Anarchism and American Traditions

Voltairine de Cleyre

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inevitably follows the same line of centralization, the logic of Anarchism is that the least objectionable form of armed force is that which springs up voluntarily, like the minute men of Massachusetts, and disbands as soon as the occasion which called it into existence is past: that the really desirable thing is that all men — not Americans only — should be at peace; and that to reach this, all peaceful persons should withdraw their support from the army, and require that all who make war shall do so at their own cost and risk; that neither pay nor pensions are to be provided for those who choose to make man-killing a trade.

As to the American tradition of non-meddling, Anarchism asks that it be carried down to the individual himself. It demands no jealous barrier of isolation; it knows that such isolation is undesirable and impossible; but it teaches that by all men’s strictly minding their own business, a fluid society, freely adapting itself to mutual needs, wherein all the world shall belong to all men, as much as each has need or desire, will result.

And when Modern Revolution has thus been carried to the heart of the whole world — if it ever shall be, as I hope it will — then may we hope to see a resurrection of that proud spirit of our fathers which put the simple dignity of Man above the gauds of wealth and class, and held that to be an American was greater than to be a king.

In that day there shall be neither kings nor Americans — only Men; over the whole earth, Men.

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**Introduction**

“Nature has the habit of now and then producing a type of human being far in advance of the times; an ideal for us to emulate; a being devoid of sham, uncompromising, and to whom the truth is sacred; a being whose selfishness is so large that it takes the whole human race and treats self only as one of the great mass; a being keen to sense all forms of wrong, and powerful in denunciation of it; one who can reach in the future and draw it nearer.

Such a being was Voltairine de Cleyre.”

What could be added to this splendid tribute by Jay Fox to the memory of Voltairine de Cleyre?

The real biography of Voltairine de Cleyre is to be found in the letters she wrote to her comrades, friends and admirers, for like many other women in public life, she was a voluminous writer.

Born shortly after the close of the Civil War, she witnessed during her life the most momentous transformation of the nation; she saw the change from an agricultural community into an industrial empire; the tremendous development of capital in this country with the accompanying misery and degradation of labor. Her life path was sketched when she reached the age of womanhood; she had to become a rebel! To stand outside of the struggle would have meant intellectual death. She chose the only way.

Voltairine de Cleyre was born on November 17, 1866, in the town of Leslie, Michigan. She died on June 6, 1912, in Chicago. She came from French-American stock on her father’s side, and of Puritan on her mother’s. Her father, Auguste de Cleyre, was a native of Western Flanders, but of French origin. Being a free-thinker and a great admirer of Voltaire, he named his daughter Voltairine. She did not have a happy childhood; her earliest life...
was embittered by want of the common necessities, which her parents, hard as they tried, could not provide. A vein of sadness can be traced in her earliest poems — the songs of a child of talent and great fantasy.

Strength of mind did not seem to have been a characteristic of Auguste de Cleyre, for he recanted his libertarian ideas, returned to the fold of the church, and became obsessed with the idea that the highest vocation for a woman was the life of a nun; so he sent her to the Convent of Our Lady of Lake Huron at Sarnia, Province of Ontario, Canada. But Voltairine’s spirit could not be imprisoned in a convent. After she was there a few weeks she ran away. She crossed the river to Port Huron but as she had no money she started to walk home. After covering seventeen miles, she realized that she could never do it; so she turned around and walked back, and entering the house of an acquaintance in Port Huron, asked for something to eat. They sent for her father who afterwards took her back to the convent. After a while, however, she again ran away, this time never to return.

Reaction from repression and the cruel discipline of the Catholic Church helped to develop Voltairine’s inherent tendency toward free thought; the five-fold murder of the labor leaders in Chicago in 1887 shocked her mind so deeply that from that moment dates her development toward Anarchism. When in 1886 the bomb fell in the Haymarket Square, and the Anarchists were arrested, Voltairine de Cleyre, who at that time was a free thought lecturer, shouted: “They ought to be hanged!” They were hanged, and now her body rests in Waldheim Cemetery, near the grave of those martyrs. Speaking at a memorial meeting in honor of those comrades, in 1901, she said: “For that ignorant, outrageous, blood-thirsty sentence I shall never forgive myself, though I know the dead men would have forgiven me, though I know those who loved them forgive me. But my own voice, as it sounded that night, will sound so in my ears till I die — a bitter reproach and a
which threw each individual strongly on his own resources, and thus developed all-around men, yet at the same time made very strong such social bonds as did exist; and, lastly, the comparative simplicity of small communities.

