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The Firebrand and the Forging of a New Anarchism

Anarchist Communism and Free Love

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into the main body of anarchist thought. But they also did something more; they managed to illustrate an example of anarchism in theory and practice. They showed, in the very way that they edited the paper and lived together as comrades, that they could come to better understand their own ideas of anarchism through the very practice of those ideas. However, their uncompromising stand and their desire to be consistent in their advocacy of free love destroyed the paper. *Firebrand* advocated anarchism, the destruction of the state, and violence and assassination, as well as free love during the first two years of its existence. But it was only in 1897, after they purposefully “bid defiance to Comstockism” and placed more emphasis on the sex question that the paper was stopped and its editors arrested. *Firebrand* was pivotal in the development of American anarchism, and we see many of the ideas and theories first articulated in *Firebrand* appear in its successor *Free Society* and later in *Mother Earth*. Yet while these papers continued to incorporate discussions of free love, they would never again openly defy the Comstock Act in the way *Firebrand* did in explicit letters like A.E.K.’s “It Depends on the Woman.”

pend on the Woman” discussed a hypothetical situation in which a group of free lovers spends the night together. One of the women, who was emancipated from sex slavery, persuaded her partner of the night that she did not want or need to perform “the sex act” that night, and the two spent the night in “friendly and loving comradeship.” However, the other woman was not fully emancipated. When she asked her first partner of the night to skip intercourse because she was menstruating, he, being an anarchist free lover agreed. But the next man, whom she was to spend the second part of the night with, convinced her to have sex. Then the next morning she went back to her own husband, who also demanded intercourse. The author of the letter argues that free love will require the education and emancipation of both men and women, but especially the women who “must teach men that sexual freedom does not mean sexual indulgence in the propagative act, regardless of the woman’s choice.”⁴⁷ This letter, and many others like it, suggested not only that women should be protected or freed from motherhood, but rather that women should be the equals of men. For A.E.K. and other letter writers in *Firebrand*, free love did not mean indiscriminate sex and variety, but rather women’s freedom to define and control when and with whom they chose to have sex.

Conclusion

Firebrand maintained its uncompromising position until the paper ceased publication for that stand. But in the course of three years the paper managed to reinvigorate that anarchist movement with the publication of a regular and lively periodical. The editors introduced anarchist communism to a English-speaking audience, they successfully blended both individualist and communistic anarchism in their contributions to the paper, and they fully integrated the ideas of free love and women’s right to freedom over her body

⁴⁷ A.E.K. “It Depends on the Woman,” April 25, 1897, 7.

In January 1895 a small paper appeared in Portland, Oregon. Titled *Firebrand*, and staunchly and openly advocating anarchist communism and free love, the paper was instrumental in the development of American anarchism. The paper systematically brought working-class anarchism and social revolution to an English speaking audience for the first time, influencing the direction of anarchism in the United States for the next twenty years. Understanding the pivotal position of *Firebrand* in what is often considered a dormant period in American anarchist history, is necessary to comprehending the evolution of anarchism in the United States. The American anarchist movement thrived in the last part of the 1890s. *Firebrand* fostered the growth of an anarchist movement that incorporated the economic change fought for by the Haymarket anarchists, along with social issues like free love and individual freedom long advocated by individualist anarchists. Published between 1895 and 1897, *Firebrand* helped reinvigorate the anarchist movement, and introduced an important development that remained part of the anarchist movement throughout the twentieth century. By combining the economic and political arguments of anarchist communism with the social and cultural ideas of free love, *Firebrand* and its contributors consciously developed an anarchism that appealed to both immigrant and native-born Americans. The anarchism discussed and worked out in the pages of *Firebrand* influenced and perhaps even formed the American anarchism appearing after the turn of the century, which gained popular expression throughout the Progressive Era.

According to Paul Avrich, the preeminent historian of American anarchism, “a revolutionary anarchist movement of considerable strength took shape in the United States” between 1880 and 1883. However, as he notes, “anarchism, during these initial years, had not yet crystallized into a coherent doctrine, nor was the

anarchist label in wide use.”¹ The first formal meeting of American anarchists took place in 1881 when the Congress of Social Revolutionary groups met in Chicago. “The Revolutionary Socialist Party” was formed, led by Albert Parsons, Michael Schwab, and Augustus Spies.² In this first expression of what anarchist communism meant to its American participants, members of the Congress adopted resolutions supporting Russian revolutionaries, and condemned the British government for its treatment of the Irish. The Congress went on to denounce wage slavery and uphold the principle of “propaganda by the deed.” Still, illustrating the evolving nature of the anarchist communist movement, the congress was unable to come to a final resolution denouncing political action.³ Two years later, in 1883, at the International Working People’s Association conference in Pittsburgh, one sees the first explicitly industrial and communistic expression of anarchist principles set forth by a large group of people who saw themselves as part of a movement. The “Pittsburgh Manifesto,” as it was called, included six objectives and was perhaps the first formal expression of socialistic or communist anarchist ideas in America to date, including a call for revolutionary action as well as for fundamental reorganization of society along anti-authoritarian collectivist or communist lines. The manifesto included six key objectives, including destruction of the existing class rule by energetic, relentless, revolutionary and international action; the establishment of a free society based upon co-operative organization of production; free exchange of products; secular, scientific, and equal education for both sexes;

¹ Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 55.

² Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, 58–59. At this time Social Revolutionary was the term most often used to describe these anarchists, who according to Avrich saw themselves as socialists with a distinctive anti-statist, anti-parliamentarian, anti-reform cast, and who saw a direct and revolutionary confrontation with capitalism as the only means to social change.

³ Avrich, *Haymarket Tragedy*, 60.

reformers. Every careful observer must see that the prevailing notions on sexual matters, which underlie our monogamic marriage institution, are among the greatest obstacles if they be not the most powerful foe we have to deal with as Anarchists.⁴⁴

Landeck agreed that “radical change of the economic structure and basis of society” was absolutely necessary, but he argued that anarchism was about more than simple economic change, “it means free and natural development of all the forces and functions and manifestations of life, social as well as individual.”⁴⁵ Landeck’s letter represented the direction the paper was moving toward and illustrated a changing understanding of anarchism among some *Firebrand* readers. Landeck understood anarchism as not simply an industrial economic theory; this was not the anarcho-syndicalism of the Haymarket anarchists, but rather a social and economic philosophy that sought to overhaul all aspects of society, a philosophy that was as concerned with the social and private life of the individual as it was with the economic life. In this respect, *Firebrand*’s mission of serving as a propaganda paper to educate people about anarchism necessitated a discussion of free love and sex.⁴⁶

The paper continued to publish this blend of anarchism that embraced economic and social change until September 1897, when AJ Pope, Abe Isaak, and Henry Addis were arrested and charged with publishing and circulating obscene material through the mail, including Whitman’s “A Woman Waits for Me” and a letter, “It Depends on of the Woman,” signed by A.E.K. The second article, “It De-

⁴⁴ Oscar Landeck, “Various Voices,” May 23, 1897, 7.

⁴⁵ Landeck, 7.

⁴⁶ As the editors asserted it was not their mission to make everyone free lovers, but rather to move toward freedom. As Addis, in a February 14, 1897 reply to a correspondent explained, “If freedom leads some into variety I cannot object; if it leads others in voluntary monogamy I am contented. Let us come what will, but give us freedom.”

For the editors of *Firebrand*, sexual freedom was a necessity. According to Addis it was impossible to advocate anarchism and not mention the “sex question.” To do so would be equivalent to discussing anarchism in England or Russia without denouncing state sponsored religion. For Addis, including the sex question was simply a matter of being consistent, he asked, “Are people free, sexually? If not then in our demand for freedom we must point out the cause of sexual slavery just as we point out the cause of industrial slavery.” Addis and others in *Firebrand* argued that people were not free sexually. Instead marriage was controlled by state law and further marriage “is based on the idea of possession, or more properly of property. The woman becomes the man’s property, and in the minds of some women the men become their property.” Addis argued that if industrial freedom, sexual freedom, and complete individual liberty could be created, then no “restrictions will grow up to thwart the work of final and complete emancipation.”⁴³ For these reasons Addis argued that a frank and full treatment of the sex question was consistent with *Firebrand*’s desire to embody in their actions their anarchist beliefs.

Readers and contributors to the paper seemed to agree. As we saw, Moses Harman heartily congratulated the paper’s stand. Well-known free love anarchists such as Lois Waisbrooker praised the paper, and short letters appeared in the “Letter Box” from anarchists across the country affirming their commitment to the discussion of sex in the paper. One reader, Oscar Landeck of New York City, is illustrative of the way many anarchists embraced the discussion of sex:

The sex question, for instance, is one of the subjects which some would like to rule out of all discussions. I think this has been done too long already, and it is high time that this problem of life should receive the attraction and study of earnest enquirers and

⁴³ Henry Addis, “Sex and Anarchism,” April 4, 1897, 2.

equal rights without distinction of sex or race; and “regulation of all public affairs by free contracts between the autonomous (independent communes and associations.”⁴ These ideas gained support among the more radical trade unionists and immigrant laborers; anarchist communist papers, such as the *Alarm* and the *Arbeiter Zeitung* were powerful and influential papers at the time of the Haymarket incident.

Historians have argued that the imprisonment and execution of the Haymarket anarchists in 1887 sounded the death knell for the burgeoning American anarchist movement.⁵ That until the publication of Emma Goldman’s *Mother Earth Magazine* in 1906, American anarchism appeared dormant, with only sporadic violent events calling attention to the movement. These events included Alexander Berkman’s attempt of the life of Henry Clay Frick in 1892, Emma Goldman’s imprisonment for “incitement to riot” during the 1893 depression, and Leon Czolgosz’s assassination of President William McKinley in 1901. By the late 1890s this scenario suggests the American anarchist communist movement was severely crippled by the events following Haymarket: the execution or imprisonment of leading anarchists and a general backlash against anarchism. A reading of *Firebrand* challenges this assessment. *Firebrand* attempted to regroup and reinvigorate a movement that had been largely destroyed, with many of the early utopian ideas of an imminent revolution no longer holding sway. The combination of social and economic issues addressed in *Firebrand* signaled a new and lasting development in the history of anarchism.

Instead of focusing solely on immigrant radical labor, or transporting a purely European type of anarchism into the U.S., *Firebrand* attempted to combine the economic and political ideas of anarchist communism being worked out in Europe and developed

⁴ Avrich, *Haymarket Tragedy*, 75.

