

WHOSE LUCY PARSONS? THE MYTHOLOGIZING AND RE-APPROPRIATION OF A RADICAL HERO.*

Casey Williams



As a radical anarchist, Lucy Parsons dedicated over sixty years of her life to fighting for America's working class and poor¹ and a skillful orator and passionate writer, Parsons played an important role in the history of American radicalism, especially in the labor movement of the 1880s, and remained an active force until her death in 1942. The one question from which she never swayed was "how to lift humanity from poverty and despair?"² With this question propelling her life's work, Parsons was active in a multitude of radical organizations including the Socialistic Labor Party, the International Working People's Association, and the Industrial Workers of the World. Coupled with her long involvement in America's labor movement was Parsons' unbending anarchist vision of society, a philosophy which underlay her critique of America's oppressive economic and political institutions.

Parsons' opposition to capitalism and state authority was solidified in 1887 when her husband, Albert Parsons, was unjustly executed.³ After the 1886 Haymarket bombing and subsequent hangings, Parsons devoted the next fifty years of her life to America's unemployed and working classes. Indeed, the power of the Haymarket Affair in shaping Parsons' later life cannot be overstated. The events of 1886 and 1887 fixed an unbending animosity between Parsons and the Chicago Police Department. During Parsons' life the police hounded her, systematically suppressing her right to free speech by repeatedly arresting her without justification.

* Anarcho-Syndicalist Review number 47, Summer, 2007. Contributor : CREAGH Ronald. To cite this page: WILLIAMS, Casey. "Whose Lucy Parsons? The mythologizing and re-appropriation of a radical hero". What's new: 23 December 2007. [Online].

¹ I am thankful to S. Kashdan who proofread and communicated this article.

² PARSONS, Lucy. "The Moving Inspiration of our Age," *The Agitator*, 15 November 1911, in Ahrens, ed. ____: *Freedom, Equality and Solidarity* (FES).p. 136.

³ Albert Parsons was formally charged with accessory to commit murder. AVRICH, Paul. *The Haymarket Tragedy*. p. 272.

Nearly six decades after her death, the Chicago police gave new life to this legacy of mutual animosity by fighting a proposal to name a city park after Lucy Parsons. In March 2004, when the Chicago Parks District proposed to name the plot at 4712 Belmont Avenue, in the Northwest side of the city, “The Lucy Elis Gonzales Parsons Park,” Mark Donahue, president of the local Fraternal Order of Police, attacked the proposal — dismissing Parsons as an anarchist “whose historic roots come” only from her “defense of her husband.” From Donahue’s perspective it would have been a travesty to name one of Chicago’s parks after a woman who “promoted the overthrow of the government and the use of dynamite.” Unfortunately, city officials did not counter Donahue’s accusations with the historical facts about Parsons’ own life and accomplishments. Instead, park officials stressed the importance of Parsons’ efforts on behalf of workers, women and African-Americans. Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley explained, “We’re honoring Lucy Parsons,” not “her husband,” because “she was highly regarded among social reformers for her efforts to promote civil rights,” and noted that it would have been unfair and sexist to “blame the wife because of her husband’s actions.”⁴

Clearly, both Mayor Daley and Officer Donahue misunderstand their city’s history. However, Donahue at least was willing to acknowledge that Parsons was an anarchist, instead of labeling her a civil rights reformer. As an anarchist Parsons rejected a concept of civil rights that assumed cooperation with, and acceptance of, the capitalist state to grant those privileges that she believed were natural rights. Indeed, a quick review of the history of the Haymarket Affair demonstrates that neither the claims of the police nor the city were entirely correct.⁵ Although Parsons was innocent of any involvement in the 1886 bombing, she did share an anarchist vision of social harmony that advocated the destruction of capitalism through revolutionary acts, and rejected reformism and civil rights as band-aids. Thus, there is a large discrepancy between Parsons’ actual beliefs and actions and the mythologized or commemorated Parsons presented by the Chicago Parks District. How and why this chasm has emerged warrants further investigation, with implications not only about Lucy Parsons, but about historical memory itself.

⁴ “Plan to Name Park after Anarchist Draws Fire,” Chicago Sun-Times, 22 March 2004, 7; “Daley Backs Plan to Name Park after Anarchist,” Chicago Sun-Times, 24 March 2004, 17. It has long been accepted that Lucy and Albert Parsons had no direct role in the 1886 bombing. For a synopsis on the unjust nature of the trial see, Governor Altgeld’s pardon of Neebe, Fielden and Schwab; vindication of the Chicago martyrs of 1887.

⁵ The best account of the bombing is Avrich’s *The Haymarket Tragedy*.

Answers to these questions are at the core of the motivation behind the parks officials' proposal. The suggestion emerged out of a citywide effort to honor more women in a system in which only 27 of the 555 parks were named after women.⁶ Thus, the proposed park had less to do with recognizing Parsons than with officials' desire to create a more "politically correct" park system. However, this idealization found in the incorporation of Lucy Parsons into public history is also mirrored in the scholarly work on Parsons. Often, historians who mention Parsons have molded her life to fit their political leanings. Most notably, Parsons' only biographer, Carolyn Ashbaugh, claimed that Parsons was not an anarchist and had joined the Communist Party.⁷ In doing so, Ashbaugh reshaped Parsons from an anarchist hero into a Marxist one. The discrepancy between Parsons' own words and the Parsons of public memory can be traced in large part to Ashbaugh's historical reshaping. The manipulation in Ashbaugh's work has since been successfully exposed.⁸ Still, there has been little to no exploration into the insights lost through this manipulation of the historical record.

A Contested Background

With few surviving records, piecing together Lucy Parsons' early life has been difficult for historians. Indeed, it is unlikely that the facts of her early life will ever be completely known. Ashbaugh states that Parsons was born in March of 1853 near Waco in Northwest Texas. According to Albert Parsons, the two met in 1869 while he was living a dangerous life as a radical Republican in post-reconstruction Texas. While traveling through Johnson County as a correspondent for the Houston Daily Telegraph, Albert met Lucy on her uncle's ranch. Excitedly, Albert describes her as a "charming young Spanish-Indian maiden."⁹ Many questions about Parsons' early life are still unanswered. For example, according to some sources the two were married in 1871, while others date the marriage to 1872. The marriage has never been confirmed by a marriage license or other official document.¹⁰

⁶ "Park Plan Upsets Chicago Cops", *Chicago Tribune*, 22 March 2004

⁷ According to Ashbaugh, "Parsons claimed to be an 'anarchist' when the title was pinned on her by the bourgeois press." PARSONS, Lucy. *American Revolutionary*. p. 201. A number of historians have similarly sought to reform the Martyrs' views to fit their own predilections.