All this has disappeared. As to sectarianism, it is only by dint of an occasional idiotic persecution that a sect becomes interesting; in the absence of this, outlandish sects play the fool’s role, are anything but heroic, and have little to do with either the name or the substance of liberty. The old colonial religious parties have gradually become the “pillars of society,” their animosities have died out, their offensive peculiarities have been effaced, they are as like one another as beans in a pod, they build churches — and sleep in them.

As to our communities, they are hopelessly and helplessly interdependent, as we ourselves are, save that continuously diminishing proportion engaged in all around farming; and even these are slaves to mortgages. For our cities, probably there is not one that is provisioned to last a week, and certainly there is none which would not be bankrupt with despair at the proposition that it produce its own food. In response to this condition and its correlative political tyranny, Anarchism affirms the economy of self-sustenance, the disintegration of the great communities, the use of the earth.

I am not ready to say that I see clearly that this will take place; but I see clearly that this must take place if ever again men are to be free. I am so well satisfied that the mass of mankind prefer material possessions to liberty, that I have no hope that they will ever, by means of intellectual or moral stirrings merely, throw off the yoke of oppression fastened on them by the present economic system, to institute free societies. My only hope is in the blind development of the economic system and political oppression itself. The great characteristic looming factor in this gigantic power is Manufacture. The tendency of each nation is to become more and more a manufacturing one, an exporter of fabrics, not
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American traditions, begotten of religious rebellion, small self-sustaining communities, isolated conditions, and hard pioneer life, grew during the colonization period of one hundred and seventy years from the settling of Jamestown to the outburst of the Revolution. This was in fact the great constitution-making epoch, the period of charters guaranteeing more or less of liberty, the general tendency of which is well described by Wm. Penn in speaking of the charter for Pennsylvania: “I want to put it out of my power, or that of my successors, to do mischief.”

The revolution is the sudden and unified consciousness of these traditions, their loud assertion, the blow dealt by their indomitable will against the counter force of tyranny, which has never entirely recovered from the blow, but which from then till now has gone on remodeling and regrappling the instruments of governmental power, that the Revolution sought to shape and hold as defenses of liberty.

To the average American of today, the Revolution means the series of battles fought by the patriot army with the armies of England. The millions of school children who attend our public schools are taught to draw maps of the siege of Boston and the siege of Yorktown, to know the general plan of the several campaigns, to quote the number of prisoners of war surrendered with Burgoyne; they are required to remember the date when Washington crossed the Delaware on the ice; they are told to “Remember Paoli,” to repeat “Molly Stark’s a widow,” to call General Wayne “Mad Anthony Wayne,” and to execrate Benedict Arnold; they know that the Declaration of Independence was signed on the Fourth of July, 1776, and the Treaty of Paris in 1783; and then they think they have learned the Revolution — blessed be George Washington! They have no idea

“I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the useless sacrifices of themselves by the generation of ’76 to acquire self-government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be that I shall not live to see it.”

And now, what has Anarchism to say to all this, this bankruptcy of republicanism, this modern empire that has grown up on the ruins of our early freedom? We say this, that the sin our fathers sinned was that they did not trust liberty wholly. They thought it possible to compromise between liberty and government, believing the latter to be “a necessary evil,” and the moment the compromise was made, the whole misbegotten monster of our present tyranny began to grow. Instruments which are set up to safeguard rights become the very whip with which the free are struck.

Anarchism says, Make no laws whatever concerning speech, and speech will be free; so soon as you make a declaration on paper that speech shall be free, you will have a hundred lawyers proving that “freedom does not mean abuse, nor liberty license”; and they will define and define freedom out of existence. Let the guarantee of free speech be in every man’s determination to use it, and we shall have no need of paper declarations. On the other hand, so long as the people do not care to exercise their freedom, those who wish to tyrannize will do so; for tyrants are active and ardent, and will devote themselves in the name of any number of gods, religious and otherwise, to put shackles upon sleeping men.

