

'Anarchist' is often hurled as a slur. But can anarchists teach us something about democracy?

Behind anarchy's bad P.R.

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These days anarchists are all over the news, oddly positioned at both ends of the political spectrum.

Conservatives rail against members of the radical antifa (anti-fascist) movement, claiming they are violent anarchists hellbent on battling the police and destroying property, all in an effort to express their displeasure with the Trump administration. Meanwhile, Trump's critics label him the true anarchist: They charge that, unmoored from law and custom, he indulges in childish tweets and displays a shocking level of incompetence in the Oval Office. In their view, he is a creature of the viscera, spreading chaos (anarchy) wherever he goes.

These divergent views of anarchists illustrate the problem with the label: It is imprecise and malleable, and it means whatever (usually bad) things different people want it to mean. Supposedly the one principle that unites anarchists is their opposition to government, but that statement tells us little about their actual views.

Still, is it possible that self-identified anarchists from the past can tell us something about our politics in the present? Specifically, in the quest for a just and equitable society, are political labels of all kinds not just irrelevant, but counterproductive and even divisive?

Largely forgotten today are the anarchists from America's Gilded Age, men and women who sounded the alarm about many of the same issues that make headlines today — the widening gap between rich and poor; the critical role of labor unions in protecting workers of all kinds; the mixed blessing of technological innovation in the workplace; the corrupt influence of money on politics; and the seductive, destructive power of rapacious profit-seeking.

During the late 19th century, one woman agitator in particular attracted large, adoring crowds all over the country. She began each of her speeches with the defiant declaration, "I am an anarchist!" From the beginning of her first speaking tour (in the fall of 1886) until her death in 1942, Lucy Parsons reveled in her own notoriety, with reporters hanging on her every word and seeking her out for interviews. She told one inquisitive reporter, "I amount to nothing to the world and people care nothing for me."

In this assertion she was wrong.

Parsons's long and tumultuous career as orator and editor has largely been overshadowed by that of her husband Albert. They were an odd couple — she the daughter of a former slave and a white man, he a veteran of the Confederate army. They met in Waco, Tex., after the Civil War, and in 1873 moved to Chicago, where they embraced first socialism and then anarchism.

Albert gained fame for his long-winded speeches brimming with statistics documenting the dire state of the urban laboring classes. In November 1887, he and three other anarchists were hanged for their supposed role in the Haymarket Square bombing, which took the lives of seven police officers. The identity of the person who threw the bomb remains unknown to this day.

Lucy Parsons launched her own national speaking tours while Albert was in prison and again after his death. Local newspaper editors feared her influence over the masses, but gave her credit for her eloquence and passion. She was arguably the most famous African American speaker of her day, and the most popular anarchist among white urban workers (surpassing, for example, Emma Goldman, who was ambivalent toward labor unions).

In Lucy Parsons's time, anarchists divided themselves into three ever-squabbling groups. She represented those who held that trade unions were the building blocks of the good society — small groups of men and women who would cooperate (and not compete) with each other for the good of the whole. Other self-proclaimed anarchists were radical libertarians, contemptuous of all kinds of associations, even those that were voluntary. And a third group of anarchists favored a strong workers' state, the kind that yielded totalitarian regimes such as the Soviet Union.

Lucy Parsons fits uneasily on the right-left spectrum that is used today to label politicians and ideas. She considered the federal government inherently oppressive, but also denounced established institutions of all kinds, such as political parties, churches and reform societies. She rejected what we today call identity politics based on race or gender, arguing that her background was irrelevant to her activism.

Parsons engaged in rhetoric that was highly provocative, pushing the boundaries of First Amendment protections. Disgusted with police attacks on peaceful gatherings of workers, she urged a militant form of self-defense. "Learn the use of explosives!" she exhorted her followers.

Parsons's life was full of contradictions. She never acknowledged she had been born a slave, claiming falsely that she was the daughter of freeborn Hispanic and Native American parents. She steadfastly ignored the plight of segregated, disfranchised and terrorized African Americans, preferring to appeal to the white urban laboring classes exclusively. She dismissed Goldman and other "free-love" anarchists as immoral, but carried on highly public, sensationalized love affairs.

In key respects Parsons seems prescient, predicting that machines would gradually erode the middle class, and that capitalism would naturally continue to foster extreme forms of inequality. She disputed the idea that either the Republicans or the Democrats could address society's most pressing problems. She was familiar with the forces that stifled the voices of radicals, including the undercover cops who monitored her speeches and shadowed her every move — and she displayed a great deal of courage speaking out despite these forces and fiercely defending free speech.

She reminds us that dissent in American history has sprung from places outside the bounds of partisan politics, and that an ossified divide between the two parties is unlikely to produce the kind of meaningful economic and social change that most Americans so desperately want and need.

At the same time, her career provides some cautionary lessons: She and her comrades emulated European-style labor-organizing tactics, which were ill-suited to the United States then and now. For example, Parsons denigrated the right to vote, ridiculed the symbolic significance of the U.S. flag and considered social reform (in contrast to social revolution) a waste of time.

And finally, anarchists like Parsons focused exclusively on white urban factory workers, dismissing other groups — especially vulnerable African Americans and Chinese — as outside the bounds of class struggle. In today's fractured society, with workers identifying themselves on the basis of their gender, race, ethnicity and task, we pursue such tribalistic policies at our peril.

The times demand a unified struggle among workers, not the scapegoating of one group by another — a tactic now quite familiar to us, and in fact encouraged and promoted at the highest levels of the federal government.

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