⁵ See for example Henry David, *The History of the Haymarket Affair; A Study in the American Social-Revolutionary and Labor Movements* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1936).

by the American anarchist movement in the 1880s, with strands of individualist anarchism that had been present in the U.S. since the abolitionist movement and had reached their zenith in the papers of native-born anarchists such as Ezra Heywood's *The Word* and Benjamin Tucker's *Liberty*. The *Firebrand* editors consciously saw themselves representing a native-born, revolutionary, working-class anarchist communist tradition; *Firebrand* is a critical paper because it struggled to create and continue an anarchist tradition of social and economic revolutionary change that they believed was inherently American.⁶

Early histories of American anarchism, such as James J. Martin's *Men Against the State: The Expositors of Individualist Anarchism in America, 1827- 1908* (1953), Lewis Perry's, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (1973), Henry Reihman's, *Partisans of Freedom* (date?) and David DeLeon's, *The American as Anarchist: Reflections on Indigenous Radicalism* (1978), focus exclusively on native-born, indigenous American anarchism. These works tend to study anarchists who came out of an anti-stateist tradition that combined the Jeffersonian ideals of rejecting government interference in private life with the radical abolitionist movement that sought freedom for slaves and saw government as the main obstacle to true liberty. While some of these anarchist did become involved in labor reform, historians have understood nineteenth-century anarchism as predominantly individualistic.⁷ Martin Henry Blatt in *Free Love and Anarchism:*

⁶ American anarchists in the 1890s (and some historians of anarchism) have been especially concerned with the split between native-born individualist anarchism and immigrant anarchist communism. *Firebrand* was explicitly concerned with correcting what they see as a false dichotomy, by continually noting the American traditions of anarchism, and the many native-born anarchists in the movement.

⁷ Daniel DeLeon, *The American as Anarchist: Reflections on Indigenous Radicalism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978): 65. DeLeon rejects the large numbers of anarchist communists in the late nineteenth century as largely "of recent immigrant origin" and therefore not truly representative of "American

to social and sexologic questions, but does not exclude governmental and economic subjects.⁴⁰

Harman's letter explicitly connected the anarchism of *Firebrand* with the "sexologic reforms" associated with *Lucifer*. Harman's letter also foreshadowed the troubles to come for *Firebrand*. He noted that his philosophy of non-invasive free speech, and the belief that his paper was open to all with something to say, had three times landed him in prison.

The beginning of the end for *Firebrand* came only two issues later when Walt Whitman's poem, "A Woman Waits for Me" appeared on the front page of the paper.⁴¹ But it was not an unwitting end. *Firebrand* was a revolutionary anarchist paper, whose mission it was to bring anarchist propaganda to an English speaking audience. In the issue immediately after publication of Whitman's poem, a short article titled, "Our Attitude" was published. In the article, signed by The Firebrand Group, they stated, "we have taken up the gauntlet of conservatism and bid defiance to Comstockism." The article argued that a paper could not stand for anarchism, for absolute liberty and freedom, without also standing for freedom in thought, press, speech, and action. "We claim that The Firebrand is an Open Court, and yet we are advised and warned to let religion and the sex question alone, and the strongest objection presented is against the sex question, and by those who for years have boasted of their radicalism."⁴² From that issue forward, *Firebrand* included not only formal essays and articles discussing the institution of marriage and the philosophical basic for free love, but also an ongoing conversation in letters and correspondence about free love, free marriage, sex and birth control, and women's sexuality.

⁴⁰ Moses Harman, "A Greeting to The Firebrand," February 28, 1897, 7.

⁴¹ Though "A Woman Waits for Me" was published on March 14, 1897, arrests of the *Firebrand* editors did not occur until September 17, 1897.

⁴² The Firebrand Group, "Our Attitude," March 28, 1897.

rimony, printed articles by Viroqua Daniels and others on marriage, free motherhood, and sexual relations, and carried regular responses and questions from their readers about free love. For the editors of *Firebrand*, freedom in love and motherhood was a basic premise of their anarchism. In 1896 J.H. Morris published “Free Sex Relations” in which he stated, “a fundamental principle of anarchist communism is non-interference. Applied to sex relations this means that every individual shall consult only his or her own tastes and happiness in the matter, and mutual agreement alone constitutes what is now called marriage” and in another article Morris asked, “Why should the state attempt to regulate my sexual any more than my social intercourse?”³⁸ But free love alone was not the answer, rather it was a part of the total transformation of social conditions. Morris explained that “freedom in sex relations must result from better social conditions generally,” directly connecting sexual relations to economic and social relations.³⁹

In early 1897 *Firebrand* expanded from a four-page to an eight-page weekly. With the expanded size, the paper published more detailed and longer articles and more correspondence. With more space, that paper also printed more articles, letters and comments discussing free love, and “sex relations.” When the paper first expanded, Moses Harman, publisher of *Lucifer* wrote to *Firebrand*,

Congratulations, good friends and co-workers, on the recent increase in the size of The Firebrand ... kindred in purpose and similar in name The Firebrand and Lucifer should be the best of friends and the most faithful and mutually helpful co-operators. The Firebrand gives emphasis and prominence to economic and political subjects, but does not exclude social and sexologic reforms. Lucifer gives prominence and emphasis

³⁸ J.H. Morris, “Free Sex Relations,” May 3, 1896, 1 and “Anarchy in Marriage,” January 5, 1896, 1–2.