⁸ AHRENS, "Lucy Parsons: Mystery Revolutionist More Dangerous than a Thousand Rioters," p. 19-20. In: MCKEAN, Jacob. *A Fury for Justice Lucy Parsons and the Revolutionary Anarchist Movement in Chicago*. Senior thesis, 2006.

⁹ Albert Parsons, "Auto-Biography" in *The Life of Albert Parsons*, Lucy E. Parsons, ed., 9.

¹⁰ ASHBAUGH. *Lucy Parsons*. p. 268.

Ashbaugh's biography challenges Albert Parsons' description of Lucy by asserting that she was actually a former slave. According to Ashbaugh, Parsons was a slave of the Gathings brothers, who owned 62 slaves near Waco in 1860. Ashbaugh asserted that Parsons was most likely named after Philip Gathings' daughter born in 1849, and claims that Henry and Marie del Gather, who Parsons named her mother and uncle, were fictional. Furthermore, Ashbaugh suggests that Albert did not meet Lucy on her uncle's ranch. Instead, she concluded that they met in Waco, where Albert's advocacy of Black political rights made him a popular figure among the Black populace. Ashbaugh speculates that while living in Waco as an ex-slave, Parsons witnessed the atrocities of the Ku Klux Klan, who grew in power as Reconstruction fell apart. Among the numerous violent events she may have witnessed were the castration of a young African-American boy in 1867 and the Klan murder of 13 African-Americans near Waco in 1868.

Undoubtedly, the racial brutality that engulfed Northwest Texas in the 1860s deeply influenced Parsons' sensitivity to, and abhorrence for, violence against the downtrodden. However, even if Parsons was not, as Ashbaugh speculates, an ex-slave she still would have witnessed racial violence. The degradation and oppression of the Black populace drove Albert Parsons, who was an ex-confederate soldier, to start his own paper in 1868, the *Spectator*, to challenge the Ku Klux Klan and support reconstruction policies.¹¹ As a witness and perhaps victim of the brutal racial violence of the South, it is still important to note that the Gathings brothers' slave records do not include names and thus can not identify Parsons as an ex-slave.¹²

Throughout her life, Lucy Parsons insisted that she was of Mexican and Native American ancestry. According to Parsons, her mother was Mexican and her father, John Waller, was a Creek Indian. Parsons' assertion of Mexican and Indian heritage and her passionate denial of African ancestry is easily documented. While covering the Haymarket trial a *Chicago Tribune* reporter noted that Parsons "objects to the term 'colored' as signifying that she has Negro blood in her veins. She says that her mother was a Mexican and her father an Indian."¹³ In September 1886 an ex-slave living in Waco accused Parsons of abandoning him and their child for a life in Chicago. When the accusation made front-page news in Chicago, Parsons dragged a *Herald* reporter into

¹¹ AVRICH. *The Haymarket Tragedy*. p. 9-10.

¹² ASHBAUGH, *Lucy Parsons*. p. 267.

¹³ "The Mayor Testifies", *Chicago Tribune*, 3 August 1886, p.1

her husband's jail cell where Albert explained that the Waco man had confused Lucy with another woman, and that "Mrs. Parsons has no African blood in her veins."¹⁴ Lucy Parsons' Indian and Mexican identification was not solely about denying a slave heritage. While speaking in London in 1888 Parsons explained:

I am one whose ancestors are indigenous to the soil of America. When Columbus first came in sight of the Western continent, my father's ancestors were there.... When the conquering hosts of Cortes moved upon Mexico, my mother's ancestors were there to repel the invader; so that I represent the genuine American.¹⁵

It would appear that Parsons took pride in her ethnic identity. Nevertheless, a Black identity was pushed upon Parsons throughout her life. Parsons was repeatedly referred to in news-papers as a Negress, Negro, dusky, colored or mulatto.¹⁶ Although many of these terms were used to identify people of mixed race the underlining implication was as one Tribune reporter put it "that at least one of her parents was a negro."¹⁷ Thus, during Parsons' life there was a discrepancy between the racial identity she claimed and the racial identity placed upon her by society. The tradition of viewing Lucy Parsons as Black despite her own words continues today.

Ashbaugh contended that Parsons' self-identification as Mexican Indian was an attempt to cover up her African heritage.¹⁸ There are a number of reasons why Parsons might have done so. First, the simple physical danger of being in an interracial marriage during the 1880s could have driven Parsons to deny an African heritage. Along with shielding her from some of the dangers of being Black, such a rejection might have created more opportunities for Parsons, especially in a predominantly white labor movement. However, notwithstanding the logic behind Ashbaugh's claim, it remains speculative due in large part to a lack of evidence — relying for support mostly on her physical appearance in pictures. There is simply not enough evidence to definitely

¹⁴ "Parsons Dusky Bride", *Chicago Herald*, 18 September 1886, p. 1.

¹⁵ "Mrs. Lucy E. Parsons Her First Address in London at A Welcome Extended Her on Arrival", *The Alarm*, 9 December 1888, p. 1.

¹⁶ "Invoking the law", *Chicago Times*, 9 May 1886, p. 2; "Lucy Parsons Talks". *New York Times*, 16 October 1886, p. 5; "Their Last Night", *Los Angeles Times*, 11 November 1887, p. 5; "Philadelphia Anarchists Mrs. Parsons Appealing for the Chicago Anarchists", *New York Times*, 1 November 1886, p. 1; "Biographical Parsons", *Chicago Times*, 7 May 1886, p. 3. It should be noted that racial descriptions of Parsons found in newspapers are almost always connected to a larger attempt to demonize her. For example, the Chicago Times 9 May 1886 description of Parsons' mulatto tan is accompanied by the accusation that her "coarse lips, small, glittering eyes, and sinister expression" were testament to her desire to drink the blood of rich men's children.

¹⁷ "The Mayor Testifies", *Tribune*, 3 August 1886.

¹⁸ Indeed, "Lucy Parsons was Black" are the first four words of Ashbaugh's biography.

declare that Parsons “was black”, as Ashbaugh does. Yet many scholars, such as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Marion Tinling and Robin D. G. Kelly, have labeled Parsons an African-American woman.¹⁹ Often this characterization is in an attempt to situate Parsons in a larger narrative of Black American heroes.²⁰

The existence of so many people who view Parsons as African-American despite her own words prompts one to wonder not why Lucy Parsons needed to not be Black then, but why we need her to be Black today? However, whether Black, Indian or Mexican, Lucy Parsons was still a woman of color, born and raised in the extremely violent and racially stratified state of Texas.