The problem then becomes, Is it possible to stir men from their indifference? We have said that the spirit of liberty was nurtured by colonial life; that the elements of colonial life were the desire for sectarian independence, and the jealous watchfulness incident thereto; the isolation of pioneer communities
we meddle with the affairs of everybody else from the West to
the East Indies, from Russia to Japan; and to do it we have a
standing army of 83,251 men.

It is American tradition that the financial affairs of a nation
should be transacted on the same principles of simple honesty
that an individual conducts his own business; viz., that debt is
a bad thing, and a man’s first surplus earning should be applied
to his debts; that offices and office holders should be few. It is
American practice that the general government should always
have millions [of dollars] of debt, even if a panic or a war has
to be forced to prevent its being paid off; and as to the appli-
cation of its income office holders come first. And within the
last administration it is reported that 99,000 offices have been
created at an annual expense of 1663,000,000. Shades of Jeff-
son! "How are vacancies to be obtained? Those by deaths are
few; by resignation none." [Theodore] Roosevelt cuts the knot
by making 99,000 new ones! And few will die — and none re-
sign. They will beget sons and daughters, and Taft will have to
create 99,000 more! Verily a simple and a serviceable thing is
our general government.

It is American tradition that the Judiciary shall act as a
check upon the impetuosity of Legislatures, should these
attempt to pass the bounds of constitutional limitation. It is
American practice that the Judiciary justifies every law which
trenches on the liberties of the people and nullifies every act
of the Legislature by which the people seek to regain some
measure of their freedom. Again, in the words of Jefferson:
“The Constitution is a mere thing of wax in the hands of the
Judiciary, which they may twist and shape in any form they
please.” Truly, if the men who fought the good fight for the
triumph of simple, honest, free life in that day, were now
to look upon the scene of their labors, they would cry out
together with him who said:

why it should have been called a “revolution” instead of the
“English War,” or any similar title: it’s the name of it, that’s all.
And name-worship, both in child and man, has acquired such
mastery of them, that the name “American Revolution” is held
sacred, though it means to them nothing more than successful
force, while the name “Revolution” applied to a further possi-
bility, is a spectre detested and abhorred. In neither case have
they any idea of the content of the word, save that of armed
force. That has already happened, and long happened, which
Jefferson foresaw when he wrote:

“The spirit of the times may alter, will alter. Our
rulers will become corrupt, our people careless. A
single zealot may become persecutor, and better
men be his victims. It can never be too often re-
peated that the time for fixing every essential right,
on a legal basis, is while our rulers are honest, our-
selves united. From the conclusion of this war we
shall be going down hill. It will not then be neces-
sary to resort every moment to the people for sup-
port. They will be forgotten, therefore, and their
rights disregarded. They will forget themselves in
the sole faculty of making money, and will never
think of uniting to effect a due respect for their
rights. The shackles, therefore, which shall not be
knocked off at the conclusion of this war, will be
heavier and heavier, till our rights shall revive or
expire in a convulsion.”

To the men of that time, who voiced the spirit of that time,
the battles that they fought were the least of the Revolution;
they were the incidents of the hour, the things they met and
faced as part of the game they were playing; but the stake they
had in view, before, during, and after the war, the real Revolu-
tion, was a change in political institutions which should make
of government not a thing apart, a superior power to stand over the people with a whip, but a serviceable agent, responsible, economical, and trustworthy (but never so much trusted as not to be continually watched), for the transaction of such business as was the common concern and to set the limits of the common concern at the line of where one man’s liberty would encroach upon another’s.

