

**A Fury For Justice: Lucy Parsons And  
The Revolutionary Anarchist  
Movement in Chicago**

Jacob McKean

2006

# Contents

Introduction . . . . .	3
Origins . . . . .	6
A New Life in Chicago . . . . .	8
Politicization . . . . .	10
The Basis of a Movement . . . . .	15
The New Politics of Anarchism . . . . .	16
Racism, Violence, and Revolution . . . . .	21
Class and the Basis of Civilization . . . . .	26
Conclusion . . . . .	28
Works Cited . . . . .	31
Footnotes: . . . . .	31

## Introduction

For six and a half decades Lucy Parsons played a pivotal role in some of the most influential social movements of her time. A fiery speaker, bold social critic, and tireless organizer, Parsons was a prominent figure in radical American political movements from the late 1870s until her death at the age of 89 on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1942. Despite playing an important part in such iconic struggles as the movement for the 8-hour day, the defense of the Haymarket martyrs, and the founding of the IWW, Lucy Parsons has been largely ignored by historians of all stripes. Parsons sole biographer, writing in 1976, explained her invisibility thusly: “Lucy Parsons was black, a woman, and working class — three reasons people are often excluded from history.”<sup>1</sup> While this helps explain in part Parsons’ absence from mainstream historiography, it is not entirely satisfying. While other working class black women found their way into academic writing and political iconography with the rise of Black Nationalist movements in the 1960s and 70s and the concurrent proliferation of Black Studies programs at American universities, Lucy Parsons was mostly left behind. Unfortunately, when she has been included in academic writing she has usually not been allowed to speak for herself. Most of the academics that have mentioned Lucy Parsons (generally very briefly) have recast her as they would have preferred her to be, usually as either a reflection of their own politics or as an example of the failures of past movements. The only biography of Parsons, Carolyn Ashbaugh’s *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary*, combines misrepresentation with inaccuracy. Ashbaugh nonsensically claims that Parsons was not an anarchist, a fact beyond the point of argument for anyone that has read Lucy Parsons’s work, and she groundlessly claims that Parsons joined the Communist Party towards the end of her life. Sadly, this has allowed every writer after Ashbaugh to make the same erroneous claim.

A notable example is Angela Y. Davis’s groundbreaking book, *Women, Race, & Class*. Davis, relying entirely on Ashbaugh’s flawed work, paints a misleading and inaccurate picture of Parsons’s life accompanied by a facile analysis of her politics. Davis apparently sought to situate Parsons in a pre-fabricated political lineage that suited Davis’s own political inclinations. Davis repeats Ashbaugh’s error by saying, “Her political development ranged from her youthful advocacy of anarchism to her membership in the Communist party during her mature years.” She goes on to state that Parsons was involved in the “anarchist” Socialist Labor Party in the late 1870s, a self-evident misrepresentation of the SLP’s politics, and goes on to say that after helping found the IWW at the turn of century, Parsons became active in

---

<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1976), 6.

the Communist Party in the 1920s. Davis precisely inverts the truth. Parsons was in fact a socialist for some amount of time between 1874 and 1881 when she was active in the SLP, although she would claim to have become an anarchist around 1877. At some point in that period, Lucy Parsons rejected electoralism and began calling for the immediate destruction of the state and the dissolution of all hierarchy. From that time forward she was a self-proclaimed and unapologetic anarchist, and in fact, a groundbreaking thinker within that political current. She never joined the Communist Party, nor did she move closer to Marxism later in life.<sup>2</sup> The attempts to paint her as a “socialist” or a “mature” Communist deprive Parsons of the ability to speak for herself and deprive us of her considerable intellectual contributions. These efforts display a disregard for Parsons’s own words that go far beyond mere sloppiness. They force the reader to question the motives of the authors who have misrepresented her for so long (almost all of whom are Marxist academics) and return to Ashbaugh’s own explanation for her exclusion from most historical narratives. Apparently, being Black, a woman, and working class has not only meant that she was excluded from history but also that she is not trusted to speak for herself by those who have included her. Additionally, being a vocal anarchist has meant that she has not received much attention from liberal scholars who prefer reform minded women to vocal insurrectionists. Academics that have explored radical women from this era seem to prefer Emma Goldman, a middle class woman with an uncomplicated identity (white) whose analysis more closely mirrors that of the New Left. To expand on Ashbaugh’s analysis, Lucy Parsons was a woman with an ambiguous identity (sometimes literally; her middle name cannot be confirmed), unpopular but influential politics, and an unglamorous job (she was a lifelong dressmaker), Lucy Parsons has not found a home in any of dominant strains of academic history.

This is especially unfortunate because Lucy Parsons was not just an adherent of an unpopular ideology; she was a trailblazer in radical theory and criticism. In fact, in historical perspective, she stands as one of the most original and radical thinkers and activists of her time. She was the author of groundbreaking essays such as “The Principles of Anarchism,” “Southern Lynchings,” and “To Tramps,” essays which offered a radically new take on organizing, violence, and direct action. Seventy five years before the Black Panthers, she urged armed self-defense against racist violence, but also called on African Americans to not limit themselves to self-defense. She argued that a revolution to dissolve the state and end capitalism was a necessary condition for the creation of an anti-racist society. An ardent feminist

---

<sup>2</sup> For a definitive refutation of Ashbaugh’s claim that Parsons joined the Communist Party see, Gale Ahrens, “Lucy Parsons: Mystery Revolutionist,” in *Lucy Parsons: Freedom, Equality Solidarity*, ed. Gale Ahrens (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 2003), 20.

before such a word existed, she argued *against* extending the franchise to women on the grounds that the state should be smashed, not accommodated. As one of the most influential founding members of the Industrial Workers of the World, she pioneered the idea of the sit-down strike, relentlessly advocated sabotage as a tool in the class struggle, and argued forcefully for an all-inclusive union that made no distinction based on class, sex, or race and spoke out specifically for the rights of sex-workers. She vigorously opposed war and imperialism in the face of massive repression and the betrayal of many of her former colleagues during WWI. And she never let the radical movements of her time forget Haymarket, not merely as a bit of activist trivia, but as a vital lesson in the nature of the state and the necessity of struggle. She also used the story of Haymarket as a vehicle to teach younger radicals the militant organizing methods of the Chicago anarchist movement in the 1880s and insurrectionary brand of anarchism they espoused.

Unfortunately, her vital contributions to the anarchist movement before and long after the Haymarket Affair have been almost completely ignored. Sometimes cast as nothing more than the wife of her husband Albert, a renowned anarchist and one of the Haymarket martyrs, Lucy Parsons has been unable to escape from the long shadow cast by that momentous event in American history. Sometimes said to have been propelled into activism by her husband's judicial murder, she was in fact a major figure in the Chicago anarchist movement in the years before Haymarket. A regular speaker at radical political events of all kinds, a widely read and very popular writer, and a key organizer in the general strike for the 8-hour day in 1886, Lucy Parsons was both a powerful figure and an anomaly. She was an English-speaking, U.S.-born woman of color in a revolutionary movement populated predominately by German-speaking male immigrants. This unique combination of circumstances was made all the more remarkable by fact that the Civil War had ended only twenty years earlier, and Lucy, possibly a former slave, was married to a former Confederate soldier turned Radical Republican (later turned anarchist.) This odd couple rose to prominence without taking any official leadership positions; they were part of an explicitly nonhierarchical movement composed of autonomous, federated collectives. After Haymarket, Lucy did achieve a newfound level of national notoriety but not as an advocate for her husband's innocence, as one might expect. Instead, she used the platform created by the national coverage of Haymarket to make the case for anarchy and against capitalism and the state, noting all the while that her husband was in fact guilty of what he had been convicted: being an anarchist.