Finding Anarchism in Chicago

Upon their arrival in Chicago in 1873, Lucy and Albert Parsons entered a turbulent world characterized less by racial tension than by industrial capitalism and labor unrest. After the Civil War, major industries including the lumber and cattle businesses took root in Chicago, bringing with them virtually every line of transportation to the city and making Chicago the most important economic center of the Midwest. Chicago’s new wealth made it an attractive destination for Americans across the nation and immigrants across the sea. During the 1860s over 74,000 European immigrants entered the city, along with thousands of Americans. The rise in population quickly created crowded and poor living conditions that were overshadowed by the massive mansions and opulent lifestyle of the city’s industrial capitalists.

The sharp contrast between poverty and wealth created class tensions, and in 1867 the city’s laborers started the first movement for the eight-hour workday. The city’s manufacturers refused to comply with labor’s demands and after five days of striking the authorities brutally suppressed the first eight-hour strike, marking the beginning of a long history of violent labor suppression.

As Chicago entered the 1870s, the city’s living and working conditions were exacerbated even further. In October 1871, a massive fire ripped through Chicago. In

¹⁹ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “One Infallible, Unchangeable Motto: Freedom’ Reflections on the Anarchism of Lucy Parsons,” in FES, p. 169. Dunbar-Ortiz attempts to bridge the gap by claiming Parsons was of mixed Black, Mexican, and Indian descent. Marion Tinling, *Women Remembered: A Guide to Landmarks of Women’s History in the United States* (Greenwood Press, 1986, 479), refers to Parsons as “a light-skinned negro.” According to ROBIN, D.G. Kelly. *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination*. Beacon Press, 2002. p. 41. Parsons was “the most prominent black woman radical of the late nineteenth century”

²⁰ See, e.g., the African American Registry’s web site.

the wake of the flames 17,450 buildings lay in ashes and 64,000 people were left homeless. The devastation of the fire was followed in 1873 by a major depression that left thousands in Chicago not only without homes but also without jobs. The events associated with the 8-hour strike in 1867 combined with the devastation of the great fire and the depression created in Chicago an atmosphere of tension and fear, making the city a fertile seedbed for a burgeoning radical labor movement.²¹ When Lucy and Albert Parsons moved into their new flat near Larrabee Street and North Avenue, they quickly became immersed in Chicago's turbulent culture of Class conflict.

After taking work as a printer for the Chicago Times and joining the Typographical Union, Albert Parsons quickly became a prominent figure in the Chicago labor movement. In 1876 he joined the Social Democratic Party where he devoted considerable time to working class causes and became one of the city's most famous English-speaking orators. During this time, both Lucy and Albert became engrossed in the works of Karl Marx, and by 1877 they were hosting meetings at their house for the Working-Men's Party. At this point, Lucy and Albert Parsons were not anarchists but instead advocated for a "combination of economic and political action to bring about the emancipation of labor."²² They viewed unions as powerful tools against capitalism's iron heel, but still believed "that as long as workers lived in a republic, they had hope of gaining power through the democratic process."²³

Several experiences between 1877 and 1880 drove Lucy and Albert Parsons to embrace anarchism. On 17 July 1877 a massive strike began in West Virginia when engineers on the Baltimore & Ohio railroad reacted to a wage cut by halting the trains and setting off a massive labor stoppage that spread West to Chicago where on July 23 a "rolling tide of protest had swept out of the rail yards and into the factories, lumberyards and brickyards" accumulating into a massive march down Chicago's Market Street.²⁴ In reaction, Chicago's leading businessmen opened their coffers to city leaders, who used the money to create a massive army of 5,000 deputized citizens. Then, on July 27 a combination of soldiers, police officers and armed civilians violently crushed the strikers, leaving 30 men dead and a bitter air of mistrust and hatred between Chicago's classes.

²¹ GREEN, James. *Death in the Haymarket*.

²² AVRICH. *Haymarket Tragedy*, p. 21-25.

²³ GREEN, p. 85.

²⁴ GREEN, p. 77.

This rapid militarization by the city's prominent citizens demonstrated the powerful influence the capitalist class had on the government. Lucy Parsons would write years later that "the great railroad strike of 1877" taught her that the "concentrated power" of government would always be "wielded in the interest of the few and at the expense of the many."²⁵ Moreover, her growing distrust for government power became a personal matter during the strike when Albert Parsons came face to face with the power of Chicago's industrial leadership. The day after giving a rousing speech before striking workers Albert Parsons was fired from the Times. Then, Police Superintendent Michael Hickey briefly kidnapped Albert and told him to leave the city. Later, when Albert Parsons attempted to meet with union members at the Times building, he was forced out by two men with a gun who threatened to shoot him in the head. During one day of the Great Railroad Strike Albert Parsons was fired, held at gunpoint, and told to leave the city. Thus, the Great Railroad Strike touched the Parsonses in an extremely personal way and served as catalyst toward a far more radical ideology.

In the years following the great strike, the Working Men's Party merged with the Socialistic Labor Party, and attempted several times to elect socialists to the city's wards. But, in one election after the other, votes were miscounted or ballot boxes were blatantly stuffed, leading many to lose all faith in electoral reform. In a letter to a labor newspaper Lucy Parsons explained that "so-called laws" were not "worth the paper they are written on" because capitalists had the power to do as they wanted even if "the producers of all wealth had willed it otherwise."²⁶

In the early 1880s, as electoral actions repeatedly failed and strikes and demonstrations were suppressed by the police, militia and hired thugs, many socialists around the world began to focus on direct action (often called "propaganda of the deed") as a means to inspire the masses and bring about the revolution. In 1882, the well-known revolutionary agitator and former parliamentarian Johann Most spoke in Chicago, arguing that workers had to arm themselves and wage war against their capitalist rulers. The Chicago movement, in particular, combined union and agitational work with advocacy of armed self-defense. Believing deeply in the necessity of organization, Albert and other Chicago militants set out in October 1883 for Pittsburgh

²⁵ PARSONS, Lucy. "The Principles of Anarchism", 1905, p. 29.

²⁶ PARSONS, Lucy. "On the 'Harmony' Between Capital and Labor or the Robber and the Robbed". *The Socialist*, 7 September 1878, p. 40.

where they, Most, and others would found the International Working People's Association.

The IWPA's declaration of principles, or the Pittsburgh Manifesto, is the most important work to emerge from the 1883 conference. It also remains an excellent expression of Parsons' anarchist ideology. Informed by Bakunin's opposition to authoritarian organization and Marx's theory of surplus value, the Pittsburgh Manifesto expressed the writers' belief in the futility of the ballot, their support for armed insurrection, and the power of revolutionary unionism.²⁷ The major anarchist element of the Manifesto was its view of unions as both "an instrument of social revolution" and as the foundation of a social order based on cooperative organization that would emerge with the destruction of capitalism. The combination of revolutionary unionism and anarchism came to be known as the "Chicago idea", and soon would capture the attention of the city's working class.