They thus took their starting point for deriving a minimum of government upon the same sociological ground that the modern Anarchist derives the no-government theory; viz., that equal liberty is the political ideal. The difference lies in the belief, on the one hand, that the closest approximation to equal liberty might be best secured by the rule of the majority in those matters involving united action of any kind (which rule of the majority they thought it possible to secure by a few simple arrangements for election), and, on the other hand, the belief that majority rule is both impossible and undesirable; that any government, no matter what its forms, will be manipulated by a very small minority, as the development of the States and United States governments has strikingly proved; that candidates will loudly profess allegiance to platforms before elections, which as officials in power they will openly disregard, to do as they please; and that even if the majority will could be imposed, it would also be subversive of equal liberty, which may be best secured by leaving to the voluntary association of those interested in the management of matters of common concern, without coercion of the uninterested or the opposed.

Among the fundamental likeness between the Revolutionary Republicans and the Anarchists is the recognition that the little must precede the great; that the local must be the basis of the general; that there can be a free federation only when there are free communities to federate; that the spirit of the latter is carried into the councils of the former, and a local tyranny may thus become an instrument for general enslavement. Con-
the concerns of government, multiplies the strength of government and the corresponding weakness of the people; this it is which begets indifference to public concern, thus making the corruption of government easy.

As to the essence of Commerce and Manufacture, it is this: to establish bonds between every corner of the earth's surface and every other corner, to multiply the needs of mankind, and the desire for material possession and enjoyment.

The American tradition was the isolation of the States as far as possible. Said they: We have won our liberties by hard sacrifice and struggle unto death. We wish now to be let alone and to let others alone, that our principles may have time for trial; that we may become accustomed to the exercise of our rights; that we may be kept free from the contaminating influence of European gauds, pageants, distinctions. So richly did they esteem the absence of these that they could in all fervor write: "We shall see multiplied instances of Europeans coming to America, but no man living will ever seen an instance of an American removing to settle in Europe, and continuing there." Alas! In less than a hundred years the highest aim of a "Daughter of the Revolution" was, and is, to buy a castle, a title, and rotten lord, with the money wrung from American servitude! And the commercial interests of America are seeking a world empire!

In the earlier days of the revolt and subsequent independence, it appeared that the "manifest destiny" of America was to be an agricultural people, exchanging food stuffs and raw materials for manufactured articles. And in those days it was written: "We shall be virtuous as long as agriculture is our principal object, which will be the case as long as there remain vacant lands in any part of America. When we get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, we shall become corrupt as in Europe, and go to eating one another as they do there." Which we are doing, because of the inevitable development of Commerce and Manufacture, and the concomitant development of the institutions of tyranny, the most strenuous advocates of independence, instead of spending their efforts mainly in the general Congress, devoted themselves to their home localities, endeavoring to work out of the minds of their neighbors and fellow-colonists the institutions of entailed property, of a State-Church, of a class-divided people, even the institution of African slavery itself. Though largely unsuccessful, it is to the measure of success they did achieve that we are indebted for such liberties as we do retain, and not to the general government. They tried to inculcate local initiative and independent action. The author of the Declaration of Independence, who in the fall of '76 declined a re-election to Congress in order to return to Virginia and do his work in his own local assembly, in arranging there for public education which he justly considered a matter of "common concern," said his advocacy of public schools was not with any "view to take its ordinary branches out of the hands of private enterprise, which manages so much better the concerns to which it is equal"; and in endeavoring to make clear the restrictions of the Constitution upon the functions of the general government, he likewise said:

"Let the general government be reduced to foreign concerns only, and let our affairs be disentangled from those of all other nations, except as to commerce, which the merchants will manage for themselves, and the general government may be reduced to a very simple organization, and a very inexpensive one; a few plain duties to be performed by a few servants."

This then was the American tradition, that private enterprise manages better all that to which it IS equal. Anarchism declares that private enterprise, whether individual or cooperative, is equal to all the undertakings of society. And it quotes...
the particular two instances, Education and Commerce, which
the governments of the States and of the United States have
undertaken to manage and regulate, as the very two which in
operation have done more to destroy American freedom and
equality, to warp and distort American tradition, to make of
government a mighty engine of tyranny, than any other cause,
save the unforeseen developments of Manufacture.