³⁹ Morris, “Free Sex Relations,” 1

The Biography of Ezra Heywood (1989), recognizes that the tradition of individualist anarchism was incorporated into a later American anarchist communism, but he still makes the delineation between immigrant- and native-born anarchism.⁸ Blatt’s work hints at the ways that individualism and communism were brought together in the late 1890s, but persists in seeing a division between native and immigrant anarchism where perhaps there was none.

The history of the free love movement’s connection to anarchism in the nineteenth century has been covered in some detail, most notably in Hal Sears’ *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in the High Victorian America* (1977) and Blatt’s *Free Love and Anarchism*. However, the most recent of these works: Joan Passet’s *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women’s Equality* (2003) while uncovering much new ground in the history of free love and sex radicalism, ignores the important connections between the political and social ideas of anarchism and the ideas of free love. Nor does the work mention the large numbers of sex radicals who happened to be anarchists. That said, Passet’s important work charts new ground in the history of sex radicalism. Through a careful reading of the primary sources, she has uncovered the lives and writings of a wide swath of native-born and working-class sex radicals or free lovers, but often fails to connect the political and social movements that influenced these women with their free love beliefs. Passet does not identify these women as anarchists, but instead as feminists.⁹ By privileging feminism rather than the fundamental political theories that informed

anarchism,” however an examination of the editorial committee of *Firebrand* suggests that most members were in fact native-born farmers, artisans, and laborers, not recent immigrants. The main exception to this was Abe Isaak and his family who were Russian Mennonite immigrants.

⁸ Martin Henry Blatt, *Free Love and Anarchism: The Biography of Ezra Heywood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989): 176.

⁹ Joanne Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women’s Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003): 1–2. See also the recently published article by Jessie Battan, “‘You Cannot Fix the Scarlet Letter on My Breast!’: Women Reading, Writing, and Reshaping the Sexual Culture of Victorian America” *Journal of Social*

these women's sex radicalism, Passet fails to understand that anarchism defined their commitment to free love, a woman's right to control over her body, and feminism.

At the same time, some historians of American anarchism are noticeably silent on the movement's embrace of free love during the 1890s. While Paul Avrich's *The Haymarket Tragedy* (1984) expertly details the emergence of anarchist communism in America leading up to the events of Haymarket, the development of a native and immigrant fusion of anarchist communism, which combined economic and political change, with social change, as documented through *Firebrand*, has yet to be examined. What Passet documents, perhaps unknowingly, in much of the second part of her book is the emergence of a new anarchism combining the social concerns of free love and personal liberty, with the economic and political concerns of anarchist communism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the most prominent female anarchists (and free love proponents) came of political age during the 1890s. Emma Goldman has been the subject of countless biographies in the past forty years, the most important of which include Richard Drinnon's *Rebel in Paradise; A Biography of Emma Goldman* (1961), Alice Wexler's *Emma Goldman an Intimate Life* (1984), and Candace Falk's *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman* (1984).¹⁰

History 37:3 (Spring 2004): 601–24, which covers some of the same ground as Passet's work.

¹⁰ American-born anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre also came to prominence during this period. For information on her life see Paul Avrich, *An American Anarchist: The Life of Voltairine de Cleyre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). Avrich discusses de Cleyre's political evolution, which came out of an indigenous American tradition of individualism and then moved to an anarchism that embraced both individualism and communist. Perhaps most important for setting de Cleyre apart from other individualist was her belief in the necessity and right to defend oneself by force. De Cleyre was highly influenced by her friend and companion Dyer D. Lum who was also able to move between the individualist and communist strains of anarchism, but who also accepted violence as inevitable. de Cleyre adopted the idea of "anarchism without adjectives" after her trip to Europe,

philosophy was not simply written in the pages of a paper, but lived in day-to-day lives. Further their day-to-day lives informed the kind of anarchism they propagated. Nowhere was this more evident than in their discussion and advocacy of free love and equality and sexual relations.

Anarchism and Sex

In the fall of 1897 through early 1898, Peter Kropotkin visited the United States for the first time. While there, he wrote a letter to Abe Isaak, who by that time was living in San Francisco and publishing *Free Society*, to congratulate him on the publication of *Free Society* and its predecessor *Firebrand*. However Kropotkin advised Isaak to "leave alone the sexual question, which the *Firebrand* devoted so much attention to. Free Men and Women will better find the ways for arranging their mutual relations than we can ever foresee now."³⁶ Kropotkin may have been the respected elder of the anarchist movement around the world, and the first to put the ideas of anarchist communism down on paper in his pamphlet *Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles* (1887). Still, for anarchists in the United States, "the sexual question" or free love was a central component of their political philosophy and conception of anarchism.

From the beginning, *Firebrand* included discussions of free love and a woman's right to control her body, which it considered to be basic principles of anarchism. Early editions of the paper included advertisements for Lois Waisbrooker's pamphlet, *Anything More, My Lord?*³⁷, carried advertisements for *Lucifer the Lightbearer*, favorably reviewed Emil Rudebush's book, *Free Men in Love and Mat-*

³⁶ Quoted in Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (1988), 91–2.