The Pittsburgh Manifesto described capitalism as "unjust, insane, and murderous." Schools, churches and the press were "in the pay and under the direction of the capitalist classes" to keep the workers suppressed. With such a corrupt system, workers had to "organize for rebellion" and destroy capitalism by any means necessary. After describing capitalism's exploitative nature, the Pittsburgh Manifesto concludes by delineating six goals for the IWPA:

- First: Destruction of the existing class rule, by all means, i.e. by energetic, relentless, revolutionary and instrumental action.
- Second: Establishment of a free society based upon cooperative organization of production.
- Third: Free exchange of equivalent products by and between the productive organizations without commerce and profit-mongery.
- Fourth: Organization of education on a secular, scientific and equal basis for both sexes.
- Fifth: Equal rights for all without the distinction of sex or race.
- Six: Regulation of all public affairs by free contracts between the autonomous (independent) communes and associations, resting on a federalistic basis.²⁸

They believed that these objectives could be reached through the IWPA's federation of autonomous groups. A bureau of information would facilitate communication between IWPA clusters, but there would be no central authority or

²⁷ AVRICH. *The Haymarket Tragedy*, p. 131.

²⁸ "To the Workingmen of America", *The Alarm*, 4 October 1884, p. 3.

executive committee, as the existence of a controlling body would contradict the movement's vision of a cooperative society.

The tenets of the Pittsburgh Manifesto best express Lucy Parsons' lifelong vision of radical social change. Writing years later, in an essay on anarchism, Parsons would explain that "unions are embryonic patterns" of the "cooperative communities" to come.²⁹ Parsons also returned again and again to the idea that the state was solely an agent of repression and so had to be destroyed through revolutionary action. Moreover, the specific mechanisms of social change named in the Manifesto would remain her weapons of choice. For Parsons, revolution would only come through the mobilization of a mass, union-based movement open to the power of violent action. This prototype of anarcho-syndicalism would later propel her toward involvement with the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905, the Syndicalist League of North America in 1912, and the Communist Party's International Defense League in 1927. Thus, the Pittsburgh Manifesto can be viewed as the first and most concise expression of Lucy Parsons' radical ideology. Following the Pittsburgh convention, Lucy and Albert Parsons' radical activities centered on rapidly developing the IWPA. As numerous clusters were established around the nation, Albert took up the editorship of the association's only English-language newspaper, *The Alarm*. The paper quickly became the home base for English-speaking anarchists in Chicago's labor movement. Lucy Parsons, along with Lizzie M. Swank, began assisting Albert with the paper's production and wrote some of its most scathing articles. Parsons' best-known article in *The Alarm* was "A Word to Tramps." Appearing in the first issue, "To Tramps" encouraged the "unemployed" and "disinherited" to "learn the use of explosives", and when on the verge of suicide to make a revolutionary statement by taking to "the avenues of the rich" and ending their lives by sending "forth the red glare of destruction" through the power of dynamite.³⁰ Through articles like "To Tramps" and her fiery speeches, she quickly became "one of the most active women anarchists in the country."³¹

Parsons was also busy working as a seamstress and caring for her two young children. In the midst of fighting for labor's emancipation Lucy and Albert had started a family with the birth of Albert Richard Parsons on 14 September 1879, and Lulu Eda Parsons on 20 April 1881. This new position as a working mother explains in part her

²⁹ PARSONS, Lucy. "The Principles of Anarchism", 1905, p. 32.

³⁰ PARSONS, Lucy. "A Word to Tramps". *The Alarm*, 4 October 1884, p. 1.

³¹ AVRICH. *The Haymarket Tragedy*, p. 105.

involvement in organizing sewing women into the Knights of Labor. Indeed, when another strike for the eight-hour working day swept Chicago in May 1886, Lucy Parsons could regularly be found at meetings to organize Chicago's sewing women.

On 1 May 1886 a massive strike for the eight-hour work day engulfed Chicago. Tensions between strikers and the police quickly escalated, and on May 3 the police shot and killed several strikers outside the McCormick reaper factory. The next day, some of the city's anarchist organizers responded to the police violence with a rally in Haymarket Square where approximately 2,000 workers peacefully gathered in protest. Lucy and Albert Parsons spent the first part of the evening at a meeting for the sewing women's union, but managed to attend the Haymarket rally afterwards, bringing their children along. Albert spoke for 45 minutes on the history of the labor movement, taking great pains to avoid inflammatory rhetoric.³² Around ten o'clock a sudden rain storm kicked up and Lucy and Albert Parsons, along with their children, left the rally. At this point, Captain James Bonifeld marched 170 police officers into Haymarket Square, ordering the remaining 300 or so demonstrators to disperse. As the last speaker objected to the demand, citing the meeting's peaceful nature, someone threw a bomb into the phalanx of police. The officers responded with a cascade of bullets, shooting several of their own men and leaving numerous workers dead and injured. Unfortunately, the actual number of casualties among the demonstrators, along with the bomber's identity, have never been determined.³³

In the wake of the bombing, Chicago's anarchist leaders were overcome by a tidal wave of repression. The following days were marked by mass arrests. On the fifth of May alone, Lucy Parsons was arrested at least three times without cause in an attempt to force her to expose her husband's whereabouts.³⁴ Albert Parsons, anticipating the repression, had fled the city on the night of the bombing. However, when charges of conspiracy to commit murder were brought against seven major anarchists Albert returned to the city, and, on the opening day of the trial, he surrendered himself to the court. With little to no evidence tying the defendants to the bombing, and few leads on the actual bomber, chief prosecuting attorney Julius Grinnell claimed the defendants' speeches and writings in anarchist papers like *The Alarm* had "inspired some unknown

³² According to AVRICH (202), Albert Parsons' speech was "surprisingly temperate" in comparison to his previous speeches.

³³ AVRICH. *The Haymarket Tragedy*, xi. **Jeffory A. **Clymer, *America's Culture of Terrorism*, p. 33.

³⁴ PARSONS, Lucy. "The Haymarket Meeting: A Graphic Description of the Attack on that Peaceable Assembly". 10 May 1886, p. 53.

person to throw the bomb, and that they were, therefore, liable for conspiracy.” The conspiracy charges, though severely lacking in evidence, were more than satisfactory for the packed jury and an openly hostile judge, who in August sentenced one defendant to fifteen years in prison and the other seven men to death. The sentences were followed by several months of failed appeals including the United States Supreme Court’s refusal to hear the case. Days before the execution the governor of Illinois commuted two of the condemned men’s sentences to life, and another man, Louis Lingg, committed suicide in his cell. Finally, four men—August Spies, George Engel, Adolph Fischer and Albert Parsons — were hanged on 11 November 1887. The Haymarket bombing and the accompanying judicial murder of Chicago’s anarchist leaders cast a haunting shadow over America’s labor movement. Moreover, the personal tragedy inflicted upon Lucy Parsons cemented her dedication to radical working class movements, and vested upon her a new duty to share with the world the anarchists’ history of the Haymarket bombing and trial.