It was the intention of the Revolutionists to establish a sys-
tem of common education, which should make the teaching
of history one of its principal branches; not with the intent of
burdening the memories of our youth with the dates of battles
or the speeches of generals, nor to make the Boston Tea Party
Indians the one sacrosanct mob in all history, to be revered but
never on any account to be imitated, but with the intent that
every American should know to what conditions the masses
of people had been brought by the operation of certain institu-
tions, by what means they had wrung out their liberties, and
how those liberties had again and again been filched from them
by the use of governmental force, fraud, and privilege. Not
to breed security, laudation, complacent indolence, passive ac-
quiescence in the acts of a government protected by the label
“home-made,” but to beget a wakeful jealousy, a never-ending
watchfulness of rulers, a determination to squelch every at-
tempt of those entrusted with power to encroach upon the
sphere of individual action — this was the prime motive of the
revolutionists in endeavoring to provide for common educa-
tion.

“Confidence,” said the revolutionists who adopted the Ken-
tucky Resolutions, “is everywhere the parent of despotism; free
government is founded in jealousy, not in confidence; it is jeal-
ousy, not confidence, which prescribes limited constitutions to
bind down those whom we are obliged to trust with power; our
Constitution has accordingly fixed the limits to which, and no
further, our confidence may go... In questions of power, let no
public finance obscure to those that paid for it; to serve as a ma-
chine for corrupting the legislatures; “for he avowed the opin-
ion that man could be governed by two motives only, force or
interest”; force being then out of the question, he laid hold of in-
terest, the greed of the legislators, to set going an association
of persons having an entirely separate welfare from the wel-
fare of their electors, bound together by mutual corruption and
mutual desire for plunder. The Anarchist agrees that Hamilton
was logical, and understood the core of government; the dif-
ference is, that while strong governmentalists believe this is
necessary and desirable, we choose the opposite conclusion,
No Government Whatsoever.

As to the essence of human nature, what our national expe-
rience has made plain is this, that to remain in a continually ex-
alted moral condition is not human nature. That has happened
which was prophesied: we have gone down hill from the Rev-
olution until now; we are absorbed in “mere money-getting.”
The desire for material ease long ago vanquished the spirit of
’76. What was that spirit? The spirit that animated the people
of Virginia, of the Carolinas, of Massachusetts, of New York,
when they refused to import goods from England; when they
preferred (and stood by it) to wear coarse, homespun cloth, to
drink the brew of their own growths, to fit their appetites to
the home supply, rather than submit to the taxation of the im-
perial ministry. Even within the lifetime of the revolutionists,
the spirit decayed. The love of material ease has been, in the
mass of men and permanently speaking, always greater than
the love of liberty. Nine hundred and ninety nine women out of
a thousand are more interested in the cut of a dress than in the
independence of their sex; nine hundred and ninety nine men
out of a thousand are more interested in drinking a glass of beer
than in questioning the tax that is laid on it; how many children
are not willing to trade the liberty to play for the promise of
a new cap or a new dress? That it is which begets the compli-
cated mechanism of society; that it is which, by multiplying
the principles of liberty taught, let them never entrust that instruction to any government; for the nature of government is to become a thing apart, an institution existing for its own sake, preying upon the people, and teaching whatever will tend to keep it secure in its seat. As the fathers said of the governments of Europe, so say we of this government also after a century and a quarter of independence: “The blood of the people has become its inheritance, and those who fatten on it will not relinquish it easily.”

Public education, having to do with the intellect and spirit of a people, is probably the most subtle and far-reaching engine for molding the course of a nation; but commerce, dealing as it does with material things and producing immediate effects, was the force that bore down soonest upon the paper barriers of constitutional restriction, and shaped the government to its requirements. Here, indeed, we arrive at the point where we, looking over the hundred and twenty five years of independence, can see that the simple government conceived by the revolutionary republicans was a foredoomed failure. It was so because of:

1. the essence of government itself;
2. the essence of human nature
3. the essence of Commerce and Manufacture.

Of the essence of government, I have already said, it is a thing apart, developing its own interests at the expense of what opposes it; all attempts to make it anything else fail. In this Anarchists agree with the traditional enemies of the Revolution, the monarchists, federalists, strong government believers, the Roosevelts of today, the Jays, Marshalls, and Hamiltons of then — that Hamilton, who, as Secretary of the Treasury, devised a financial system of which we are the unlucky heritors, and whose objects were twofold: To puzzle the people and make more be heard of confidence in man, but bind him down from mischief by the chains of the Constitution.”