This essay will explore the life and work of Lucy Parsons before Haymarket, focusing primarily on her involvement in the International Working People's Association in Chicago and the revolutionary philosophy she articulated in the pages of its English-language newspaper, *The Alarm*. These articles were written in the for-

mative years of her political life and show the development of her unique vision of anarchy, a vision she constantly renovated and adapted to the conditions in which she found herself. Parsons also cultivated her pluralistic approach to activism and ideology during this time as part of a heterogeneous radical milieu inspired by an action-oriented, anti-dogmatic ethic. No radical author understood better than Parsons the philosophical implications of consensus-based, non-hierarchical organizing, and her writings offer a window into the new radical politics of the late nineteenth century. Always following points to their logical and sometimes discomfiting conclusions, she refused to shy away from any form of action or rhetoric. She gained notoriety, both positive and negative, for imploring the working class to take revolution into their own hands and do away with the constraints of organizationalism and Christian morality. She furiously denounced racist violence in the South and the exploitation of African Americans a decade before Ida B. Wells began her more well-known career. Finally, she launched a scathing critique of Western civilization and its central institutions and spoofed the logic of imperialism and its cultural chauvinism. In her short career before Haymarket, and the important changes it brought to her life, Lucy Parsons was able to forge a new insurrectionary anarchism, a revolutionary political philosophy that set her apart from even her most radical peers.

## Origins

Very little is known of Lucy Parsons's life before her arrival in Chicago; what is known is difficult to confirm. The absolute truth of where, when, and to whom Parsons was born will never be absolutely determined with the information presently available. Parsons never spoke of her early life, and so nothing is known of her possible experiences during slavery, the Civil War, or even Reconstruction. Carolyn Ashbaugh, Parsons's biographer, holds that she was born in March of 1853 near Waco, Texas as a slave of James G. and Philip Gathings. In 1849, Philip Gathings had a daughter named Lucy; it is possible that a girl born to one of his slaves about four years later was named after the master's daughter.<sup>3</sup> This information is far from unqualified fact, however; while it does make a certain degree of sense, it is speculative. What little is known of Parsons's young life comes from Albert, who met a teenaged girl by the name of Lucy living with a African American man named Oliver Gaithings in northwestern Texas sometime between 1869 and 1871. Precisely how that meeting occurred is unclear; the various accounts on record are contradictory and lack supporting evidence. It is known that Albert, a former

---

<sup>3</sup> Ashbaugh, 267–8

Confederate scout who became politicized after the war, worked for various Radical Republican causes and newspapers. It was likely during one of his campaigns or fact-finding missions, which usually took him into heavily African American counties in Texas, that he met Lucy. The couple married (perhaps legally, perhaps not) in 1871 or 1872 around Austin, Texas and moved to Chicago not long after.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, far more is unknown than known about this portion of Lucy's life. This has led to considerable uncertainty and debate about where she should be located in history.

Lucy Parsons claimed throughout her life that she was of Mexican and Native American ancestry.<sup>5</sup> Newspaper accounts from the time, however, constantly referred to her as "colored", "black", or various derogatory terms implying African ancestry. Some accounts written by activists who knew her later in life made similar claims, and some accounts even claim that photographs prove her African ancestry. Some scholars, such as Ashbaugh and Davis, claim that Parsons invented her Mexican and Native American ancestry as a way of avoiding certain obstacles, such as laws against "miscegenation." This possibility is congruous with a history of African Americans adopting an alternative racial or ethnic identity as way of breaking out of the constraints imposed upon Black racial identity. As Richard Brent Turner says in his discussion of Noble Drew Ali's construction of a "Moorish American" identity, "When black leaders concentrate on ethnicity and construct new ethnic names for their races, they throw water on the coals of racial discourse, thereby making themselves and their constituencies more acceptable to the white American mainstream."<sup>6</sup> It seems possible that Lucy Parsons attempted such a maneuver. It is certain beyond any doubt that she was perceived as Black or "colored" by most observers in her era, and thus the social obstacles of her racialization were very real, regardless of her true ancestry. While a Mexican and Native American identity would certainly not have been impervious to racial stigmatization, it may have appeared sufficiently exotic to mitigate the worst effects of racism in the late nineteenth century.

If she did in fact come of age near Waco, Texas after the Civil War, she would have witnessed sweeping racist violence. The Ku Klux Klan was especially active in Texas almost immediately after the war, and Lucy herself would have been under constant threat. Between 1867 and 1873, Lucy and Albert witnessed or heard about hundreds of murders, rapes, beatings, mutilations, and various other crimes committed against African Americans by the Klan. Albert himself was targeted a number of times by the Klan for political activities (a bullet from an encounter

---

<sup>4</sup> Ahrens, 4

<sup>5</sup> "Mrs. Parsons Career," *Washington Post*, September, 17, 1886, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 96.

with the Klan remained lodged in his body for the remainder of his life), especially those on behalf of African Americans. Given these circumstances, it is not difficult to understand why Lucy would have wanted to avoid public identification as a Black woman. Would a Black woman have been allowed to get away with everything Lucy Parsons did? It is possible that Lucy herself just didn't want to find out. It is also possible to take her claim of Mexican and Native American ancestry at face value. She may in fact have had complex ancestral roots containing all of these identities and her presence in Northwestern Texas in the late 1860s lends credence to this possibility. The accusation that Lucy Parsons "denied her Blackness" ignores this possibility and again ignores her own words. Her ancestry, whatever it was, will never be definitively determined. Criticism based on assumptions of her ancestry cannot stand the test of reason.

## A New Life in Chicago

Sometime in 1873 or 1874, Lucy and Albert Parsons moved to Chicago. They moved from one place of deep hardship and vigorous political activity to another. Although they left Klan violence and the rapidly Redeeming South behind them, they entered an unstable industrial metropolis in the midst of the worst depression the country had ever seen, the Panic of 1873. Until then, Chicago seemed like a city that couldn't be stopped. The city experienced its first major economic boom during the Civil War when its slaughtering and packing industries won military contracts for the supply of rations to the Union Army. It enjoyed access to the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River (via the Illinois and Michigan Canal Link), thus making it a hub for trade between the East and West of the United States. By the end of the Civil War, every major railroad passed through Chicago, and it served as the main processing center for raw Western goods on their way to Eastern markets.<sup>7</sup> All of the goods that flowed through Chicago required some degree of manufacturing, so the city became a testing ground for industrial capitalism. New methods of factory production and labor management were constantly implemented and tested by the up-and-coming capitalist class. In doing so, factory owners realized previously unimaginable profits, but they also sowed the seeds of labor unrest unlike that which the city and the country had ever seen.

The city's population doubled in the 1860s by drawing in young rural workers and huge numbers of European immigrants. 37,000 came from the new German states, 20,000 from Ireland, 9,000 from Norway and Sweden, 8,500 from England, Scotland, and Wales, and 7,700 from the British provinces of Canada. The vast

---

<sup>7</sup> James Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, The First Labor Movement and The Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America* (New York: Pantheon Book, 2006), 28–29



majority of these new migrants to the boomtown in the Midwest found work in manufacturing; the number of people employed in this sector grew by five times during and after the Civil War.<sup>8</sup> During these heady days, demand for labor outstripped the supply and wages rose, along with purchasing power. Cheap housing was made available in the form of vast pine-box shantytowns that quickly spread out from the city center. But the rigors of industrial manufacturing were unlike those of previous production systems. Workers were forced to labor for as many as twelve hours a day in dangerous conditions under the close watch of hostile foremen. Factory owners demanded nonstop production in order to meet the endless demand for pork, lumber, and tractors. Unwilling to spend all of their waking hours at work, Chicago's new industrial working class began to take action. Beginning in 1866, trade union activists, former abolitionists, and grizzled veterans of Europeans labor battles began forming "8-hour Leagues" to lobby for the enactment of an 8-hour day. The movement resulted in the creation of the National Labor Union, the country's first trade union coalition, and the Grand Eight Hour League, a federation of local groups seeking a legal limit on the hours of work. The campaign was a success. The politically savvy workers mobilized bipartisan support for an 8-hour bill and it was signed into law on March 2, 1867; it was to take effect on May 1<sup>st</sup> of that year.<sup>9</sup> Illinois's manufacturers proved less amenable to the 8-hour day than its lawmakers. Seventy factory owners quickly formed a manufacturer's association to resist the new law. Workers and 8-hour organizers responded by threatening a general strike if the law was not obeyed. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, tens of thousands of workers and activists marched through the streets of Chicago to support the 8-hour day and urge the state's manufacturers to comply with the new law. The following day, Chicago's employers refused to abide by the new statute and ordered workers to carry out their normal shifts. Workers across the city walked off the job and for the next five days the city's streets were occupied by a sea of strikers and their supporters. It didn't take long for local authorities to panic; the city's mayor ordered the police and a nearby army unit to put down the unruly workers. The strike was quickly and brutally suppressed. Deeply disappointed workers began returning to their jobs, working their customary ten to twelve hour shifts. Chicago would not see any more labor unrest for several years.