Lucy Parsons’ Haymarket history

Immediately after the death sentences were handed down, Parsons left Chicago on a nationwide tour to generate support and raise funds for the defense. Speaking largely to “conservative trade unionists,” Parsons believed she was “enlightening the American people” about the “judicial murdering operation in Chicago.”³⁵ By February of 1887 Parsons had addressed over 200,000 people in sixteen states. The tour and the support generated by it played a significant role in winning a stay of execution from the Illinois State Supreme Court. Moreover, Parsons’ speaking tour brought national attention both to the injustices of the trial and the ideas of the anarchists. However, the tour’s success was limited by a lack of support from conservative union leaders. Terence Powderly, grand master workman in the Knights of Labor, refused to support the defense, and spoke against the condemned men, further exacerbating pre-existing tension within the labor movement. Nevertheless, the defense committee set up by Parsons and the use of a speaking tour to garner both public and financial support would serve as important models for future radicals. On a personal level, the tour would introduce one of the most persistent features of Parsons’ life. From 1886 until her death

³⁵ PARSONS, Lucy. “Challenging the Lying Monopolistic Press”, 11 October 1886, p. 56.

in 1942 Parsons would return again and again to her commitment to sharing her first-hand history of Haymarket with her audiences.

Through published books, speeches and writings, Parsons dedicated fifty years of her life not just to clearing her husband's name but also to preserving, educating and inspiring other generations with the history of the Haymarket Affair. Parsons shared this history largely through published materials. Less than a month after the executions, Parsons was running advertisements for a book of Albert's speeches in *The Alarm*.³⁶ By 1889 Lucy Parsons was selling her *Life of Albert Parsons*, a collection of essays on the history of the American labor movement and Albert's own writings. With the book, Lucy set out to create a work that was "not only biographical, but historical — a work which might be relied upon as an authority" for the future.³⁷ Parsons' devotion to ensuring that this history would not be forgotten extended far into the twentieth century. In 1909 Parsons wrote to *Mother Earth*, an anarchist magazine edited by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, among others, begging "those who would perpetuate the memory of our martyred comrades" to help her republish her other text, the *Famous Speeches of our Martyrs*.³⁸ Often, when speaking on May Day or November 11, Parsons would infuse her history with added passion by also sharing the personal pain she felt when she and her children were arrested and detained during the execution.³⁹ In front of IWW audiences and in IWW publications she told of the atrocities of capitalist conspirators while comparing the Chicago trial to the prosecution of IWW leader Bill Haywood in 1907.⁴⁰ Later, when socialist Eugene V. Debs and radical labor organizer Tom Mooney were jailed, Parsons sent them both copies of the *Life of Albert Parsons*.⁴¹

Lucy was also intensely aware of other works on Haymarket. When Frank Harris' fictional *The Bomb* was published in 1908, Parsons had 10,000 leaflets printed and distributed to refute the "statements contained in that lying book."⁴² Believing that the bomber's identity was "absolutely unknown", Parsons objected to Harris naming a bomber and also to the secondary role Albert played in *The Bomb*. Conversely, in 1937

³⁶ *The Alarm*, 17 December 1887, p. 4.

³⁷ PARSONS, Lucy. "Author's Note". In: *The Life of Albert Parsons*, p. xxx.

³⁸ PARSONS. "To Lovers of Liberty", *Mother Earth* 4, no. 9 (November 1909): 303; Lucy Parsons, ed., *The Famous Speeches of Our Martyrs*.

³⁹ PARSONS. "November 11: Fifty Years Ago". *One Big Union Monthly*, November 1937, p. 165.

⁴⁰ PARSONS, "Speeches at the Founding Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World", 28 June 1905, p. 85; "The Proposed Slaughter", *The Liberator*, 4 March 1905, 1; "The Haywood Trial and the Anarchist Trial". *The Demonstrator*, 4 September 1907, p. 130.

⁴¹ PARSONS. "Letter to Tom Mooney", 11 June 1936, p. 162; Parsons to Eugene V. Debs, 12 March 1926, in: CONSTANTINE. J. Robert. *Letters of Eugene*. University of Illinois Press, 1990. p. 557-558.

⁴² PARSONS. "Letters to the Editor". *Freedom*, December 1933, p. 6.

Parsons praised Alan Calmer's *Labor Agitator: the Story of Albert R. Parsons*, calling it "fine labor history" that the current "generation should know".⁴³

Parsons' dedication to sharing the radicals' Haymarket history is deeply disputed. One early Haymarket historian virtually ignored Parsons' role in the defense efforts and confined her life to the endnotes.⁴⁴ According to Ashbaugh, in the 1960s the editors of Radcliffe's *Notable American Women* chose not to include Parsons, calling her a pathetic figure unable to escape the past and stop crying about injustices.⁴⁵ Apparently, according to such characterizations, Parsons' defense of her husband and dedication to the martyrs' Haymarket history made her historically insignificant. Indeed, Mark Donahue's fight against the Lucy Parsons park testifies to the fact that this idea is still alive today.

In the 1970s, revisionist historians struck back at this dismissal. In her biography, Ashbaugh denounced "the impression that Lucy Parsons devoted her life to clearing her husband's name" as completely erroneous, instead portraying Parsons as a communist revolutionary, not a doting wife. More recently, Gale Ahrens wrote that Parsons' "writings and speeches on the events in 1886-87... are a relatively small part of her life's work," and that she was only trying to demonstrate the historical continuity between Haymarket and later political trials.⁴⁶ Both are correct in deeming Parsons a revolutionary in her own right. However, sharing the history of the Haymarket martyrs was not a small part of Parsons' life, but instead was a central feature of her life.

Almost immediately after the bombing, popular histories of the event entered the public sphere. Most often these histories served to support and sensationalize the prosecutions' conception of anarchists as dangerous subversives. "The most notable of these histories is police Captain Michael" Schaack's 1889 *Anarchy and Anarchists*, which depicts the Haymarket trial as a major victory for law and order over anarchist terrorists.⁴⁷ Another early history is the 1886 *Anarchy at an End: Lives, Trial, and Conviction of the Eight Chicago Anarchists* which focuses on the heroic roles of the jury, prosecution and judge.⁴⁸ Along with other popular histories of the time, these books disseminated the capitalist state's interpretation of the Haymarket events. As a counterpoint to these conservative histories, Parsons' *Life of Albert Parsons* follows an

⁴³ PARSONS. "Forward". In: CALMERS. *Labor Agitator*. *International Publishers*, 1937, p. 5

⁴⁴ DAVID. *The History of the Haymarket Affair*, p. 476

⁴⁵ ASHBAUGH, p. 6.

