

Tour Impressions

Voltaireine de Cleyre

1911

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TOUR IMPRESSIONS

LEAVING Philadelphia on Friday, the 7th of October, I began my meeting with comrades and their work on that evening in New York, and from that day till the present writing (I date at Buffalo, the 18th of October) I have addressed nine meetings,—two in New York, one in Albany, one in Schenectady, one in Rochester, and four in Buffalo. In all these places I have to thank all comrades for kindly courtesy and fraternal service. But these, while most grateful to me personally, are of course not of public interest. What the readers of Mother Earth will find interesting to know is, What has been the character and number of the attendance at such meetings, the amount of interest displayed, the reports given, and inquiries or suggestions as to the value of such lecturing tours.

In point of numbers, the first meeting arranged by Branch 145 of the Arbeiter Ring in New York, and the Ferrer Memorial meeting in Buffalo, were the best attended, the number present at these being something between 250 and 300, I should judge. Otherwise the attendance has averaged from 100 to 150 people. The smallest gathering was that in Schenectady; but, considering that the whole affair had been arranged in but three days, and that almost entirely by the efforts of one energetic comrade, the fact that the attendance was less than 100 was not to be wondered at,—rather the wonder was that it should have been as successful as it was.

As to the character of the attendance, it has been quite different in different places, according to the method adopted in advertising. In Rochester, where the matter of securing a hall was taken up by an American of the old type (not an Anarchist), the policy of subterfuge was resorted to. By advertising a mixed program, withholding the names of the speakers until the last day in the afternoon, the Common- Council Chamber of the City Hall was secured for the meeting. The audience (of about 100) was somewhat mixed, but mostly American middle-class people, in appearance. Of course, the other speakers, finding themselves with an Anarchist sandwiched between them, failed to appear, and we had the meeting to ourselves. Now, it was perhaps a triumph for an Anarchist to be enabled to invade the City Hall and speak on “Anarchism and American Traditions” in the Common Council Chamber; but I doubt the advisability of such a policy of subterfuge, and should much prefer open dealing.

In Buffalo, the policy of advertising also was to clothe me somehow with the mantle of Tolstoian respectability, as a means of persuading the people to come to listen. Now, once for all, I am not a Tolstoian, nor a non-resistant; and I hope I shall not in future be advertised as such. The result of securing “respectable halls,” and a church in one instance, to speak in, was certainly to attract a so-called “respectable” audience; among the persons present at the lectures, especially on education, were some teachers, and one member of the School Board of Buffalo. But there was a lamentable lack of working people present,—they were middle-class business or professional people in the main. The only meeting where I found myself addressing working people was that to which I was invited after my arrival here, which had been arranged by the Socialists, and at which the principal speaker was Robert Steiner, editor of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. There, at last, were the industrial workers, the soldiers of the factory. To-night I am to deliver a final address before what will probably be a small gathering of intellectual faddists calling themselves the International Progressive Thought League, in the parlors of the Iroquois Hotel. This I have agreed to do, for the sake of saying to the faces of the rich, for once in my life, what I think their society is. But I consider it utterly useless as propaganda.

Of the meeting in Albany I can not say more than that it appeared to be a quietly sympathetic gathering of people with more or less of Socialistic leanings, of mixed nationalities. The New York audiences were of course Jewish, being arranged by the Arbeiter Ring. So much for the character of the attendance. As to the interest displayed in the matter of the lecture on Modern Education, I have numerous inquiries as to whether or no it can be printed to fill the demand, now growing constantly stronger for dissemination of thought concerning changes in education ideas. I am inclined to think myself that something much more constructive would be of greater service. I must say, as a teacher, that I have been extremely dissatisfied with the vagueness of the pamphlets issued by the Ferrer Association, and am anxiously awaiting something much more definite. I believe the best move will be the publication in English of the primary books used by Ferrer in the Modern Schools of Spain; for the evils of our own system lie principally in the elementary schools, in my opinion.

Several teachers have expressed to me their agreement with the criticisms and suggestions in my lecture. I think perhaps a practical move might be for the Ferrer Groups to obtain the list of the teachers in the various cities, and send the pamphlet "The Rational Education of Children" to them by mail (though postage makes it costly). While the pamphlet is inadequate, it might stimulate thought and inquiry.