After the failure of the 8-hour movement, Chicago seemed to be headed down a path of uncontested capitalization: investment flowed in unabated, production constantly increased, and workers were seemingly pacified by the might of the state. However, on the night of October 8, 1871, Chicago was brought down from its lofty heights. Virtually the entire city burned to the ground, including the en-

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 30

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 25

tire business district, City Hall, most factories, and homes large and small, 17,450 buildings in all. As devastating as the fire was, the factors that had created the city's wealth had not burned with it. The prospects for recovery seemed excellent and Chicago's "leading men" threw themselves into its reconstruction with abandon. Speculators and entrepreneurs of all kinds joined the mix and it seemed as though the fire would be just another easily surmountable bump in the road. These dreams too came crashing down, this time at the hands of the Panic of 1873. Rebuilding in Chicago slowed considerably and many workers lost their jobs or found their wages slashed. In dire straits and unable to find relief, 20,000 working and unemployed people marched on the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, the private agency controlled by local businessmen that was supposed to distribute welfare to the unemployed. The march shocked Chicago's politicians and commentators, to whom the sudden unrest was inexplicable. The city had elected a populist mayor who had publicly sided with the city's working people, and there had been no indication that workers might act on their own behalf. When local Workingmen's Party leaders organized a second march on the Society, middle class workers and businessmen organized a militia, the First Regiment, to bolster the police force. The armed men intimidated the workers sufficiently to prevent the second march from taking place.<sup>10</sup>

## Politicization

This was the city in which a young interracial couple from the South chose to make their home. They moved into a small apartment on Mohawk Street, a predominantly German immigrant neighborhood on the North Side. Albert had founded a small Radical Republican newspaper in Texas and in the process had learned the skills necessary to work as a typographer. In Chicago, he quickly found work at the *Times* as a hot type setter and joined Typographical Union No. 16, one of the most active and radical trade unions in the city. Through his work at the *Times* as well as his active participation in his union local, Albert quickly learned the political landscape of the city and plunged in headlong. He joined the Social Democratic Party of North America, the electoral organ of Karl Marx's First International in the United States, in March of 1876 and quickly became its English language spokesman.<sup>11</sup> When Marx dissolved the First International in the summer of 1876, Albert helped reorganize its constituent groups into the Workingmen's Party of the United States. The English-speaking cluster of the Party often met in the Parsons's apartment, meetings in which Albert and Lucy helped devise the socialist's political agenda

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 50–51

<sup>11</sup> Ashbaugh, Pg. 17

for the city. Albert was nominated as the Party's candidate for Alderman of the 15<sup>th</sup> Ward in 1877, the district in which he and Lucy lived. When Albert got almost 16% of the vote, it was considered a major success for the growing party, which captured 12% of the vote overall, but no offices.<sup>12</sup>

Participation in the SLP constituted Lucy Parsons's first involvement in an organized political movement. In addition to the couple's growing involvement in electoral politics, Lucy later remembered the railroad strike of 1877 as a turning point in her politicization. She wrote:

It was during the great railroad strike of 1877 that I first became interested in what is known as the "Labor Question." I then thought, as many thousands of earnest, sincere people think, that the aggregate power operating in human society, known as government, could be made an instrument in the hands of the oppressed to alleviate their sufferings...I came to understand how organized governments used their concentrated power to retard progress by...silencing the voice of discontent...I came to understand that such concentrated power can always be wielded in the interest of the few at the expense of the many. Government, in its last analysis, is this power reduced to a science.<sup>13</sup>

It seems unlikely that Parsons first considered "the Labor Question" in the summer of 1877, however. It is doubtful that she would have married a prominent Radical Republican who openly advocated for the rights of former slaves and hosted regular socialist meetings in her home without considering the politics of labor. She was almost certainly introduced to the writings of Marx and Lasalle through the Social Democratic Party and the Workingmen's Party between her arrival in Chicago in 1874 and the strike in 1877. If, however, the railroad strike did in fact compel Lucy Parsons to take her first steps toward anarchism by rejecting the state as she claimed later, she was well ahead of her husband. When the strike reached Chicago on July 21, 1877, workers engaged in all manner of sabotage and illegal forms of demonstrations.<sup>14</sup> Albert Parsons and other socialist leaders urged the workers to remain peaceful and trust in the efficacy of the ballot box. Albert rose to prominence by playing a highly visible role in the strike, but he was, by all accounts, an avowedly moderate figure, a stance applauded by even the shrill and reactionary *Chicago Tribune*. His employer, however, was less forgiving. Albert was fired from the *Times* and dragged in front of the Chief of Police and members

---

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Nelson, *Beyond the Martyrs: A Social History of Chicago's Anarchists, 1870-1900* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 56-57

<sup>13</sup> Lucy Parsons, "The Principles of Anarchism" in Ahrens, 29

<sup>14</sup> Green, 75

of the Citizens' Association, the local business counsel that had founded the First Regiment, to answer for his agitation. Nonetheless, Albert and the Workingmen's Party maintained their faith in the state, continually organizing rallies at which they urged "every honest workingman to help us preserve order" and vote in the upcoming elections.<sup>15</sup> On Thursday, July 26, the military entered the city to put down the strike with the help of the police and hundreds of deputized civilians. After sporadic but intense fighting throughout the city over the next few days, 20 to 35 workers were dead with 200 seriously wounded; no police or military officers were hurt. The Chicago press applauded the violent suppression of the "commune" and argued that more violence against workers, even "extermination," would have been justified.<sup>16</sup>

If the Great Upheaval of 1877 changed Lucy Parsons's mind about the state, the decline of electoral socialism must have confirmed her new belief. After a brief period of growth, socialism rapidly became irrelevant in Chicago politics. The Workingmen's Party joined a national coalition of socialist parties and changed its name to the Socialistic Labor Party. Albert became the assistant editor of *The Socialist*, the first English-language socialist newspaper in Chicago, and the party ran candidates for every contested city office for the first time. However, within seven months the *Tribune* accurately announced "The Abatement of Socialism."<sup>17</sup> As the events of 1877 faded into memory, the SLP sought to counter its waning support by fielding more moderate candidates, which led to a bitter split in the party, with more radical elements openly criticizing party officials and candidates in the Party's press. The election of 1880 was by all measures a complete disaster for the SLP. Across the board votes for the SLP were down dramatically, and in the one ward in which the Party actually won an election the victory was denied to them by blatant fraud. Ballot box stuffing, perpetuated with the help of both Democrats and Republicans, made a deep impression on many SLP members. Convinced that the Party was moving away from its role as the voice of the radical working class, the "radical elements" in the Party began to split with the Party leadership. The "radical elements" within the Party, as described by a Party leader, were comprised of the majority of the Germans, some of the English-speakers (including Parsons), and a majority of the Scandinavians. The radicals took control of the Party's newspapers and formed a new party, the Revolutionary Socialistic Party (RSP), which took part in only one election. Their effort could be described as half-hearted at best, since most members of the RSP had already concluded that elections were nothing more than hopeless spectacles. The English-language branch of the SLP virtually

---

<sup>15</sup> Nelson, 56

<sup>16</sup> Green, 80

<sup>17</sup> Nelson, Pg. 66

disappeared and its newspaper, *The Socialist*, was folded. Both parties made pitiful showings in the elections of 1882; the RSP press increasingly argued that electoral politics were futile.<sup>18</sup>

Lucy Parsons had been leaning in that direction for some time. In letters sent to the *Socialist* in 1878–79, she illustrated her growing sense that capitalism and the state were inextricably linked. Without explicitly ruling out electoralism, she condemned laws and the state as extensions of the capitalist class and enemies of working people. She wrote, “Let the masses understand that these robbers hold this property (which is so much unpaid labor) under the plea of the laws which they themselves have made, and by the sanction of the very men they have locked out to *starve*...”<sup>19</sup> Parsons’s identification of the state as the protectors of capital and the enforcers of inequality did not seem to lend itself to electoral reformism, nor did she call for the destruction of the state, as she would in the coming years. Her parenthetical comment on the means of capital accumulation illustrated her familiarity with Marx’s labor theory of value, a theory she would cling to throughout her life and which became a hallmark of her rhetoric. Expanding her critique of the state in another letter dated January 25, 1879, Parsons denounced nationalism and patriotism as ruses of the “New Slavocracy” and the “monied-ocracy,” shams used to get working people to fight the wars of the elite. And while she called the Civil War “the late struggle between slavery and freedom,” she made clear that freedom was not the victor. According to Parsons, not only were the brave soldiers who fought in the war tricked to “believe that this was [their] country,” but they were denied “the right to live” upon their return.<sup>20</sup> Her budding critique of the nation-state made her an influential thinker within the radical faction of the SLP. When radicals from across the United States convened the Congress of North American Socialists in Pittsburgh in October 1883, the movement that sprung from it would bear the deep impressions of Lucy Parsons’s cutting-edge radicalism.