⁴⁶ AHRENS, "Lucy Parsons: Mystery Revolutionist, More Dangerous Than a Thousand Rioters," p. 12.

⁴⁷ SCHAACK. *Anarchy and Anarchists*.

⁴⁸ *Anarchy at an End*

outline similar to Schaack's text. Both begin with a history of the labor movement far before the 1880s, and although both are extremely subjective, they do attempt to present a historical framework for understanding the events of 1886.

However, as time passed Albert Parsons' centrality to the history of the Haymarket Affair grew in Parsons' work. Indeed, Parsons took a vested interest in mythologizing and creating a hero out of her husband's legacy. This can be seen by comparing Parsons' responses to Harris' *The Bomb* and Calmer's *Labor Agitator*. Parsons passionately denounced *The Bomb* because she believed Harris had misidentified the bomber, and because *The Bomb* presented Albert Parsons as a secondary figure.⁴⁹ Conversely, Parsons' praise for Calmer's book is directly tied to the fact that Albert takes center stage in *Labor Agitator*. Clearly, Parsons supported the narrative that placed her husband at the forefront of events, despite the fact that his prominence in the labor movement was largely due to the fact that he was one of its few English-speaking agitators. Thus, Parsons was guilty of participating in hero-making herself. Yet, an acknowledgement of this subjectivity not only reinforces the centrality of the Haymarket Affair in Parsons' life, but also shows that Parsons was not infallible. She did at times allow her personal loyalties to shape her interpretation of the Haymarket affair, though not to pathological or obsessive degree.

However, there is a rationale to the timing and manner of presentation found in Parsons' historical narrative. Most often Parsons shares this history when attending appropriate events — especially on anniversaries of the bombing or the execution. Her IWW paper *The Liberator*, printed from 1905 to 1906, most clearly demonstrates this. In *The Liberator* Parsons devotes ample space to the issues of the time, such as trade unionism, the Russo-Japanese War and coming elections, saving a detailed discussion on Haymarket for the 11 November 1905 issue. In the memorial issue Parsons offered her narrative of judicial murder, supporting her argument by using Cook County court records.⁵⁰ Apart from the anniversary issue, almost every article on Haymarket in *The Liberator* was coupled with an article on international labor history, reflecting Parsons' awareness of Haymarket's broader place in history.⁵¹

⁴⁹ AVRICH. *The Haymarket Tragedy*, p. 440.

⁵⁰ PARSONS, Lucy. "The Great Conspiracy all Capitalist Lies". *The Liberator*, 11 November 1905, p. 1.

⁵¹ For example, in October 1905 Parsons wrote several articles on "Famous Women in History", which included a long piece on the French revolutionary. MICHEL, Louise. *The Liberator*, 29 October 1905, p. 1. *The Liberator* also demonstrates that Parsons' interest were not limited to radical history. For example, one long-running feature was "The Wonders of Science" series, which focused on scientific issues raging

Similarly, when speaking at events that were not directly related to Haymarket, Parsons generally would reserve her discussion of Haymarket for the end, as an inspirational capstone. Her speech at the founding convention of the IWW began with an expose of the oppression of female workers, then discussed class solidarity, and ended with a history of the Haymarket affair. However, at a May Day celebration in 1930, Parsons devoted the entirety of her speech to Haymarket, beginning with “the great strike” for “the eight-hour day” and ending with the martyr’s final words in court.⁵² The differences between the two speeches highlights the rationality behind Parsons’ decisions on when to speak on Haymarket’s history.

In telling the Haymarket history to labor audiences, Parsons warned against naive visions of American democracy. Coupled with the lessons of the strike in 1877, the red scare that followed the bombing taught Parsons, in the most personal way, that the American state could pour a “reign of terror” upon radicalism equal to “the most zealous Russian bloodhound.”⁵³ The history of the Haymarket Affair showed that government could move swiftly to crush individuals and movements. The inability of the defense committee to prevent the judicial murders instilled in Parsons the central importance of garnering mass support to challenge capitalism’s power over the state. Thus, the underlying purpose for sharing Haymarket’s history extended beyond clearing her husband’s name to using the lessons of the Haymarket Affair to educate future labor radicals. The lessons embedded in Parsons’ history were evident to later militants. IWW organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn explained that Parsons “traveled from city to city, knocking on the doors of local unions and telling the story of the Haymarket trial” in order to warn young people about the “seriousness of the struggle ahead” and the possibility that “jail and death” might come “before victory.”⁵⁴ The dangerous nature of labor radicalism was illustrated by Parsons’ explanation in a speech that “the capitalistic press,” the “pulpit,” the police, a packed jury, and “prejudiced judges” acted in concert

from Antarctic exploration to Oregon’s Crater Lake. *The Liberator*, 18 October 1905, 3; 10 December 1906, 3.

⁵² PARSONS, Lucy. “Speeches at the Founding Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World”, 28 June 1905, p 85; “I’ll be Damned if I Go back to Work under Those Conditions! A May Day Speech,” p. 155.

⁵³ PARSONS, Lucy. “The Haymarket Meeting: A Graphic Description of the Attack on that Peaceable Assembly”, p. 53.

⁵⁴ FLYNN. *I Speak My Own Piece*, p. 70.

to execute Chicago's anarchist leaders.⁵⁵ Thus, Parsons warned young radicals by using the history of the Haymarket Affair to map out power structures in a capitalist state.

Revisionist historians who have dismissed or ignored Parsons' dedication to Haymarket's history have also masked the fact that Parsons fixed an alternative meaning to the Haymarket Affair that challenged the meaning created by institutionalized powers. Through their historical interpretations "mainstream commentators, spokesmen of capital, and state officers grounded in legitimating institutions" conveyed the "dominant idea that government violence effectively protected" America against the "conspiratorial and nihilistic violence of working-class terrorists" like Albert Parsons.⁵⁶ In other words, histories like Schaack's, which labeled the anarchists as terrorists and foreign subversives, gave the events of Haymarket symbolic meaning that later justified the creation of repressive state apparatuses including red squads, nativist legislation, and intelligence agencies. In opposition to this dominant characterization, Parsons portrayed the anarchists as martyrs rather than terrorists, exhibiting a keen awareness of this struggle over meaning. Virtually every time "the Haymarket meeting" was referred to historically as the "Haymarket Riot," Parsons would passionately cite the meeting's "peaceable and quiet" nature.⁵⁷ Parsons knew that she had to "dig the facts" out of a history of lies that had been heaped upon the martyrs by those who had attempted to "cover up [the] crime of sending five labor leaders to the gallows."⁵⁸ Moreover, Parsons' alternative historical meaning also built the symbolic foundations of institutional celebrations such as May Day. When Parsons' dedication to the radical historical interpretation of the Haymarket Affair is downplayed it obscures the influential role she played in fixing an alternative meaning to the Haymarket bombing.