One gentleman, a Socialist, assured me that if he could obtain a definite idea of how to work, could get the proper books, etc., he would now open a school of the kind in Buffalo; he is quite positive of the demand for it. The same demand exists in Philadelphia and Chicago. Numerous inquiries are beginning to come from the far west. I expect to meet it everywhere I go. The great need is for teachers who will know what they want to do.

Aside from this interest, while I cannot now express a fixed opinion on so short experience, my impression is that our present propaganda (if there is any) is a woeful mistake. I am more than ever convinced that our work should be with the workers, not with the bourgeoisie. If these latter choose to come, very well, let them. But I should never approve of this seeking after "respectable halls," "respectable neighborhoods," "respectable people," etc., etc., into which it appears we have somehow degenerated. The chief result seems to be a lot of shallow flattery dealt to the speaker at the close of the meeting, by people who have no interest and no intent ever to take the speaker's words as serious things to be acted upon.

Comrades, we have gone upon a wrong road. Let us get back to the point that our work should be chiefly among the poor, the ignorant, the brutal, the disinherited, the men and women who do the hard and brutalizing work of the world. If we cannot do this, if our gospel has come to be a gospel for the "respectable," then I, for one, shall renounce it. But I do not think it has; the fault is in us, not in Anarchism. The Socialists have thus much advantage over us; they have not forgotten that their teaching is primarily a teaching for the common man. Let us remember that ours is also. [note]For lack of space, the second part of this report will appear in the next issue.[/note]

Greetings,

VOLTAIRINE DE CLEYRE.

Voltairine de Cleyre, "Tour Impressions," *Mother Earth* 5, no. 10 (December 1910): 322-325.

A Rejoinder

IT is not often that I take issue with my friend Voltairine de Cleyre. But there are a few points in her report which I cannot permit to pass unchallenged.

Comrade Voltairine states that she speaks of the propaganda (“if there be any”) “from short experience and impression.” Yet she finds it necessary to emphasize the “seeking of respectable halls, respectable neighborhoods, etc.” I have always known her to be cautious in passing opinions, and I am therefore surprised that a mere impression should warrant her in suggesting that we are seeking for “respectable halls, respectable people,” etc.

The fact that the man who arranged a meeting for her in Rochester (by the way, *not* an Anarchist) has tried to sandwich her between bourgeois speakers, or that she was advertised in Buffalo as a Tolstoian Anarchist, is by no means proof that we are all following the same lines, or that “we have gone woefully wrong.”

I have traveled the length and breadth of this country for many years; have been to the Coast four times within a short period, and I can assure Comrade Voltairine that no one connected with my work has sought for “respectable” patronage. Of course, if by “respectable halls” is meant clean halls, I plead guilty to the charge. I confess that I prefer such places, partly for sanitary reasons, but mainly because the workers themselves—the American workers—will not go to a dilapidated, dirty hall in an obscure quarter of the city. In that respect the people Voltairine wants to reach are probably the most bourgeois in America. I have again convinced myself of it the other day in Baltimore, where the American workers would not attend my meetings because the hall was in the “nigger” district. Strange as it may seem, the people who came were, what Voltairine would call, respectables.

I agree with our Comrade that our work should be among “the poor, the ignorant, the brutal, the disinherited men and women.” I for one have worked with them and among them for twenty-one years. I therefore feel better qualified than Voltairine to say what may be accomplished in their ranks. After all, my friend knows the masses mainly from theory. I know them from years of contact in and out of the factory. Just because of that knowledge I do not believe that our work should be only with them. And that for the following reasons:

The pioneers of every new thought rarely come from the ranks of the workers. Possibly because the economic whip gives the latter little opportunity to easily grasp a truth. Besides, it is an undisputed fact that those who have but their chains to lose cling tenaciously to them.

The men and women who first take up the banner of a new, liberating idea generally emanate from the so-called respectable classes. Russia, Germany, England, and even America bear me out in this. The first conspiracy against the Russian despot originated in his own palace, with the Decembrists representing the nobility of Russia. The intellectual pioneers of revolutionary and Anarchist ideas in Germany came from the “respectables.” The women who are to-day enduring the hunger strike for their ideas, in England, are also not from the ranks of the workers. The same holds good in regard to almost every country and every epoch.