³⁷ Lois Waisbrooker was an anarchist and free lover. In 1893 she published the book, *Sex Revolution* in which women refused to bear children to fight war and which identified government, property, and religion as the cause of social problems.

ject would express themselves through the columns of *Firebrand*. Possibly by thus introducing the subject a discussion and consequent agreement may be had which will place the matter in a better [sic] light for all.³³

Holmes's opening discussion of anarchist communism initiated a series of short articles, debates, and continuing discussions about the meaning of anarchism in the *Firebrand*. The discussion continued through October with comments from William Holmes, J. H. Morris, Henry Addis, Viroqua Daniels, Lizzie Holmes, and others.³⁴

In this and other discussions, the editors of the paper worked to create anarchism in their practice as much as they hoped to express their ideas through the written word. As the paper entered its third year, Addis wrote a short announcement, in which he stated how important the creation of an anarchist movement was to the publication of the paper.

We want, too, to gather around us a number of radicals, of both sexes, who wish to actualize, in every day life, as near as possible, ideal we all are working to attain... Thus we may form a nucleus of a society, or group, of free individuals who produce within themselves the necessities and comforts of life, and enjoy the association of other free individuals.³⁵

For the anarchists around *Firebrand* theory and practice were intimately connected. The two worked together so that anarchist

³³ Holmes, 25 July 1895, p.1.

³⁴ Henry Addis, "A Symposium on Anarchist-Communism," August 11, 1895, p. 1-2, J.H. Morris, August 11, 1895, "Culture and Art, September 29, 1895, p.2. William C. Owen, "The Novel in Propaganda," August 11, 1895, p. 3-4, William Holmes, "A Few Questions," September 15, 1895, Viroqua Daniels, "Anarchist Communism" August 18, 1895, p. 1 and "Anarchist Symposium," September 15, 1895, 1, and Lizzie Holmes, "Firebrand Symposium," September 29, 1895, 2.

³⁵ Henry Addis, "The Prospects," February 7, 1897, 5.

However these biographies, while detailing the life of their subject fail to meaningfully discuss the political theory that guided Goldman's life. In many ways Goldman embodies the fusion of the social issues of some individualist anarchists, including free love, the refusal of state interference in one's personal life, and the importance of literature and art to express anarchist ideas, while at the same time embracing the economic ideas of anarchist communism, and working to bring those ideas to an English speaking audience. While Goldman is so important for understanding this new American anarchism, none of the biographies that discuss her life has looked at this important development in her thought.¹¹ During the period that *Firebrand* was published, Goldman developed and began to write about this new understanding of anarchist communism. Two of her most important and illustrative essays from this period were published in *Firebrand*.¹² Yet, all three of Goldman's biographers have failed to note this important moment in Goldman's own political evolution and the greater evolution of anarchism taking place in America at the time *Firebrand* was published.

where in 1897 she met Spanish anarchist theorists, Ricardo Mella. Certainly, de Cleyre's life and political philosophy represents an important strain of American anarchism, but it was a relatively uncommon strain during this period.

¹¹ Many historians have characterized Goldman as a popular synthesizer, but most often in doing so they have subtly dismissed Goldman as a political thinker. Perhaps even more troubling these historians have ignored the development of a new kind of anarchism that did synthesize various threads of anarchism, and which became the predominant strain of anarchist theory and practice in the twentieth century.

¹² These essays include Goldman's 1895 report to English anarchists, "The Condition of the Workers in America" which was printed first in the English paper *Torch*, and then in *The Firebrand* (November 17, 1895) and stressed the economic issues facing the American working class. Her July 18, 1897 essay "Marriage" was her first essay to speak about women and advocate free love. She wrote, "I demand the independence of woman; her right to support herself; to love whomever she pleases, or as many as she pleases. I demand freedom for both sexes, freedom of action, freedom in love and freedom in motherhood."

Firebrand was the first paper in the United States to imagine a political and economic system in which men and women would be able to have absolute social as well as economic and political control over their lives. Within the pages of *Firebrand*, its editors and contributors worked out what anarchist communism meant to them and often these discussions included both traditional economic claims and demands for men and women's individual freedom, political freedom, but also sexual freedom and the freedom not to marry. Much of their frank discussion of sexuality and women's freedom had not before appeared in anarchist communist papers, though these ideas had been covered to great length in individualist papers such as *The Word* and Moses Harmon's *Lucifer the Lightbearer*.

As Paul Avrich has noted, "By the turn of the century, the anarchist movement in America had become predominantly anarchist communist in orientation."¹³ This statement is manifestly correct, yet how this happened is an area still ripe for study. *Firebrand* and its editors and contributors were pivotal in clarifying, elaborating, and working out just what American anarchist communism meant, and the study of *Firebrand* is critical for understanding the development of American anarchism in the late nineteenth century.

