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Voltairine de Cleyre Speaks Again!, Shane Little, Anarchist Studies, vol. 33 no. 2, 2025.

This article introduces and contextualizes the publication of “The Economic Phase of Anarchism,” a previously unpublished speech by the American anarchist thinker Voltairine de Cleyre. It frames the speech as a rare and valuable recovery, given that many of de Cleyre’s manuscripts were lost after being taken without family consent to the Mother Earth offices, which were later seized by the U.S. government during World War I repression.

The essay first outlines de Cleyre’s life and intellectual development. Born in 1866, influenced by freethought, abolitionism, and socialism, she became an anarchist after the Haymarket Affair and emerged as one of the most important anarchist intellectuals in the United States and internationally. Her writings and lectures emphasized individual autonomy, moral responsibility, and opposition to coercion. A defining moment of her ethical consistency came after she was shot in 1902, when she supported her attacker’s legal defense rather than seeking punishment.

What Voltairine de Cleyre might look like as an anime character.

The core argument of the article concerns the long-standing debate over de Cleyre's economic position within anarchism. Scholars have variously labeled her an individualist anarchist, an anarchist communist, or an "anarchist without adjectives." Drawing on her 1907 public correction of Emma Goldman and the content of "The Economic Phase of Anarchism," the author argues that all these labels misunderstand her position. De Cleyre explicitly rejected both individualist and communist economic systems as exclusive or compulsory models, while also declining to formally adopt anarchism without adjectives.

In the speech itself, de Cleyre presents economy as only one "phase" of anarchism, subordinate to the core anarchist principle of noncoercion. She carefully outlines and critiques the main anarchist economic schools - individualism, communism, mutualism, and collectivism - highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. She agrees with anarchists on the rejection of private land monopoly, government-backed property, interest, and exploitation, but raises serious concerns about rigid property norms, enforced communism, monetary systems, competition, and quasi-governmental mechanisms that could reintroduce authority under anarchist forms. She also argues that all the schools agree that 'what no man has produced, no man can lay more social claim to than another. That therefore land, which is the first necessity of existence after light, air, and water, should be equally accessible to all.' Land reform, in other words, is basic to anarchism, but it cannot be once-and-for-all. People need to be able to occupy or claim land at any point.

Throughout, de Cleyre insists that no economic system should be imposed and that individuals and communities must be free to experiment with arrangements suited to their conditions, so long as they do not coerce others. Her ultimate commitment is to individual autonomy, voluntary

association, toleration, and moral self-responsibility. The article concludes that “The Economic Phase of Anarchism” confirms de Cleyre as a freethinking anarchist who resisted all dogma, economic or otherwise, and understood anarchism not as a fixed program but as a living practice grounded in freedom and noncompulsion.

Individualist anarchism of Tucker’s kind is criticised because it might allow people to enclose huge swathes of land, and create openings for economic rents. Communism, which works the land ‘in common’, is more economical, sensible, libertarian... so long as it was a union of egoists which people could leave if they wished to farm on their own. There are also issues with natural monopolies and waste. De Cleyre also discusses issues around monetary value and the gold standard.

She then discusses how unpleasant work would get done. Her answer is that the problem only comes up when people are forced together, and fight over who does the hard work. She then suggests that anarcho-communism differs from State socialism in wanting to localize production and do away with global markets and ‘the fever of market-chasing’ as far as possible. But this depends on people relying more on their own resources rather than administrative systems – something she takes as a weak point. Finally, she worries that individualism, because of the need to protect property from criminals, ends up as a series of ‘little states’ with ‘anarchist police’, some using savage punishment. Her own position is that criminals are ‘unfortunate persons more to be pitied than blamed and to be dealt with if at all, in the same [way] as an insane person’ (i.e. therapy not punishment). Take that, idpols.

What it means for radicals: It’s always nice to see new material from a classic theorist, but most of the terrain covered is fairly familiar. If de Cleyre was writing this today, she would have to deal with a much more diverse range of economic positions. Although many of these loosely resemble individualism, mutualism, or anarcho-communism, others emerge from

an ecological baseline, a politics of desire, or from indigenous or other cosmologies. The land issue, for example, looks rather different when considered through the lens of agro-ecology, permaculture, horticulture, or rewilding, in relation to monoculture, and not solely in terms of land ownership. Stirner's point of view seems to be that people might well tolerate others' little plots if concentration wasn't too bad (perhaps from fellow-feeling or to avoid a fight), but, since there's no moral obligation to do so, they'd start occupying land if concentration was forcing them into landlessness. It's the fact that people are spooked that stops them taking what they've no reason not to take.

It would be nice if we could summon some of these older theorists to a séance, and ask them about the current situation. I daresay we'd see the letters W, T, and F being used quite a lot.

As for so-called crime, we were winning this debate for awhile, only for our positions to be put under a thought-block by the New Right. Nowadays a lot of the left and even anarchists have gone over to hard-right punitive positions, sometimes supplemented by retributive shaming and thought-reform. To be fair, psychiatry today isn't necessarily any better than punishment, although it might be if the psy disciplines hadn't been similarly gutted. We actually know an awful lot now from psychoanalysis about why some people are impulsive, psychopathic, and so on. It's just been wilfully forgotten because it doesn't suit neoliberalism in its agenda of inciting the masses against folk-devils. De Cleyre's position is typical of what just about every anarchist, Marxist, and radical socialist knew in her time, but which seems to have been forgotten today.