Far be it from me to belittle the poor, the ignorant, the disinherited. Certainly they are the greatest force, if only they could be awakened from their lethargy. But I maintain that to limit one’s activities to them is not only a mistake, but also contrary to the spirit of Anarchism. Unlike other social theories, Anarchism builds not on classes, but on men and women. I may be mistaken, but I have always been of the opinion that Anarchism calls to battle all libertarian elements as against authority.

That to limit oneself to propaganda exclusively among the oppressed does not always bring desired results, is borne out by more than one historical proof. Our Chicago comrades propagated only among the workers; in fact, cheerfully gave their lives for the oppressed. Where were the latter during the eighteen terrible months of the judicial farce? Were not the Chicago Anarchists shamefully betrayed by the very organization which Parsons and Spies helped to build up—the Knights of Labor? And has not the spirit of that time drifted into conservative channels, as represented by the American Federation of Labor? The majority of its members, I am sure, would hesitate not a moment to relegate Voltairine or myself to the fate of our martyred comrades.

John Most worked for twenty-five years exclusively among the workers. He certainly never sought for “respectables.” Indeed, the poorer and more wretched the atmosphere, the more eloquently Most spoke. Where are the results of his propaganda? Why was the man so utterly forsaken in the last years of his activities? Why cannot the *Freiheit*, in spite of all desperate efforts, be maintained?

I think the answer to these questions can easily be found in the very thing Voltairine so fervently advocates—the propaganda exclusively among the workers. Yes, that is, in my opinion, the reason why we have in the past made so little headway. The economic factor is, I am sure, very vital. Possibly that accounts for the fact that a great many radicals lose their ideals the moment they succeed economically. Voltairine surely knows as well as I that hundreds of Anarchists, Socialists, and rabid revolutionists who were ardent workers twenty years ago are now very respectable, indeed much more respectable than the very people to whom Voltairine objects. That, however, should not discourage the true propagandist from working among the disinherited, but it should teach him the vital lesson that spiritual hunger and unrest are often the most lasting incentives.

Anarchism excludes no one and gives no one a mortgage on truth and beauty. Above all, Anarchism, as I understand it, leaves the propagandist free to choose his or her own manner of activity. The criterion must at all times be his or her individual judgment, experience, and mental leanings. In the Anarchist movement there is room for every one who earnestly desires to work for the overthrow of authority, physical as well as mental.

Emma Goldman.

Emma Goldman, “A Rejoinder,” *Mother Earth* 5, no. 10 (December 1910): 325–328.

TOUR IMPRESSIONS

By VOLTAIRINE DE CLEYRE.

MY preceding report was written on the morning of the 18th of October, as I knew I should scarcely have time to report the final meeting in Buffalo, which was to be held that evening. It took place, as I said, in the parlor of the Iroquois Hotel before the “International Progressive Thought League,” the subject being, “The poor ye have always with you.”

Probably the best result of this lecture was the excellent report given in the Buffalo *Times*, in which mention was made of standard works to be read on Anarchism, which I had recommended in response to an inquiry from the audience. A sort of side result of the lectures in Buffalo was the controversy between the defenders of Catholicism, or, rather, anti-Ferrerism, and the defenders

of the memory of the great martyr in the public press. No doubt some will have been led by it to study the facts in the Ferrer case, and the knowledge of the Modern School movement will be by so much widened.

My next experience was in Cleveland, where every arrangement had been made to hold an excellent memorial meeting Oct. 21. Had it not been for the storm which at the last moment fell furiously upon us, I am sure we should have had a crowded meeting; as it was, even in spite of the drenching, one hundred and twenty people were in attendance,—*wet*, but *enthusiastic*. A feature of the meeting was the exquisite singing of the old Irish revolutionary song, “The Wearing of the Green,” and our well-beloved “Annie Laurie,” around which floats forever the memory of Albert Parsons’ voice; the singer, Mr. H. R. Carr, put something more than artistic voice-culture in his work,—a soul! A few excellent words were spoken by Prof. Bourland of one of the Cleveland universities,—an explanation of conditions in Spain, and to some extent the psychology of the Spaniard. It appears to me the most primary part in the understanding of the Ferrer movement is to understand these conditions. I learned that a foreign priest, sitting in the audience during my speech, became so angry that he went out to “get a policeman to arrest me.” However, he did not return. I infer he was angry because I told the truth about the Catholic Church in Spain, of whose character he was likely ignorant.