The Congress resulted in the RSP joining the International Working People’s Association (IWPA), a new “Black International” founded by anarchists after the dissolution of Marx’s First International. A group of delegates to the Congress consisting of Victor Drury (a refugee from the Paris Commune,) Johann Most (the most prominent German anarchist in the United States), Albert Parsons, Joseph Reifgraber (Editor of ‘Die Parole’, St. Louis) and August Spies (a leader in the RSP and future Haymarket Martyr) drafted The Pittsburgh Manifesto as a statement of the IWPA’s purpose. Perhaps the first explicitly anarchist document crafted on

---

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, Pg. 72

<sup>19</sup> Lucy Parsons, “On the ‘Harmony’ Between Capital and Labor: Or, The Robber and the Robbed,” in Ahrens, 40

<sup>20</sup> Lucy Parsons, “‘Relics From the Late Carnage’: The New Slavocracy and the Unemployed”, in Ahrens, 41

U.S. soil, the Pittsburgh Manifesto signaled a major new ideological thread in the American radical tradition. Despite being authored primarily by Europeans, it begins with Thomas Jefferson's introduction to "The Declaration of Independence" which states that it is the "right" and "duty" of the people to overthrow governments veering towards "Despotism." It then asks, "[D]o not the necessities of our present time compel us to reassert [this] declaration?"<sup>21</sup> The *Manifesto* then states the labor theory of value as evidence of the inherent injustice of capitalism and insists that the capitalist economic system is characterized by coercion and endless exploitation. It goes on to argue that the only purpose of the state, the church, and the "capitalistic press" is to maintain this system and that both the state and capital can only be destroyed by a violent, international revolution of the proletariat. The program of the IWPA is then listed as follows:

First: — Destruction of the existing class rule, by all means, i.e. by energetic, relentless, revolutionary, and international action.

Second: — Establishment of a free society based upon co-operative organization of production

Third: — Free exchange of equivalent products by and between the productive organizations without commerce or profit-mongery.

Fourth: — Organization of education on a secular, scientific and equal basis for both sexes.

Fifth: — Equal rights for all without distinction to sex or race.

Sixth: — Regulation of all public affairs by free contracts between autonomous (independent) communes and associations, resting on a federalistic basis.<sup>22</sup>

Although the *Pittsburgh Manifesto* was clearly influenced by *The Communist Manifesto*, there are important differences. The *Pittsburgh Manifesto* does not call for the "conquest of political power by the proletariat," nor did the authors believe that the centralization of power in worker hands would lead to the eventual withering away of the state, as did Marx and Engels.<sup>23</sup> The *Pittsburgh Manifesto* and the movement that grew out of it had no place for centralization or leadership of any kind. Their call for the immediate abolition of the state was the extension of a belief in direct democracy and non-hierarchical organizing, a dramatically different

---

<sup>21</sup> "To The Workingmen of America," *The Alarm*, Vol. 1, No. 1, October 4, 1884, 4

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 2003), 31, 43

starting point from Marx and Engels. The anarchists who met in Pittsburgh also had no use for “stages” in revolution. Direct action was their guiding methodology, so indirect means seemed to invalidate their desired ends.

## The Basis of a Movement

The Black International as an organizational force took hold in only one city: Chicago. It was in this movement, quite unlike anything else before or since, that Lucy Parsons became a forceful voice for a new brand of revolutionary anarchism. Chicago’s anarchist movement was built in the shell of its old socialist movement. Six small clusters of like-minded individuals survived the split with the SLP and became the founding collectives of the International Working People’s Association. Structured somewhere between a federation and loose network, the IWPA was neither a party nor a traditional mass-based membership organization. This novel approach resulted in a rapid growth in the number of people associated with the collectives that made up the IWPA. In one year, ten new collectives or “clusters” were added, bringing the total to sixteen, and the size of all of the collectives grew. The “American Group” (the only English-language cluster) began with five members in November 1883. Within one year it had grown to 45 members, and by April 1885 it had 95 members, and then 150 by November of that year. By the start of 1886, the Group had 175 members, including 15–20 women and soon added a second “American Group.”<sup>24</sup> Other IWPA collectives for which information exists showed similar growth, with particularly strong growth in the Bohemian, German, Czech and Moravian communities. The growing numbers of clusters reflects the unique organizational structure of the IWPA. Clusters were structured non-hierarchically and had complete autonomy; the only requirement for affiliating with the IWPA was endorsement of the Pittsburgh Manifesto. All members were responsible for sharing the work of growing their collective and no permanent leadership positions were created. The facilitator or “chairman” of each meeting was elected by the attendees, with a different member taking the job each time. The recording secretary and treasurer were elected and rotated every six months and could be recalled at any time. No officers were repeatedly reelected, showing that democratic participation was not just a catch phrase for the IWPA. The structure necessitated total participation of the membership and no individual or faction was able to control any aspect of the organization.<sup>25</sup> Even though the IWPA in Chicago began as an outgrowth of the SLP, its membership was distinctly different. An analysis of the 2,800 people that composed the IWPA’s twenty-six clusters by 1886 shows that

---

<sup>24</sup> Nelson, 103–104

<sup>25</sup> Nelson, 105, 108

Chicago's anarchists tended to be newer immigrants, more unskilled, younger, and less white collar than its socialists. Only about one fifth of IWPA members spoke English.<sup>26</sup>

This decentralized, non-hierarchical structure supported a large number of additional clubs and organizations that helped give Chicago's anarchist movement its unique social and political character. By 1886, the various collectives published seven weekly newspapers in five different languages, supported five armed militias, a number of singing and theatrical societies, cooperatives, mutual aid societies, free-thinking leagues, and social organizations of various kinds. Less organized but probably as important to the IWPA's growth was its visible presence and participation in the rich and heterogeneous saloon culture of Chicago's immigrant neighborhoods. Chicago's saloons were the sight of many IWPA cluster meetings, and they served as informal debate forums, social clubs, propaganda distribution centers, and cultural societies that were crucial sites for the spread of anarchism amongst Chicago's immigrant working class.

## The New Politics of Anarchism

The publications of the Chicago anarchists present the richest sources of information about the new theoretical approach of the IWPA. Single sentence slogans such as, "The true science of government is the science of getting rid of government", "The rights of capital are the wrongs of labor", and "In the name of law, authority, and government, the human race is enslaved" presented an easily digestible version of the emerging "Chicago Idea" anarchism, a vision that Lucy Parsons continually pushed in new directions.<sup>27</sup> The Chicago Idea was characterized by a Marxist-influenced analysis of capital and labor (especially in the form of the labor theory of value), a rejection of reform and electoralism, a belief in the necessity of violent class warfare and the immediate dissolution of all hierarchy and coercive social systems, including the state. While the *Pittsburgh Manifesto* was the first written expression of the Chicago Idea, it was heavily influenced by the earlier life experience of people like Albert and Lucy Parsons. Having seen the pervasive violence of the Redeeming South and its devastating effect on Reconstruction, the Parsons' would not have needed much convincing that armed self-defense was necessary and electoral politics were of questionable efficacy.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, it is not hard to see why Albert and Lucy, an interracial couple with a history of

---

<sup>26</sup> Nelson, 101

<sup>27</sup> *The Alarm*, Vol. 1, No 1, 1

<sup>28</sup> David Roediger, "Albert Parsons: Anarchist as Trade Unionist," in Haymarket Scrapbook ed. David Roediger and Franklin Rosemont (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1986), 32



anti-racist activism, would have been attracted to anarchism. At a time when most socialist parties in the United States were leading anti-Chinese protests and riots, the heavily immigrant Chicago anarchists were devoid of nativism. When a socialist group, the similarly named International Workingmen's Association, proposed a merger with the IWPA, C.S. Griffin responded in the pages of *The Alarm* that the "important difference" between the two groups revolved around "the Chinese question." Commenting on the IWA's exclusionary membership practices, Griffin wrote, "The I.W.P.A. would never feel that its ranks were complete if it excluded the working people of any nationality whatever." He went on to accuse the IWA of acting as "the tools of capitalism" for promoting racism which served to divide the working class.<sup>29</sup>