***Firebrand* and its Editors**

Firebrand first appeared in January 1895 with the specific goal of filling in a perceived gap in local radical papers. As one of the members of the editorial team, Henry Addis, explained:

A little over a year ago comrade Morris was running a small job printing office in this city. Comrades Mary Squire, A. Isaak, E. Slabs, John Pawson and myself visited the meetings in the city where free discussion was

¹³ Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995): 5.

implied state authority and true anarchists were against all forms of authority, even the authority of small groups. To individualist anarchists, communistic anarchism, with its ideals of "to each according to need, from each according to ability," necessarily implied authority over others, because it did not privilege individual liberty as the highest virtue. But for anarchist communist, who saw economic freedom as central, individual liberty without food and shelter seemed impossible. Unlike the individualist tradition, whose ideas had had years of exposure through the English language anarchist press in America with the publication of *The Word* from 1872 to 1893 and *Liberty* from 1881 to 1908, communistic anarchism had not been advocated in any detail. As Holmes explained, a definition of anarchist communism was needed, "if we would maintain the dignity of a distinct school of economic thought, even more than to those sneering individualist who delight in calling themselves "plumbliners" and those who differ with them, "authoritarians," "State Socialists in disguise," etc."³² Holmes went on to state his reasons for finding it necessary to contribute a sketch of his ideas:

It is to correct these erroneous impressions, that we should publicly declare the faith that is within us. I have not right, least of all have I any desire, to speak for and othor [sic] than myself, or to set up myself as authority upon the ethics of our doctrine. Nevertheless I wish that a few comrades who have ideas on the sub-

³² Holmes, July 25, 1895, p.1. One sees also in this and earlier discussions of *Liberty* and its brand of anarchism, and distinct strain of anti-intellectualism and disdain for the educated and middle-class perspectives of *Liberty*. Other notes and comments from the editors in *Firebrand*, suggested that while they may not be so educated and well off, their ideas and perspectives were necessary and more important than a create perfectly spelled and typeset copy. As an editor notes in this issue in response to a letter from Holmes, "We are as annoyed by the typographical errors as anybody, but when a person puts in 16 to 18 hours per day, and has to read his own setting, typographical perfection is out of the question."

opinions on theory and practice as they did, but regardless ensured other ideas were heard. The editors and contributors to the paper created an outlet for an ongoing discussion.

The first contribution to the discussion came from the eminent American anarchist, William Holmes, published the next week on the front page.²⁸ Holmes's article began, "for some time it has seemed that we, who call ourselves Anarchist-Communists, should explain to the world our principles, and forever set at rest the question whether we are, or are not authoritarians."²⁹ Holmes's piece had two aims; the first was simply to make clear the ideas of anarchist communism, an idea first developed by Peter Kropotkin in the late 1870s, and adopted in 1880 in Switzerland, at the Congress of La Chaux-de-Fonds of the Jura Federation.³⁰ However, Holmes's article also addressed an ongoing discussion and debate then taking place among the anarchists in *Firebrand* and elsewhere and the individualist anarchists of *Liberty*, whose main proponent was its editor, Benjamin Tucker. As early as the second issue of *Firebrand*, the editors took offense with Tucker's description of John Edelman, the editor of *Solidarity*, as a communist instead of an anarchist communist.³¹ Tucker and other individualist anarchists argued in the pages of *Liberty* that anarchist communism was a misnomer because communism

²⁸ William Holmes was a young and active anarchist and friend of Albert Parsons in Chicago at the time of the Haymarket bomb in 1886; by the time *Firebrand* was published he was a respected elder of the anarchist movement. For more information on Holmes see Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, (1984).

²⁹ William Holmes, "Anarchist-Communism" *Firebrand*, July 28, 1895, p.1.

³⁰ Falk et al., *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History*, 490–491. Kropotkin's pamphlet, *Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles*, however was not published up 1887.

³¹ E.S., February 3, 1895, p. 4. ES or Ezekiel [Zeak] Slabs, one of the members of the publishing group noted, "The followers of "Liberty" have no monopoly on the title "Anarchist"; all of us are not philosophers — please remember that in the future." Slabs identified himself as a gardener by profession in a later article, September 8, 1895, p.4.

had, and occasionally [sic] took part in the discussions. We also tried to get our ideas into the local "reform" press. We finally found all the columns of the press closed against us, except on condition that we "trim" our contributions. We talked the matter over and concluded to start a paper.¹⁴

The early issues of the paper reflect this localized radical or reform community. These issues included announcements for the local Secular Union, the Turn Verein, Knights of Labor meetings, Spiritualists, and the Central Labor Union in Portland. Yet, quickly the paper took on a much more forthrightly anarchistic cast. The paper also established itself as not simply for the people of Portland, or even the west, but for the whole Anarchist Movement. Addis noted that as they developed their idea for a paper, "we sent sample copies to all comrades whose addresses we knew, and soon had contributions from comrades Viroqua Daniels, William Holmes and Owen."¹⁵ By seeking out an anarchist movement beyond Portland, the paper included contributions from well-known and able writers, including William Holmes, the respected American anarchist who had been active in Chicago at the time of Haymarket and was then living in Colorado, William C. Owen, an English anarchist then living in the U. S. who had connections in both England and the U.S., and Viroqua Daniels, a respected writer and farm woman living in California. *Firebrand* rapidly joined a larger anarchist community.

The paper had no editor. As Addis noted, a group of "comrades" co-operatively produced the paper. One member of the publishing group explained "[we] started the *Firebrand* on the basis of a free association with voluntary co-operation, and have through it become convinced that this is the only way to work and make the

¹⁴ Henry Addis, "The History of *Firebrand*," March 8, 1896, 3.

