Anarchism and American Traditions

Voltairine de Cleyre (1866 – 1912) was, according to Emma Goldman, "the most gifted and brilliant anarchist woman America ever produced." She became interested in anarchism as a result of the Chicago Affair of 1886 and at first championed the ideas of Benjamin Tucker, to whose paper Liberty she contributed. Towards the end of her life she began to work closely with the libertarian communists, but refused to commit herself to their ideas, preferring to call herself an "anarchist without adjectives" and adopting a pluralist view of any future "free society."
see its members in the regular pay of the general government. Since any embodiment of the fighting spirit, any military organization, 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.
manufacturing one, an exporter of fabrics, not an importer. If this tendency follows its own logic, it must eventually circle round to each community producing for itself. What then will become of the surplus product when the manufacturer shall have no foreign market? Why, then mankind must face the dilemma of sitting down and dying 'in the midst of it, or confiscating the goods.

Indeed, we are partially facing this problem even now; and so far we are sitting down and dying. I opine, however, that men will not do it forever, and when once by an act of general expropriation they have overcome the reverence and fear of property, and their awe of government, they may waken to the consciousness that things are to be used, and therefore men are greater than things. This may rouse the spirit of liberty.

If, on the other hand, the tendency of invention to simplify, enabling the advantages of machinery to be combined with smaller aggregations of workers, shall also follow its own logic, the great manufacturing plants will break up, population will go after the fragments, and there will be seen not indeed the hard, self-sustaining, isolated pioneer communities of early America, but thousands of small communities stretching along the lines of transportation, each producing very largely for its own needs, able to rely upon itself, and therefore able to be independent. For the same rule holds good for societies as for individuals—those may be free who are able to make their own living.

In regard to the breaking up of that vilest creation of tyranny, the standing army and navy, it is clear that so long as men desire to fight, they will have armed force in one form or another. Our fathers thought they had guarded against a standing army by providing for the voluntary militia. In our day we have lived to see this militia declared part of the regular military force of the United States, and subject to the same demands as the regulars. Within another generation we shall probably

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by Voltairine de Cleyre

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 remolding 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 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 possibility, 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 repeated that the time for fixing every essential right, on a legal basis, is while our rulers are honest, ourselves united. From the conclusion of this war we shall be going down hill. It will not then be necessary to resort every moment to the people for support. 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 Revolution, was a change in 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
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
tyrans 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 which threw each
individual strongly on his own resources, and thus
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.
Convinced of the supreme importance of ridding the
municipalities 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
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
application 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 Jefferson! "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 resign.
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:

"I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the
incapable of a wholesome care over so wide a spread of surface." There is not upon the face of the earth today a government so utterly and shamelessly corrupt as that of the United States of America. There are others more cruel, more tyrannical, more devastating; there is none so utterly venal.

And yet even in the very days of the prophets, even with their own consent, the first concession to this later tyranny was made. It was made when the Constitution was made; and the Constitution was made chiefly because of the demands of Commerce. Thus it was at the outset a merchant's machine, which the other interests of the country, the land and labor interests, even then foreboded would destroy their liberties. In vain their jealousy of its central power made enact the first twelve amendments. In vain they endeavored to set bounds over which the federal power dare not trench. In vain they enacted into general law the freedom of speech, of the press, of assemblage and petition. All of these things we see ridden roughshod upon every day, and have so seen with more or less intermission since the beginning of the nineteenth century. At this day, every police lieutenant considers himself, and rightly so, as more powerful than the General Law of the Union; and that one who told Robert Hunter that he held in his fist something stronger than the Constitution, was perfectly correct. The right of assemblage is an American tradition which has gone out of fashion; the police club is now the mode. And it is so in virtue of the people's indifference to liberty, and the steady progress of constitutional interpretation towards the substance of imperial government.

It is an American tradition that a standing army is a standing menace to liberty; in Jefferson's presidency the army was reduced to 3,000 men. It is American tradition that we keep out of the affairs of other nations. It is American practice that we meddle with the affairs of everybody else from the West to the East Indies, from 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 system 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 institutions, 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 acquiescence 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 attempt 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 education.

"Confidence," said the revolutionists who adopted the Kentucky Resolutions, "is everywhere the parent of despotism; free government is founded in jealousy, not in confidence; it is jealousy, 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 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 this: to establish bonds between every corner of the earths 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 strong government. And the parallel prophecy is likewise fulfilled: "If ever this vast country is brought under a single government, it will be one of the most extensive corruption, indifferent and
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
difference is, that while strong governmentalists believe
this is necessary and desirable, we choose the opposite
conclusion, No Government Whate’ersoever.

As to the essence of human nature, what our national
experience has made plain is this, that to remain in a
continually exalted moral condition is not human nature.
That has happened which was prophesied: we have
gone down hill from the Revolution until now; we are
absorbed in "mere money-getting." The desire for
material east 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 imperial 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 complicated
mechanism of society; that it is which, by multiplying 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
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 answer, "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 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 public finance obscure to those that paid for it; to serve as a machine for corrupting the legislatures; "for he avowed the opinion that man could be governed by two motives only, force or interest"; force being then out of the question, he laid hold of interest, the greed of the legislators, to set going an association of persons having an entirely separate welfare from the welfare of their