Chicago Idea anarchism was characterized by a pluralistic approach to organizing and a non-dogmatic view of ideology. The books offered for sale in *The Alarm* included the "Communist Manifesto" by Marx and Engels, "Anarchy: By An Anarchist" by Elisee Reclus, "God and the State" by Mikhail Bakunin, "The Beast of Property" by Johann Most, and a variety of anarchist periodicals from around the United States, each representing distinctly different takes on anarchy. The paper itself published a diverse array of viewpoints, many of which sparked lively exchanges of letters which consumed a large portion of the paper's pages. While no single viewpoint dominated *The Alarm*, the most frequent contributors, Dyer Lum, Albert Parsons, and Lizee Swank, were all adherents to the basic tenets of the Chicago Idea. Lucy Parsons was in some ways a radical amongst radicals. Her articles appeared irregularly, almost always under a special masthead reading "Written for The Alarm." The content of her articles usually broke from the general consensus. However, the rest of the newspaper was usually not far behind. After one of Parsons's broadsides, there was almost always a noticeable shift in the rhetoric and emphasis of subsequent articles on the same topic, often bearing the marks of her analysis.

A major influence on both Parsons and the Chicago anarchists was Johann Most, the German anarchist who moved to New York after spending over a year in prison for writing an article calling for the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. *The Alarm* frequently reprinted his speeches and carried news of his public appearances, but his voice was most present in the newspaper's editorials addressing the use of violence in the revolutionary anarchist struggle. Two works by Most, *The Beast of Property* and *The Science of Revolutionary Warfare* formed the foundation of the Chicago Idea anarchists analysis of class struggle. Stylistically, Most, like Parsons, usually made his point with all the subtlety of a jackhammer. Most states in *The Beast of Property*:

---

<sup>29</sup> C.S. Griffin, "Union of 'Black' and 'Red'" in *The Alarm*, Vol. 2, No. 10, 3

Let those who labor to live understand, that this monster [property] cannot be tamed nor be made harmless or useful to man; let them learn to know, that there is but one means of safety: unrelenting, pitiless, thorough war of extermination! Gentle overtures are for naught; scorn and derision will be the result, if by petitions, elections, and like silly attempts the proletariat hopes to command respect of its sworn enemies.<sup>30</sup>

Most's blood-drenched vision of class struggle was heavily informed by the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871. The Paris Communards essentially created a living example of the communal, decentralized system Most and the Chicago anarchists envisioned, and it was even bravely defended by force of arms. The defense failed to hold off the awesome firepower of the state. The resulting bloodbath apparently indicated to Most and Lucy Parsons (who delivered regular speeches on the Paris Commune) that mere defense would not be enough to defeat the forces of the established governments. Only "unrelenting, pitiless" violence seemed likely to succeed in the face of the states overwhelming coercive power.

Parsons embraced offensive violence as the most practical and effective tool in the hands of the working class, and she promoted it consistently. Apparently, others agreed. The IWPA printed and distributed 100,000 copies of "To Tramps" as a broadside, more than any of its other publications, and it was often distributed to new IWPA members all around the country.<sup>31</sup> Many articles in *The Alarm* by other authors make references to "dynamite...the great civilizing agent of our century" and call upon workers to arm themselves for class warfare.<sup>32</sup> The striking coal miners of the Hocking Valley in Pennsylvania were cheered on in virtually every issue of the paper, most vociferously when they set seven mines on fire, destroyed three railroad bridges with explosives, and fired on scabs and the Pinkertons assigned to protect them. Far from exceptional, calls for violence against both people and property were the rule in *The Alarm*. Again, Most crucially informed the Chicago anarchists analysis of worker violence. *The Science of Revolutionary Warfare* was essentially an instruction manual on the home manufacture of explosives with political theory sprinkled throughout; it was reprinted almost in its entirety as a series of articles in *The Alarm*. In *The Science of Revolutionary Warfare*, before explaining

---

<sup>30</sup> Johann Most, *The Beast of Property* (New Haven: International Workingmen's Association Group New Haven), 10

<sup>31</sup> *The Alarm*, Vol. 1, No. 17, February 21, 1885, "Mass-Meeting in Canton", 4. The article notes that all new members received a copy of "To Tramps" at a meeting in Canton, Ohio. Since the Canton meeting was organized by Samuel Fielding, a Chicago IWPA member, it is likely that "To Tramps" was a standard document in IWPA organizing.

<sup>32</sup> *The Alarm*, Vol., No. 14, January 7, 1885, 2

how to make dynamite in one's backyard, Most matter-of-factly states, "Today, the importance of explosives as an instrument for carrying out revolutions oriented to social justice is obvious. Anyone can see that these materials will be the decisive factor in the next period of world history."<sup>33</sup> "To Tramps" clearly operates on the same assumption, as do many other articles throughout *The Alarm*. An article entitled "The Anarchists" illustrates the Chicago anarchists belief in the almost supernatural power of explosives: "[O]ne man armed with a dynamite bomb is equal to one regiment of militia...The whole method of warfare has been revolutionized by the latter day discoveries of science and the American people will avail themselves of its advantages..."<sup>34</sup> But the obvious overstatement of dynamite's efficacy outs the article's anonymous author as someone more experienced in the use of a typesetting machine than the instruments of war. At no time did this contradiction haunt the Chicago anarchists more than in the days after the Haymarket Riot, two years after this article's publication. But in the fall of 1884, when the IWPA was growing rapidly and anarchism seemed to be at the forefront of a burgeoning radical workers' movement, *The Alarm* could state calmly, "The Anarchist believes in peace, but not at the expense of liberty."<sup>35</sup>

Lucy Parsons set the tone of the rhetoric employed by the Chicago anarchists from the beginning. On October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1884, the American Group of the International Working People's Association published the first issue of *The Alarm*, the first English-language organ of the IWPA. The front page of this new anarchist bi-weekly featured an editorial by Lucy Parsons entitled "A Word to Tramps." As it would turn out, her first published article would become her most famous, in her own time and far into the future. Addressed as "a word to the 30,000 now tramping the streets of this great city," the article sounded themes that would become familiar in Parsons's writing. She stated her belief in the labor theory of value, the exploitative and unreformable nature of capitalism, and the need for violent direct action. Her insistent, literary prose distinguished her writing from the matter of fact style favored by the journal's other contributors. Her message took on a desperate, uncompromising quality:

[I]n all those years of drudgery do you not know you have produced thousands upon thousands of dollars' worth of wealth, which you did not then, do not now, and unless you ACT, never will, own any part in?...[C]an you not see that the "good boss" or the "bad boss" cuts no

---

<sup>33</sup> Johann Most, *The Science of Revolutionary Warfare*. The copy I have of this book appears to be photocopied from a printed edition. No publication information is provided. The copy I have was purchased from AK Press, Oakland, CA

<sup>34</sup> *The Alarm*, Vol. 1, No. 3, October 18, 1884, "The Anarchists", 3

<sup>35</sup> *The Alarm*, Vol. 1, No. 5, November 1, 1884, "Anarchism", 2

figure whatever? That you are the common prey of both, and that their mission is simple robbery? Can you not see that it is the industrial system and not the “boss” which must be changed?...<sup>36</sup>

Parsons’s often chose such a format to illustrate Marx’s analysis of capitalist accumulation. Having no use for anything but the most practical implications of theory, Parsons used the labor theory of value as a call to arms, convinced that if the working class only understood their own exploitation they would begin to fight it. Her impatience often turned this rhetorical device into a rather blunt object with which she beat her readers over the head; such was the obviousness in her mind of Marx’s observation. However, Parsons’s frustration with the working class marked a significant difference with the Marx of the *Communist Manifesto*. Whereas Marx wrote calmly of the inevitable rise of the working class and the predetermined proletarian revolution that capital itself would generate, Parsons and the Chicago anarchists believed capitalism would grind on forever unless workers were incited to revolt. The frustrated pleading of Parsons in “To Tramps” is indicative of the impatience that permeated articles addressed to the working class in *The Alarm*. Although writers in *The Alarm* consistently maintained that the working class must be the engine of revolution in capitalist society, one does not find the lionization of the proletariat that is common in the various strains of Marxism. Parsons’s obvious irritation with working class complacency is typical of the Chicago anarchists; most writers had few kind words for the large mass of workers unwilling to join the fight for revolution.