¹⁵ Addis, "The History of *Firebrand*," 3.

paper live.”¹⁶ This idea of a free group of individuals coming together to create the paper continued throughout its existence. In 1897, the paper again asserted, “the publication of *The Firebrand* is carried on by a few individuals, aided by a number of radicals everywhere, for the purpose of spreading radical ideas. We have no organization, no constitution, by-laws, rules, officers or dues. Each works at what he or she is most competent to do. The Firebrand has no editor in the ordinary sense, and we invite everyone who has anything to say to send in their ‘copy.’”¹⁷ Notices such as this appeared regularly in the paper, signaling the Firebrand Group’s desire to practice their theoretical principles, and also their desire to increase the reach and influence of the paper by opening its pages to “everyone who has anything to say.”

Several influential members of the Firebrand Group, deserve at least a brief sketch of their lives. J.H. Morris, as Addis mentioned was a printer by trade. An American-born anarchist and a poet, he first published a short-lived anarchist paper *Freedom* in Portland in 1893. Morris, who also worked as a carpenter, died in 1904 when he fell off the roof of a house while working. Henry Addis (1864–1934) was an American-born anarchist who settled in Portland in 1890 after living for some years in Colorado. Addis co-founded *Freedom* with Morris and was one of the leading forces of *Firebrand*. Addis worked as a painter in Portland, though he also spent some time on “agitation tours,” through the Pacific Northwest, and worked in the hop fields when money was particularly tight. At the time, *Firebrand* began publication, he had already published the pamphlet *Receptive and Imperative Wants and their Gratification through Labor Exchange* (1894). He would later publish two more pamphlets, *Essays on the Social Questions* (1898) and *Communism*, which was published in a single pamphlet with Jay Fox’s *Roosevelt, Czolgosz and Anarchy* in 1902. Addis remained in Portland after *Firebrand*

¹⁶ Ezekiel Slabs, “Notes and Comments,” September 8, 1895, 3–4.

¹⁷ “Special Announcement,” May 16, 1897, 7.

definitions of anarchist communism, but discussions within the paper were informed by those ideas. Regular features of early issues included news notes and comments on the state of the working class, including strike notes, statistics on wages and poverty, and calls to revolution, as well as poetry and short stories imagining an anarchist future.

With publication of the July 21, 1895 issue the editors of *Firebrand* set out to explain what they meant when they wrote and spoke of anarchism. However, rather than simply defining their terms, the editors chose to open the pages of the paper to all their readers, inviting participants to help work out some of the basic principles. Two important articles appeared in this issue; the first, a short story by a member of the *Firebrand* editorial group titled “A Year of Jubilee,” imagined the day of a revolution and the effects of such a revolution, including the distribution of property and materials according to need, free labor, and free love all taking place peacefully and happily. The second item was the announcement of a “Symposium.” The short announcement read only, “The *Firebrand* has been chosen as the arena for the discussion of a number of questions as to Anarchist-Communism, by a number of the best known Anarchist writers and their answers to these questions will appear under this head successively. All the comrades wishing to, are invited to take part in this discussion, but we request that they make their contributions short and to the point.”²⁷ The symposium in the pages of *Firebrand* introduced readers not only to the ideas of anarchist communism, but illustrated that anarchism was an idea that was open to people, in doing so the editors helped create a movement readers could participate in. By opening the pages to all comrades willing to “take part in the discussion,” the editors of *Firebrand* implicitly accepted that not everyone would hold the same

published, and in France the two most important papers were *Le Révolté* (Paris and Geneva, 1879–1887) and *La Révolte* (Paris, 1887–1894).

²⁷ Zeak Slabs, “The Year of Jubilee,” *Firebrand*, July 21, 1895, p. 3–4, “A Symposium,” *Firebrand*, July 21, 1895, p.4.

why free love and free motherhood were necessary for true freedom. At times these discussions must have become tedious for even the editors, as the same ground was covered repeatedly. In 1896 an unsigned member of the editorial board responded to a letter in the “Letterbox” section of the paper, stating: “We are very well aware of the fact that the discussions are sometimes ‘somewhat tiresome’ but it cannot be avoided in a paper like *Firebrand*, whose object is to introduce Anarchist Communism or to define a condition of freedom to the American people.”²⁴ It is clear that the editors saw themselves not as a theoretical paper, but as a propaganda paper, a paper to “introduce Anarchist Communism” to the American people. But in the process and act of introduction by the editors, they also helped to create a very American version of anarchist communism.

What is Anarchist Communism?

From its earliest publication, *Firebrand* conceived itself as a weekly paper introducing anarchist communist ideas to American English-speaking radicals. It was only the second English-language paper in this vein in America, the first, the short-lived *Solidarity* appeared intermittently between 1892 and 1893.²⁵ For most radicals who read the paper, *Firebrand* was their first exposure to these ideas.²⁶ Early editions of *Firebrand*, there did not contain

²⁴ Anon., “Letterbox,” 4.

²⁵ Candace Falk et al., *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years, Vol. 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): 568.