These resolutions were especially applied to the passage of the Alien laws by the monarchist party during John Adams’ administration, and were an indignant call from the State of Kentucky to repudiate the right of the general government to assume undelegated powers, for said they, to accept these laws would be “to be bound by laws made, not with our consent, but by others against our consent — that is, to surrender the form of government we have chosen, and to live under one deriving its powers from its own will, and not from our authority.”

Resolutions identical in spirit were also passed by Virginia, the following month; in those days the States still considered themselves supreme, the general government subordinate.

To inculcate this proud spirit of the supremacy of the people over their governors was to be the purpose of public education! Pick up today any common school history, and see how much of this spirit you will find therein. On the contrary, from cover to cover you will find nothing but the cheapest sort of patriotism, the inculcation of the most unquestioning acquiescence in the deeds of government, a lullaby of rest, security, confidence — the doctrine that the Law can do no wrong, a Te Deum in praise of the continuous encroachments of the powers of the general government upon the reserved rights of the States, shameless falsification of all acts of rebellion, to put the government in the right and the rebels in the wrong, pyrotechnic glorifications of union, power, and force, and a complete ignoring of the essential liberties to maintain which was the purpose of the revolutionists. The anti-Anarchist law of post-McKinley passage, a much worse law than the Alien and Sedition acts which roused the wrath of Kentucky and Virginia to the point of threatened rebellion, is exalted as a wise provision of our All-Seeing Father in Washington.

Such is the spirit of government-provided schools. Ask any child what he knows about Shays’ rebellion, and he will an-
swer, “Oh, some of the farmers couldn’t pay their taxes, and Shays led a rebellion against the court-house at Worcester, so they could burn up the deeds; and when Washington heard of it he sent over an army quick and taught ’em a good lesson” — “And what was the result of it?” “The result? Why — why — the result was — Oh yes, I remember — the result was they saw the need of a strong federal government to collect the taxes and pay the debts.” Ask if he knows what was said on the other side of the story, ask if he knows that the men who had given their goods and their health and their strength for the freeing of the country now found themselves cast into prison for debt, sick, disabled, and poor, facing a new tyranny for the old; that their demand was that the land should become the free communal possession of those who wished to work it, not subject to tribute, and the child will answer “No.” Ask him if he ever read Jefferson’s letter to Madison about it, in which he says:

“Societies exist under three forms, sufficiently distinguishable.

1. Without government, as among our Indians.
2. Under government wherein the will of every one has a just influence; as is the case in England in a slight degree, and in our States in a great one.
3. Under government of force, as is the case in all other monarchies, and in most of the other republics.

To have an idea of the curse of existence in these last, they must be seen. It is a government of wolves over sheep. It is a problem not clear in my mind that the first condition is not the best. But I believe it to be inconsistent with any great degree of population. The second state has a
great deal of good in it...It has its evils too, the principal of which is the turbulence to which it is subject. ...But even this evil is productive of good. It prevents the degeneracy of government, and nourishes a general attention to public affairs. I hold that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing.”

Or to another correspondent:

“God forbid that we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion!...What country can preserve its liberties if its rulers are not warned from time to time that the people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take up arms... The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.”

Ask any school child if he was ever taught that the author of the Declaration of Independence, one of the great founders of the common school, said these things, and he will look at you with open mouth and unbelieving eyes. Ask him if he ever heard that the man who sounded the bugle note in the darkest hour of the Crisis, who roused the courage of the soldiers when Washington saw only mutiny and despair ahead, ask him if he knows that this man also wrote, “Government at best is a necessary evil, at worst an intolerable one,” and if he is a little better informed than the average he will answer, “Oh well, he [Tom Paine] was an infidel!” Catechize him about the merits of the Constitution which he has learned to repeat like a poll-parrot, and you will find his chief conception is not of the powers withheld from Congress, but of the powers granted.

Such are the fruits of government schools. We, the Anarchists, point to them and say: If the believers in liberty wish