Perhaps the most radical and original element of “To Tramps” is its emphasis on individual direct action. Parsons took the decentralized, non-hierarchical organizational structure of the IWPA one step further and gave a role to the lone individual in the anarchist movement. This represented perhaps the most significant structural break between anarchism and socialism at the time: with the political empowerment of the individual in the revolutionary struggle, anarchy became a craft that anyone could practice. To be an anarchist one no longer had to believe in a specific creed and join an organization; an anarchist could now be a practitioner of a craft called “anarchy” and the tools of the trade were readily available to everyone. This vision of anarchy is usually associated with contemporary post-left or insurrectionary anarchism, but its roots lay in Lucy Parsons’s radical revision of anarchism in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century. She wrote:

Send forth your petition [to the capitalist class] and let them read it by the red glare of destruction...You can be assured that you have spoken to these robbers in the only language which they have ever been able

---

<sup>36</sup> Lucy Parsons, “A Word To Tramps,” *The Alarm*, October, 4, 1884, 1

to understand...You need no organization when you make your mind to present this kind of petition. In fact an organization would be a detriment to you; but each of you hungry tramps who read these lines, avail yourself of those methods of warfare which Science has placed in the hands of the poor man, and you will become a power in this or any other land. Learn the use of explosives!<sup>37</sup>

Parsons developed her anti-organizational theory of violence by combining the practical instructions of Most with the philosophy of individualist anarchism, such as that promoted by Benjamin Tucker (the journal he edited, *Liberty*, was advertised in *The Alarm*.) This synthesis resulted in an innovative new perspective on revolutionary theory, one which clearly grew out of a nineteenth-century paradigm but which also foreshadowed postmodernism and formed the basis for insurrectionary theory. It also moved anarchism even further away from Marxism. While Marxism spent the next century emphasizing collective identity and reaffirming its ties to Hegel's conception of history, anarchism adopted a relativist view of individual experience and embraced uncertainty as a revolutionary value. The programmatic differences in which these divergent views resulted are obvious from reading Parsons's article: the actions of anarchists such as Alexander Berkman and Leon Czolgosz stand in stark contrast to the mass-movements of Lenin and Mao.

## Racism, Violence, and Revolution

Lucy Parsons brought her unique analysis to bear on the subject of racism and the condition of African Americans in the South. Although the *Pittsburgh Manifesto* explicitly called for absolute racial egalitarianism and the various writings and actions of the IWPA affirm this philosophical commitment, anti-racism was not at the top of the anarchist agenda. Despite this, Parsons chose to address the pervasive racist violence of the South in an article entitled, "The Negro: Let Him Leave Politics to the Politician and Prayers to the Preacher." She wrote:

As to those local, periodical, damnable massacres to which you are at all times liable, these you must revenge in your own way...[T]his is the beginning of respect!...You are not absolutely defenseless. For the torch of the incendiary, which has been known to show murderers and tyrants the danger line, beyond which they may not venture with impunity, cannot be wrested from you.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Lucy Parsons, "The Negro: Let Him Leave Politics to the Politician and Prayers to the

She addressed African Americans suffering from racist violence in the same terms in which she addressed tramps. Both suffered from extreme material deprivation, lacked any recourse for justice within legitimated avenues such as the state, and were prevented by a variety of circumstances from creating traditional oppositional political formations. Seeing similar situations, Parsons gave essentially the same advice, counseling against organizations and in favor of individualized violence. That she believed in the impracticality of organized opposition and embraced the empowered individual as the solution in both cases illustrates her belief in the adaptability of insurrectionary anarchism.

While her prescription for responding to racist violence was undoubtedly radical, her analysis of the causes of racist violence itself was more problematic. The first half of the 1885 article in *The Alarm* consists of an examination of the causes of racist violence and the general conditions for African Americans in the South. Commenting on an especially gruesome lynching in Carrolton, Mississippi a few weeks earlier, she wrote:

Who, surrounded even as we are in the midst of organizations whose mission it is to depict wrongs to which the propertyless class are subjected, could help but stand aghast...of the awful massacre of the poor and defenseless wage slaves in Carrolton, in the state of Mississippi? Defenseless, poverty-stricken, hemmed about by their deadly enemies; victims not only of their misfortunes, but by deep-seated, blind, relentless prejudice, these our fellow-beings are murdered without quarter...Are there any so stupid to believe these outrages have been, are being and will be heaped upon the Negro because he is black? Not at all. It is because he is poor. It is because he is dependent. Because he is poorer as a class than his white wage-slave brother of the North.<sup>39</sup>

Parsons's analysis of African American oppression has been cited as an example of her "class reductionism" which supposedly proves that "she operated strictly within the confines of nineteenth century Western socialist thought."<sup>40</sup> While Parsons never developed a coherent analysis of racism, it is inaccurate to claim that she simply mimicked socialist party leaders. Her claim that African Americans were victimized "because he is poor" and poorer than poor whites is obviously reductive, but it does not constitute the entirety of her analysis. She did not shy away from forcefully indicting the "relentless prejudice" to which African Americans were subjected, and she spoke out against racism in a public forum despite

---

Preacher," from Ahrens, 55–56

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 54

<sup>40</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, (Boston: Beacon Press,

tremendous personal risk. In an era when socialists promoted anti-immigrant legislation on racist grounds, Parsons comments certainly broke from the standards of the Marxist left.

Seven years after the above article was published, Parsons addressed racism again in an article entitled “Southern Lynchings.” Taking a different approach, she discussed attending a meeting of “colored citizens” to “protest against the outrages being perpetrated in the South upon peaceful citizens simply because they are Negroes” and argues that Southern whites were planting the seeds of their own destruction. She wrote:

Never since the days of the Spartan Helots has history recorded such brutality...as is now being perpetrated upon the Negro in the South. How easy for us to go to Russia and drop a tear of sympathy over the persecuted Jew. But a step across Mason’s and Dixon’s line will bring us upon a scene of horrors before which those of Russia, bad as they are, pale into insignificance!...Where has justice fled?

In this article, Parsons can certainly not be accused of downplaying the particular oppression faced by African Americans. Her comment that African Americans were targeted for violence “simply because they are Negroes” appears to contradict her previous point that they were victimized only because of their disproportionate poverty. Unfortunately, Parsons did not take up the subject again, so we are left to conclude that she never bothered to reconcile her divergent analyses of racism. While she does not say in either article whether the elimination of poverty, and thus capitalism, was the *only* necessary condition for the elimination of racism, she clearly believed that it was *one* of the necessary conditions. Whether she thought racism would exist in a post-capitalist world is unclear, and it is false to assume that she believed ending capitalism would end all other forms of oppression. That she attended a meeting of “colored citizens” and acknowledged the specificity of African American oppression indicates that she in fact participated in a self-consciously anti-racist movement, even one outside of the context of the anti-capitalist and anti-statist struggle.

The earlier article from *The Alarm* gives a clue as to why Lucy Parsons, who did not identify as African American, did not participate more often in anti-racist organizing. She wrote, “[T]o the Negro himself we would say your deliverance lies mainly in your own hands...” This comment is generally in line with what can be broadly termed an individualist view of struggle that was generally adhered to within the Chicago anarchist movement. Parsons herself summarized this view best when she said, “The disinherited must work out their own salvation in their

own way.”<sup>41</sup> While *The Alarm* gave ample space to reporting on struggles against oppression all around the world, the organizing energy of the IWPA was almost entirely directed locally. Other than helping to seed new IWPA chapters across the United States, the farthest the Chicago anarchists reached out was to the striking coal miners of the nearby Hocking Valley. Lucy Parsons and the IWPA also may not have made more of an effort to engage in anti-racist organizing because of differences over strategy and goals. An article entitled “The Negro” appeared in *The Alarm* in April of 1885. The article was written as a response to a petition sent by an African American man named “A.B. Lee” to President Grover Cleveland demanding the enfranchisement of African Americans in light of the fact that the vote was given even to “communists and Anarchists, the dregs and scum of Europe and America.” The article responded by saying, “The so-called dregs and scum of this country has long ago flung the gift of the elective franchise at the feet of the capitalists, who are identical with the government, as worthless trash, and we think that things which have no value for a white man, is also not good enough for a negro to possess.” The article concludes that if Mr. Lee were to “study this question a little closer” he “will more likely swear on a keg of dynamite that he will never rest until even the best government is destroyed.”<sup>42</sup> This article indicates that the gulf between the Black freedom movement in the late-nineteenth and the anarchist movement was insurmountably large.