²⁶ *Revolt*, which appeared shortly after the *Firebrand*, was also an American anarchist communist English language paper published intermittently between 1895–1897. Like *Solidarity* it never established a regular publication, and eventually folded. There were however, a number of foreign language anarchist-communist papers available to immigrant readers including *Freiheit* and *Frie Arbeiter Stimme*. Those already aware of the anarchist ideas could also find anarchist communist information in European papers, where the movement was more advanced in its theoretical thinking. In England both *Freedom* and *The Torch* were

ceased publication and eventually moved to the anarchist colony Home in Puget Bay, Washington.¹⁸ Other members of the group included Mary Squire, a corset maker who left Portland for San Francisco in late 1895 on a propaganda tour and later disappeared from the paper, Ezekiel Slabs, a gardener, John Pawson, a woodchopper, Viroqua Daniels, who was a farm woman in California, and Herman Eich, the Jewish rag-picker poet, who died in 1896 when his brain was crushed while hopping trains.¹⁹ All these individuals were American-born and also share working-class backgrounds.

The last important member of the *Firebrand* group is Abe Isaak (1856–1937) and the rest of his family including his wife Mary (1861–1934) and their children, Abe Jr., Peter, and Mary. The Isaaks, unlike many of the other members of the *Firebrand* Group were not American-born, but were Russian Mennonite immigrants. The Isaaks were farmers in Portland, and *Firebrand* often included notes that the paper was late or that Isaak would need time to answer mail because he was getting the hay ready, or working in the hop fields, or simply tending the cows. Abe Isaak later become a printer after learning the trade working on *Firebrand*. The whole family worked on the paper together and eventually the house they built outside Portland was used as the office for *Firebrand*. After his arrest with Addis and A. J. Pope for the publication of obscene material in the paper, Isaak and his family moved to San Francisco where in late 1897 the

¹⁸ Addis, “History of *Firebrand*,” 3, Slabs, “Notes and Comments,” 4. For further biographical details on both Morris and Addis, see *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years, vol. 1*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), especially “Directory of Individuals,” 516, 544 respectively.

¹⁹ Slabs, “Notes and Comments,” 4, Addis, “History of *Firebrand*,” 3. For Herman Eich, See J.H.M., “Another Victim” September 6, 1896, 3 and Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990): 176. Eich, a German Jew who was about 32 when he died, wrote many of the poems that appeared in the first column of the first page of every issue of the paper, including “The Red Flag” which appeared in the second issue of the paper and “Freedom” which appeared in the September 6, 1896 issue, that issue also carried his obituary.

resumed the publication under the new name, *Free Society*. *Free Society*, published from 1897-1904, became the most important and enduring English language anarchist communists papers in the United States at the turn of the century.²⁰

Firebrand, whose masthead proclaimed itself “For the Burning Away of the Cobwebs of Ignorance and Superstition,” was a paper with energy, dedicated editors and contributors, and something new to say, but it was also a paper that was remarkable in its editorial style. The paper saw itself as bringing anarchism to a working-class and English speaking audience, an audience that reflected their own identities. To do this the editors disregarded perfect spelling and typesetting in exchange for the regular publication of *Firebrand*. They understood the paper as propaganda for the anarchist movement, and as such regular publication was the most important consideration. Addis explained, “we are few, very poor, novices, and have kept the paper alive by dint of hardwork and determination. The paper is the very best we can make it under the circumstances.”²¹

For many in the *Firebrand* group, the unprofessional and unfinished nature of the paper was an important defining characteristic, another example of how necessary the social revolution was. Viroqua Daniels explained in an 1896 issue her disdain for other anarchists who refused to write or associate with the paper because of its unfinished nature,

If we are so impoverished that we must spread notions of revolt in a haphazard way instead of in the most finished style, will we hasten the revolution by pulling back in the harness because the leather, it is made of, is not of the finest grade? Suppose an idea

²⁰ For biographical information on Isaak, see *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History*, Vol.1, 536. See also Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995): 37–29.

²¹ Addis, “History of Firebrand,” 3.

we have wrestled with till the perspiration started is ingloriously made as naught by a wrong use of type, is that all we do that ends in failure? Shall fear of ridicule for a little BAD English drive us back to our holes, when we would face legal persecution, and continually from public and friends for the RIGHT TO THINK OUR OWN THOUGHTS AND ACT IN ACCORDANCE WITH OUR OWN OPINIONS? Come, come, comrades. Think better of it.²²

For Daniels and other contributors to the paper the necessity to live, act, and express their ideals far outweighed the need for perfectly spelled copy. Instead the purpose of the paper was propaganda introducing anarchism to a larger American audience. According to Addis the paper “was issued by a group of lovers of freedom, who did not hesitate to style themselves Anarchists, in order to propagate their ideas that society can exist without arbitrary authority — in fact, that true social conditions cannot exist until such authority is first abolished.”²³ The importance of that propaganda, of publishing a paper in clear and common language that would allow working people to understand and accept the ideas of anarchism, a paper capable of establishing the conditions for freedom, need not be published with perfect copy, perfect spelling, perfect grammar, if it was doing the work of propagating anarchism.

In a later issue, the editors more clearly spelled out the perceived shortcomings of their paper, and more important, what they believed to be its strengths. Issues of the *Firebrand* often had long discussions and debates among correspondents, contributors and the editorial group. These discussions sometimes lasted for weeks at a time, covering much the same material: definitions of anarchism, authority, state socialism and anarchist communism, and

²² Viroqua Daniels, “To Those,” April 5, 1896, 3.

²³ Henry Addis, “A True Story of American Officialism,” *Free Society* (November 21, 1897): 1.