By acknowledging that Parsons spent much of her time sharing the history of the Haymarket events it is possible to explore the influence of personal narrative on radicalism. Although well versed in radical thought, Parsons' ability to shape the meaning of the 1886 events did not derive from her intellectual expertise. Instead, Parsons' influence is rooted in the use of a personal narrative and her position as a widow of the accused and executed. Parsons explained that she had a "right as a mother

⁵⁵ "The Haywood Trial and the Anarchist Trial". *The Demonstrator*, 4 September 1907, p. 129.

⁵⁶ CLYMER. *America's Culture of Terrorism*, p. 6. For a fuller discussion on how the meaning of the Haymarket bombing was created and used by the state, see CLYMER, p. 33-68.

⁵⁷ PARSONS, Lucy. "The Eleventh of November, 1887", 1912, p. 141-142.

⁵⁸ "November 11: Fifty Years Ago," *One Big Union Monthly*, p. 163-164.

and as a wife of one of [the] sacrificed men, to say whatever” she could to “bring the light to bear upon” the judicial “conspiracy.”⁵⁹ Despite her lack of institutionalized power she could use her symbolic power as a widow to propel her alternative meaning into the public sphere through speeches and books, and thus counter the sensationalized ideas disseminated by the mainstream press. Just as institutional histories of the Haymarket bombing produced powerful feelings of fear within society, Parsons’ narrative created passionate feelings of anger and rebellion among radicals. When historians ignore Parsons’ commitment to telling her alternative history of the Haymarket Affair, they also destroy the opportunity to see the power that personal experience can have on fostering radicalism in America, and in filling the gaps in the historical record.

Race and the Forging of Class Consciousness

Parsons’ stance on racial oppression is also sharply contested. Tied to the celebration of Parsons as a civil rights activist, it is often claimed that Parsons was a strong spokesperson against racism. The home page of the celebratory *LucyParsonsProject.org* web site claims that Parsons defied racial discrimination. Along the same lines, Chicago parks officials believed that the proposed park would recognize not just Parsons’ labor activism, but also her efforts on behalf of African-Americans.⁶⁰ Yet, this celebration of Parsons as an active voice against racial oppression has not been affirmed by academics. Historian Robin D. G. Kelly argues that Parsons eloquently fought against the oppression of the working class but “ignored race,” and that although she wrote about Black lynchings Parsons viewed such racial violence primarily as an extension of class oppression. Kelly based his argument largely on an 1886 article in *The Alarm* where she wrote that the oppression was not “heaped upon the Negro because he is Black,” but because “he is poor.”⁶¹ Kelly argued that Parsons practiced class reductionism, and believes that this reductionism is explained by her inability to operate outside “the confines of nineteenth century Western socialist thought.”⁶² Ashbaugh agrees, arguing that Parsons “believed that the abolition of

⁵⁹ “Speeches at the Founding Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World”, 28 June 1905, p 85.

⁶⁰ “Plan to Name Park after Anarchist Draws Fire,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 22 March 2004, 7.

⁶¹ “The Negro: Let Him Leave Politics to the Politician and Prayers to the Preacher”. *The Alarm*, 3 April 1886, 2.

⁶² KELLY. *Freedom Dreams*, p. 42.

capitalism would automatically produce racial” equality. Ashbaugh explains that Parsons’ stance (or lack thereof) on racial oppression reflected her deep internalization of white racism, which made it impossible for “her to analyze her social position in relation to anything but her class status.”⁶³ This analysis clearly contradicts the mythologized image of Parsons as “a staunch advocate” for “the rights of African Americans.”⁶⁴ This contradiction is explained in part by recent challenges to Kelly’s and Ashbaugh’s view of Parsons as a class reductionist.

Feminist historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz recently argued that Parsons did indeed recognize racism as a force outside the confines of class oppression, drawing upon an 1892 article where Parsons protests against the racial violence “being perpetuated in the South upon peaceful citizens simply because they are Negroes.” In response to this brutal racism, Parsons suggested that African Americans draw from the spirit of John Brown and “help themselves” by rising in self defense.⁶⁵ Dunbar-Ortiz argues that Parsons’ stance on racism extended beyond “reductionist economism” and that her “language of self-reliance and self-determination” was a precursor to the radicalism of “Malcolm X and the Black Panthers.”⁶⁶ The connection made here is rather tenuous. Nevertheless, by linking Parsons’ writings to the ideas of the “civil rights movement during the 1960s,” Dunbar-Ortiz planted the seeds for Parsons’ commemoration as a defender of Black rights.

Parsons’ 1930s work for the defense of the Scottsboro Boys through the International Labor Defense is also cited as evidence of her Black activism. It is argued that Parsons’ work in defense of eight Black men, known as the “Scottsboro Boys,” on trial for the alleged rape of a white woman speaks to her “dedication... to the struggles of African-Americans.”(www.lucyparsonspojet.org/about_lucyparsons.html.) Yet, in the 1930s Parsons was also working with the ILD to get labor leader Tom Mooney released from jail. Parsons’ effort on behalf of the Scottsboro Boys appears to reflect her long-standing work against judicial murder more than a specific dedication to African-Americans.⁶⁷ Along the same lines, her essay “Southern Lynchings” does not

⁶³ ASHBAUGH. *Lucy Parsons*, p. 66.

⁶⁴ LOWNDES, Joe Lowndes. “Lucy Parsons (1853-1942): The Life of an Anarchist Labor Organizer”. *Free Society* 2:4, 1995, Worldwide Web.

⁶⁵ “Southern Lynchings”. *Freedom*, 1892, p. 70.

⁶⁶ “One Infallible, Unchangeable Motto: Freedom? Reflections on the Anarchism of Lucy Parsons”, p 181.

⁶⁷ In 1934 Parsons explained that she “went to work for the International Labor Defense because” she “wanted to do a little something to help defend the victims of capitalism,” making no reference to racism. Lucy Parsons to Carl Nold, 27 February 1934, p 161.

provide enough evidence to demonstrate that the oppression of African Americans was a central focus in Parsons' work. However, the article does demonstrate that Parsons was aware of racism, and did not ignore the issue. Indeed, "Southern Lynchings" suggests that before Parsons can be definitively labeled a class reductionist or an activist for Black rights, more research is necessary.