Antagonistic interactions like that above characterized what little interaction took place between the Black freedom struggle and the anarchist movement. Ironically, anarchists were often denigrated in racist terms, and widely accepted theories of scientific racism were applied to anarchists as well as African Americans. The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, a widely read author in late nineteenth century, developed a “hereditary anarchist type” that was supposedly characterized by large sinuses, discolored skin, facial asymmetry, a deformed head, and a variety of other irregularities.<sup>43</sup> Anarchists were also targeted for the heavily immigrant character of the movement, often in the language of the eugenics movement. Prominent Illinois newspaper editor (and immigrant) Hermann Raster wrote of the anarchists condemned in the Haymarket trial, “General Sheridan is credited with the remark ‘Good Indians? pshaw! There is no *good* Indian but dead ones.’ Say anarchist in place of Indians and I subscribe to the sentiments with both hands.”<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, Albert Parsons was routinely condemned as a “miscegenationist” and

---

2002), 42

<sup>41</sup> Ahrens, 27

<sup>42</sup> A.A., “The Negro,” *The Alarm*, Vol. 1, No. 20, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1885, 2

<sup>43</sup> David Roediger, “Strange Legacies: The Black International and Black America” in Rosemont and Roediger, *Harmarket Scrapbook* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company: 1986), 93

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 94



Lucy was subjected to far worse. Despite her denials of African ancestry, she received racist hate mail such as a letter which read, “Your parentage was engendered in the jungle along with the hyena.” The Chicago press described her children as “anarchist sucklings” and usually described her in highly derogatory terms. In sum, as historian David Roediger writes, “[T]he biologicistic assumptions and acceptance of brutality characteristic of late nineteenth-century race-hatred conditioned the treatment accorded to the anarchists.”<sup>45</sup> Despite all this, references to racism in the anarchist press were few and far between, although the claim that wage slavery and chattel slavery were virtually identical appeared in nearly every issue.

Meanwhile, the African American press had little sympathy for the anarchist cause. African American newspapers in the Midwest applauded the Haymarket verdict and roundly denounced the convicted anarchists. Some even wondered why such appropriate justice was meted out to deserving anarchists and not Southern lynch mobs. Even radicals such as T. Thomas Fortune applauded the “great verdict” in the Haymarket case. Despite these denunciations of anarchists, some African American activists and publications aligned themselves with the very tactics anarchists promoted. Fortune, the most prominent Black radical of his day, seemed to borrow directly from Lucy Parsons when he wrote that the “essential element in which the Afro-American character was most deficient...[was] the *dynamite element*.” He followed Parsons even more closely when he wrote, “The only way to stop [racist violence] is for colored men to retaliate by use of the torch and dagger.” Even Frederick Douglass wrote in 1892, learning of the rise of anarchism in Boston, “If the Southern outrages on the Colored race continue the Negro will become a chemist.”<sup>46</sup> Despite these similarities in tactical theory and a shared location in the hierarchy of late-nineteenth century racial science, an affinity between African American activists and anarchists never developed. The mainstream of the Black freedom movement was primarily focused on gaining equal citizenship rights, an effort anarchists could only mock as futile and ignorant. African Americans activists, constantly struggling against marginalization, did not see any value in aligning themselves with a political movement that sought to abolish the mainstream rather than move out of the margins. What seemed like an exercise in liberation to one group struck the other as insipid and counterproductive. The gap was never bridged, even by Lucy Parsons, a seemingly obvious choice to play the part.

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 95

## Class and the Basis of Civilization

Indicative of the Chicago anarchists' sense of the worth of the mainstream and the values of the margins are Lucy Parsons articles on class and civilization. Parsons wrote a number of articles for *The Alarm* which addressed the causes of poverty and the basis of class oppression. The title of one of those articles poses the question these articles essentially seek to address: "Our Civilization: Is It Worth Saving?" For Parsons, capitalism, the state, and religion, all forces she wished to destroy, constituted the pillars of Western civilization. It was inconceivable to her that these could be abolished without completely remaking the civilization to which they gave rise. In her analysis, the values of the "civilized world" were nothing more than the products of its insidious institutions. The most onerous of civilization's elements in her mind was class inequality, and she condemned it with passion. All three of her articles in *The Alarm* attempt to illustrate the barbarity of class inequality and elicit reader sympathy for the poor and exploited. Arguing that civilization had to be destroyed set her apart from other radicals yet again. Scientific socialists argued that socialism was the natural outgrowth of Western civilization, not a departure from it. Although Parsons regularly cited authors from the Western canon, she did not subscribe to the notion of Western supremacy, often promoted by Marx and European socialists, and did not believe that capitalism had to spread and consolidate itself before its destruction would be possible. Other anarchists called for the destruction of the same institutions as Parsons but few chose to condemn "civilization" as she understood it. For her, the creation of anarchist social relations required the destruction of the central institutions of Western civilization, which would result in a world utterly different from the civilization of her time.

The first of her articles to address civilization and class inequality appeared in *The Alarm* in August of 1885. Although complimentary of the achievements of modern technology, she identified the exploitation of the working class as the productive engine that made such remarkable advances possible. The marvels of civilization in the late nineteenth century were to her the products of a highly stratified social order that made "barbarians" of "the producing class" as well as the "few having dignified themselves with the title, 'upper class.'" After admiring the new skyscrapers appearing in Chicago "we gradually bring the eye down...[until] we discover in the very shadow of these magnificent abodes, the homeless man, the homeless child, the young girl offering her virtue for a few paltry dollars..." The most degraded individual of all, "the tramp," is spotted as well: "demoralized by

---

<sup>47</sup> Lucy Parsons, "Our Civilization: Is It Worth Saving?" *The Alarm*, Vol. 1, No. 20, August 8, 1885, 2

poverty and abashed by want, [he] attempts to slink from sight of his fellow beings.”<sup>47</sup> Despite the miserable condition of these characters “it was their labor that erected these evidences of civilization.” The narrative paints a dramatic portrait of life in Chicago in the 1880s and exemplifies her theatrical approach to explaining the labor theory of value. The article also shows her trademark impatience with the working class. It concludes by asking with evident exasperation, “When will you tire of such a civilization and declare...‘Away with a civilization that thus degrades me; it is not worth the saving’?”<sup>48</sup>

Another article addressing class and civilization from *The Alarm*, entitled “A Christmas Story,” lends further insight into Parsons critique of Western civilization. It is one of her longest articles and her only known story-length work of fiction. The premise of the story is this: “a ship-wrecked Christian” lands on a “barbarous” island whose inhabitants care for him until he is able to return home. In exchange for their kindness, the Christian offers to take some of the natives to visit his civilization as his guests. The narrative takes the form of report-back from the delegation of natives to their community after returning home from their trip. The natives report that they were at first in awe of the Christian world’s extraordinary feats of engineering, but became disillusioned by the Christian’s treatment of the poor, naturally after encountering a tramp. When the delegates had asked their host what would become of the tramp, he responded that he will turn the wretched creature over to the police which is “mainly what we have our government for, the taking charge of the lower classes.”<sup>49</sup> After the natives encountered workers on the streets of the great Christian city, they questioned their host about the capitalist system of labor and learned about the labor theory of value. The host cheerily explained that capitalists steal the surplus of workers and retain ownership while managing workers like a flock of animals. At this point in the story, the natives listening to their delegate’s story interrupt and ask, “What do you think of the Christian government and their boasted civilization?” The delegate responds, “Why, from what we could learn of their government it is simply organized fraud and oppression...in their religion they are hypocrites...and in their economic and industrial system they are robbers...” The assembled natives, shocked by what they hear, then quickly pass a motion to “send missionaries amongst [the Christians] at once, not to teach them how to die, but how to live...”<sup>50</sup>

