within the sphere of middle class intellectuals in the Fabian Society, which was a reformist oriented socialist organization, and finally split with them when they formally chose a parliamentary path. Her "anarchist faction" within the Society, which fellow Fabian member George Bernard Shaw called a "sort of influenza of Anarchism which soon spread through the society," was to have long lasting effects. When Kropotkin was released from prison in 1886, Wilson invited him to come to Britain to join the "circle of English anarchists" that had formed the previous year. The group decided to produce a new anarchist paper once they split from the Fabian Society and so began Freedom and the Freedom press, attracting such contributors as Jean Grave, Louise Michel, Dyer D. Lum, and Errico Malatesta.

For Wilson, anarchism was a specific tenet within Socialism which fell opposite the 'collectivist' Socialist viewpoint: a State Socialism that "supports a strong central administration." [Not to be confused with the collectivist tendency within anarchism advocated by Bakunin, which Wilson also rejected in favor of the 'communist-anarchism' made popular by Kropotkin.] Her 'What Socialism Is' points out these differences convincingly, making the anarchist argument by stressing the "individual as well as social, internal as well as external" context in which

radical change must occur. Though her language is steeped in the optimism of the Enlightenment, and one would begin to think her views on industry and work might also fall under that faith in scientific order, happily she is critical of this view saying:

"all coercive organization working with machine-like regularity is fatal to the realization of this idea [that labor could become a pleasure]. It has never proved possible to perfectly free human beings to co-operate spontaneously with the precision of machines. Spontaneity, or artificial order and symmetry must be sacrificed. And as spontaneity is life, and the order and symmetry of any given epoch only the forms in which life temporarily clothes itself, Anarchists have no fears that in discarding the Collectivist [state socialist] dream of the scientific regulation of industry, and inventing no formulas for social conditions as yet unrealized, they are neglecting the essential for the visionary."

Her 'Work' (1888), which was mistakenly attributed to Kropotkin for many years, also stresses the importance of spontaneity in social organization: "Therefore the question of supreme importance in social organization is — not how can men be induced to work, but how can their spontaneous desire to work be allowed the freest scope and guided into the most useful directions."

Unique in her analysis is the emphasis on the psychological aspects of oppression as well as the material. The "inward attitude of slavish adoration" towards authority is one way this is manifested, which she elaborates on in 'Freedom'; also in 'Anarchism', she asks: "After the annihilation of the oppressive institutions of the present, what social forces and social conditions will remain, and how are they likely to be modified and developed?" putting emphasis again on the psychology of power and the importance of social pressures in the development of individuals and society. Similarly, she acknowledges public opinion, the "common moral sense of [human]kind" in

its ideal form, as a powerful social pressure which will have to be utilized in favor of positive social change: "For a radical change must have come over opinion as to the nature of property and public duty before the Revolution can succeed."

On violence, similar to other anarchist-communists of the time, Wilson stated: "The employment of force to coerce others is unjustifiable: but as a means of escaping from coercion, if it is available when other means have failed, it is not only excusable, it is a moral obligation. Each man [sic] owes it to himself and to society to be free." Her words are worthy of analysis in the contemporary, though enduring, discussion over violence as a tactic in a revolutionary context. Readers may find her language, like other propagandists of her time, verbose and at times dotted with obscure Classical references but editor Nicolas Walter included valuable notes at the end of the book which shed light on these mysterious things for those of us in the 21st century.

What can be rightfully criticized in Wilson's writings is that annoying Euro-centric worldview that rears its ugly head every so often. Her references to the "civilized world" obviously refer to the industrialized Western world and make no value judgment, but they do infer a colonial mindset and racism, such as when she states "power, […] that is the veil which hides Freedom from the eyes of men. Sometimes it takes the form of the blind fear of a savage of his 'medicine' or his fetish, sometimes of the equally blind reverence of an English workman for the law of his masters".

Beyond her archaic language is her belief in humanity's need to break free from oppression universally, as when she states: "Freedom is the necessary preliminary to any true and equal human association." "The vitiation of social life is produced by the domination of man by man. The spirit of domination is the disintegrating element which constantly tending to break up society, is the fundamental cause of confusion and disorder."

Convinced that we already have the capabilities to live free from authority — found in the fraternity of social bonds — Charlotte Wilson said that anarchism was "not a Utopian dream of the future, but a faith for the present," in that its humble first aim "is to assert and make good the dignity of the individual human being." Yet, "Its one purpose is by direct personal action to bring about a revolution in every department of human existence, social, political and economic. Every man owes it to himself and to his fellows to be free."