The following Sunday the Cleveland Freethought Society extended to me the courtesy of their platform, and an excellent meeting, very well attended, interesting, warm, and homelike, was held. I observed with regret that a number of the Anarchists in attendance showed some tendency to preserve the old narrow excommunicative spirit of the one-time “Boston Anarchists,”—one going so far as to declare that “no Communist could be an Anarchist.” It made me feel that I was living some twenty years back, in the days when we held that our own particular economic gospel was the only “road to freedom,” and whoever did not hold it was bound to the perdition of authority.

These were the only meetings held in Cleveland. Several of the larger dailies gave interviews, one of which, in the *News*, was excellent; and one in the *Press*, was execrable; the latter, I believe, not because of the policy of the paper, but the incompetence of the reporter. There is a decided tendency at present to interview everybody as to his or her opinion concerning the teaching of sex-hygiene to the young in the schools. Each reporter in turn gravely put me the question, I felt like crying out, “Shades of Moses Harman! what have I lived to see?” But while it is worth while to make use of the opportunity to give the attitude of Anarchists on this important subject, I very much fear that the present movement, commendable as it is in its motive, has been undertaken by the wrong persons. I fear we shall have, instead of physiological knowledge in the schools, a fresh crop of restrictions, laws, moral suasion, and sentimental twaddle. However, the question is to the fore; and let believers in science and in freedom use every chance to express themselves while it lasts.

On the 26th I spoke in Toledo, to a very small audience, on “The World at Play.” The comrades who arranged the meeting made what in my opinion was a grave error by charging a 25 cent admission. I would like to say, as a suggestion for future workers, that to charge such a price for any lecture of mine is both a business and an ethical mistake. I am not well enough known to the general lecture-going world to justify such a price for purely financial considerations; and in the second place, it is very distasteful to me to find that Anarchism, in my name, is associated with any such price,—a price fairly prohibitive to those whom I most wish to address. I do not

wish to censure my Toledo comrades for having thought otherwise; but I think their experience demonstrated their mistake.

Detroit was a resting place. Our meeting on October 29th was simply a club-meeting, only semi-public. We discussed the General Strike, and the discussion was the most interesting I have heard since the famous discussions heard everywhere during the actual General Strike in Philadelphia last March.

And this brings me to a point upon which I am always in doubt, and upon which I should like an expression of opinion from other speakers. I am, on principle, in favor of “the open meeting” after the lecture; i. e., throwing the meeting open to question or remark by whosoever will. I have always argued that it is better to have the people speak, even if they speak folly, than to remain dumb recipients of the speaker’s utterances, like pew-holders in a church. I have, however, over and over again been compelled to see the effect of an excellent lecture spoiled by a very foolish discussion, or pretence at discussion. In my own meetings I have sat patiently—no, rather very impatiently—through rambling, disconnected fooleries about every subject under the sun except the lecture. Usually, those who get up at public meetings are not persons who want to put a question, or know how to put a question; but persons who are either fanatics on some unrelated subject, which they drag in; or mildly insane persons; or persons who want to protect the speaker from chivalry, courtesy, or some other laudable feeling which is, nevertheless, out of place.

Such has been the generality of my experience on this trip. At the Detroit club-meeting, however, I found a genuine, earnest, to-the-point discussion. No doubt we all talked more or less nonsense, too; but no more than is in the normal latitude of the subject. We were to talk of the General Strike; and we did; and no one talked of anything else; and many took an earnest and feeling part.

Thinking it over, I am asking myself whether this is not the real place for genuine discussion. Of course, I see the objection: How then shall we ever get a stimulation of thought among outsiders?

But do we get it through the public after-lecture discussion?

Voltairine de Cleyre, “Tour Impressions,” *Mother Earth* 5, no. 11 (January 1911): 360–363.

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