By using “barbarous” natives as the lens for viewing “Christian civilization,” Parsons implicitly attacked the racist and chauvinistic logic of imperialism and Manifest Destiny. The story’s comical ending inverts the standard nineteenth century

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Lucy E. Parsons, “A Christmas Story,” *The Alarm*, Vol. 2, No. 10, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1885, 3

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

colonial travel narratives which usually described the experience of a European amongst savage and bizarre indigenous populations and served to rationalize European colonialism. By having the natives agree to send missionaries amongst the Christians, Parsons also challenged the “White Man’s Burden” justification for colonialism, implying that it was the West that needed to learn from the civilizations of the colonized rather than the other way around. Importantly, she portrayed the natives as kind and egalitarian but not as infantile, “noble savages.” The decision to send missionaries amongst the Christians is made in an assembly that apparently follows Robert’s Rules of Order (the proposal to send missionaries is met with a chorus of “second the motion”<sup>51</sup>), and they appear to be engaged citizens rather than wise savages. Parsons did not call for an end to all civilization as such; she constructed the fictitious natives as members of a radically democratic polity, not hunting and gathering primitives. She does not say whether the natives have modern technology like the Christians, which seems to indicate that she had a “take it or leave it” attitude towards modern technology. She often railed against industrial technology in its roll as exploiter of the working class, but she never said whether such technology had a place in an anarchist world. It is likely that she neither totally opposed nor totally favored industrialization; she seemed to care only whether it would benefit working people. This ideological flexibility was characteristic of Lucy Parsons for her entire life. As she wrote years later, “The best thought of today may become the useless vagary of tomorrow, and to crystallize it into a creed is to make it unwieldy.”<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

Just a few weeks after Lucy Parsons counseled African Americans to use whatever means available to respond to racist violence, someone threw a bomb into a crowd of police officers rushing a peaceful demonstration in Chicago’s Haymarket Square. Seven police officers were killed and many were injured. The previous day, police officers murdered a handful of workers striking for an eight hour day at the McCormick Reaper Works, and the demonstration had been called to protest the slaughter. In the aftermath of the so-called Haymarket Riot, war was declared by the state on Chicago’s anarchists; hundreds were arrested and seven men including Albert Parsons, known as the Haymarket Martyrs, were eventually hanged. The bomb thrower was never identified and theories abound as to the culprit’s identity. Of the Haymarket Martyrs, only Louis Lingg, a young man recently immigrated to Chicago and largely unknown in the city’s anarchist movement, was

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Lucy Parsons, “The Principles of Anarchism,” in Ahrens, 32

accused of actually taking part in the bombing. The others were found guilty of making the bombing possible by promoting anarchism and class war. The lengthy manhunt and trial was the country's first true judicial spectacle, a legal circus watched with rapt attention across the nation and the world. Lucy Parsons went on a country-wide speaking tour and gained tremendous notoriety, a despised oddity to the mainstream press and a fire-breathing hero to the labor movement. Just as her husband refused to beg for leniency because he would not renounce his thought-crime, Lucy Parsons did not tour the country merely to publicize his unjust show-trial. For Lucy and Albert, the trial represented a tremendous opportunity to expand the reach of the anarchist movement by spreading their message far and wide. On her tour, Lucy was met with enthusiastic crowds and intense state repression. Almost every city she visited attempted to block her from speaking, creating dramatic showdowns with local authorities and offering a prelude to the free-speech fights she would lead as one of the founders of the Industrial Workers of the World. Although she was arrested a handful of times, she persisted relentlessly, forging ahead with the help of loyal activists around the country.

The anarchist movement was brutally suppressed after Haymarket and didn't emerge again as a mass-movement until the founding of the IWW. The Wobblies also struggled under the weight of state repression, and many anarchists found themselves in jail or deported during WWI. Anarchism in America was largely snuffed out by the overwhelming force of the state, and by 1934 Lucy Parsons declared in a letter to a fellow anarchist, "You speak of 'the movement' in your letter. Where is it?...Anarchism is a dead issue in American life today."<sup>53</sup> It is fair to say that anarchism did not return to public consciousness until 1999 when anarchists in Seattle showed the power of direct action by shutting down a meeting of the World Trade Organization. Since then anarchism, and Lucy Parsons, have received considerably more attention. But in the current political climate it is unlikely that Lucy Parsons will become a widely respected historical figure. Just as there is still widespread ambivalence about John Brown and Nat Turner, it seems improbable that a person who pioneered the concept of decentralized insurrection and advocated the use of explosives will find her face on a stamp anytime soon (although perhaps Malcolm X proves me wrong.)

In historical perspective, Lucy Parsons's revolutionary theory before Haymarket seems to ask more questions than it answers. The use of a single explosive at Haymarket resulted in the effective suppression of the entire anarchist movement, probably not the result Parsons had in mind when she wrote "To Tramps." It is worth considering if any other outcome was possible. Although *The Alarm* printed many articles urging its readers to engage in violence against the state, the IWPA

---

<sup>53</sup> Lucy Parsons, "U.S. Anarchism in the 1930s" in Ahrens, 161

did not itself organize any violent action. The various militias associated with the IWPA were outlawed not long after they were formed and never posed a serious challenge to the Chicago police force or the army of private security officers hired by the city's factory owners. Although bomb-making was described in detail in *The Alarm*, the IWPA never used or distributed bombs or weapons of any kind. Most of the IWPA's organizing energy was dedicated to labor organizing and propagandizing. While Lucy Parsons was urging readers of *The Alarm* to take up arms against their oppressors, she spent much of her time supporting the 8-hour movement and helping to organize a women's garment workers union. Why the difference between rhetoric and action? It was probably fairly obvious to the IWPA even before Haymarket that violent direct action would lead to tremendous repression. But it is unclear why they persisted propagandizing for violence. Their theoretical commitment cannot be questioned, but their practical commitment was nonexistent. Lucy Parsons did not continue to promote violence in quite the same terms as she had before Haymarket. However, she was the foremost advocate of sabotage in the IWW, one of the most distinctive features of the Wobblies.

There is much left to be said about Lucy Parsons and the movements in which she participated. Her atheism and analysis of the role of religion only began to form in the period covered in this paper and certainly deserve greater attention. Her writings on sex and patriarchy, which have received treatment similar to her thoughts on race and racism, require closer reading and better contextualization. Other, currently unexplored sources may also contain information relevant to Lucy Parsons. As Franklin Rosemont pointed out to me, records may exist of her participation in the Chicago Anthropological Society, which may lend insight into her thoughts and words on the wide variety of topics discussed by that group. A closer reading of her longest and richest work, "The Principles of Anarchism," would be valuable for the insight it can offer into her influence on the philosophy of the American anarchist movement and the progression of her own thinking. As for the Chicago anarchists, the most pressing question is, what happened to them? Those that weren't hanged must have gone somewhere. Were they absorbed by other radical movements? Did they start their own groups which have remained invisible to history? Did they give up in the face of the state's response to Haymarket? Why didn't the movement bounce back in some new, less easily subverted form? The answer to this question would seem to offer potentially fruitful information to those that study other radical movements that faced similar resistance, such as the Black Panthers. In many ways, the study of Lucy Parsons and the Chicago anarchists has yet to fully get off the ground, although it looks to be a promising venture for those interested.

## Works Cited

Ahrens, Gale, ed. *Lucy Parsons: Freedom, Equality Solidarity*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 2003.

Ashbaugh, Carolyn. *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1976.

Green, James. *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, The First Labor Movement and The Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America*. New York: Pantheon Book, 2006.

Kelley, Robin D.G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 2003.

Most, Johann. *The Beast of Property*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Haven: International Workingmen's Association Group New Haven.

— . *The Science of Revolutionary Warfare*. Oakland: AK Press.

Nelson, Bruce. *Beyond the Martyrs: A Social History of Chicago's Anarchists, 1870–1900* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

Roediger, David and Franklin Rosemont eds. *Haymarket Scrapbook*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1986.

*The Alarm*, 1884–1886.

Turner, Richard Brent. *Islam in the African American Experience*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.

*Washington Post*, 1886.

## Footnotes:

Library.Anarhija.Net



Jacob McKean  
A Fury For Justice: Lucy Parsons And The Revolutionary Anarchist Movement in  
Chicago  
2006

Retrieved on September 13, 2009 from [www.waste.org](http://www.waste.org)  
10/17/2006

**lib.anarhija.net**