A deeper exploration into Parsons' stance on racism might begin with an examination of Kelly and Ashbaugh's claims of reductionism in relation to Parsons' dedication to forging class consciousness. To reiterate, Kelly explained Parsons' stance on racism as a reflection of her confinement to Western socialist thought. In doing so, Kelly implied that Parsons' work within the labor movement so distanced her from racial oppression that she was unable to see racism's oppressive power. Ashbaugh believed that Parsons' reductionism was due to the fact that she internalized racism to such an extent that she "denied her own Black ancestry" and so was left unable to see both her own "oppression as a Black woman" and racism's role in society as large.⁶⁸ These explanations are largely speculative, and paradoxically although Kelly and Ashbaugh both came to the same conclusion, their reasoning contradicts each other. It is hard to imagine that a woman of color living in the early twentieth century could not see or feel racism. Moreover, coupled with "Southern Lynchings", an exploration of Parsons' dedication to forging a racially inclusive class consciousness demonstrates that Parsons was aware of racism's power in society at large.

Throughout Parsons' life she actively strove to build a common class identity among all American workers.⁶⁹ Long before the Haymarket bombing, Parsons urged the "masses to learn that" their interests would always be in opposition to the owning class.⁷⁰ It seemed that the lack of support for the defendants from the leaders of the Knights of Labor, along with pre-existing divisions within the labor movement and a general fear of reprisals, prevented labor's unified support for the Haymarket defendants. Parsons walked away from the executions believing that only a massive movement based around the common interest of workers could successfully challenge capitalism. Thus, in urging the formation of a self-identified working class in America,

⁶⁸ ASHBAUGH. *Lucy Parsons*, p 66.

⁶⁹ The following articles demonstrate Parsons' long dedication to forging class consciousness through educating workers on their common interests as producers: "On the 'Harmony' between Capital and Labor Or, the Robber and the Robbed". *The Socialist*, 7 December 1878, p 39-40. "The 'Scab' a Result of Conditions." *Freedom*, August 1892, p 73; "Are Class interests Identical? A Synopsis of the Aims and Objects of the Industrial Workers of the World." *The Liberator*, 3 September 1905, p 1; "Workers and the War." *The Agitator*, 12 February, 1917, p 151.

⁷⁰ "On the 'Harmony' Between Capital and Labor," p. 40

Parsons was attempting to strengthen the one weapon she believed could truly topple capitalism. In 1907, after IWW leader Bill Haywood was acquitted of charges of conspiracy to commit murder, Parsons explained that the success of the defense was because “the working class was united and stood shoulder to shoulder” and became class conscious in recognizing that the IWW, not Haywood alone, was actually on trial.⁷¹

Moreover, Parsons’ vision of class included people of all races and ethnicities. Parsons embraced organizations that refused to participate in racial scapegoating and rejected racially exclusive policies. In 1885 the IWPA declared that it would not do as other labor organizations had and “hold the Chinese responsible for the oppressive conditions of working people,” as the “IWPA would never feel that its ranks were complete if it excluded the working people of any nationality.”⁷² Parsons would continue to advocate for a racially inclusive labor movement long after the IWPA’s demise. Speaking before the IWW, Parsons stressed the importance of forming an inclusive solidarity among workers, reminding the IWW that:

The red current that flows through the veins of all humanity is identical... It matters not where, whether on the sunny plains of China, or on the sun-beaten hills of Africa, or on the far-off snow-capped shores of the north, or in Russia or America... they all belong to the human family and have an identity of interest.⁷³

Clearly, Parsons was aware that issues of race within the American labor movement could be powerfully divisive. Indeed, speaking directly to problems of racism that plagued the labor movement, Parsons clearly encouraged the IWW to embrace an inclusive form of class consciousness by not allowing the union to be divided along racial or national lines, as were many other unions of the time. Far from ignoring race, Parsons rejected the creation of racially exclusive or stratified labor organizations.

Moreover, Parsons’ dedication to forging a racially inclusive labor movement challenges the idea that she had internalized racism. Instead, she recognized the divisive power of racism, and, along with the other founders of the IWW, she embraced and

⁷¹ PARSONS, Lucy. “The Haywood Trial and the Anarchist Trial.” *The Demonstrator*, 4 September 1907, p 129-130.

⁷² GRIFFIN. “Union of ‘Black’ and ‘Red.’” *The Alarm*, 26 December 1885, p 4.

⁷³ “Speeches at the Founding Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World,” 28 June 1905, p 83

encouraged the formation of a racially inclusive class consciousness that could act as a powerful mechanism against capitalism.

An exploration of Parsons' dedication to forging a racially inclusive class consciousness in America can serve as a starting point for an examination of her stance on race. Indeed, in terms of commemoratives, including park names and celebrations, Parsons' name might in fact encourage the American labor movement to adopt more racially inclusive practices and policies. Still, it must be stressed that Parsons' dedication to forging a racially unified self-conscious working class was rooted in her desire to strengthen her weapon of choice against capitalism—a massive workers movement. Indeed, implied within her oppositional stance, including her critique of racism's divisive power, was Parsons' challenge to America's self-conception as a classless society.⁷⁴

Creating the Mythic Hero

Much of the controversy over Parsons' life has been a product of the inappropriate reshaping and creation of a historical icon. Parsons' history has been influenced by the political affiliations and objectives of those who have recorded it, and by those who have been bent on creating a hero in synchrony with their particular political leanings or needs. However, a number of ways of commemorating or honoring Parsons are possible without altering or ignoring Parsons' own words. Parsons can be easily celebrated as a foundational figure in the creation and preservation of an alternative Haymarket history. She can be viewed as a labor hero who broke with tradition and championed racial (and gender) unity among America's working class—an usually radical position for that period. However, not enough attention has been given to how and why this manipulation is so prevalent in Parsons' historiography. A number of factors influence the reshaping of Parsons' legacy. By exploring how and why Parsons has been labeled a Black activist, a feminist and a communist, the roots of this manipulation can be addressed in full.

⁷⁴ Parsons believed that one of the biggest problems facing American laborers was the widespread belief that there were “no classes” in America. Thus, she strove to educate workers on their class interests in order to debunk mythic conceptions of American freedom. Parsons, “Are Class interests Identical? A Synopsis of the Aims and Objects of the Industrial Workers of the World.” *The Liberator*, 3 September 1905, p. 1.

Many of the problems associated with labeling Parsons an African-American have already been discussed, but the attractiveness of this label warrants further discussion. In labeling Parsons Black it becomes possible to engage with her on a more familiar level. America's inability to recognize its class divisions has made racial and ethnic identities a more familiar area of discourse. It is easier to label Parsons an African-American and then discuss issues that confronted Black figures in American history. For example, when comparing Parsons to famous white anarchist Emma Goldman, Ashbaugh argues that "Goldman could study in Europe and travel in educated circles," but Parsons' "dark skin" blocked her from such opportunities.⁷⁵ Yet, the historical record refutes this. Parsons was warmly welcomed while speaking in London in 1888, at least among radical circles, and her visit to England is considered a key factor in pushing many English socialists toward fully embracing anarchism.⁷⁶ Parsons' popularity in Europe lasted for decades. While writing *The Liberator*, a comrade from Paris reminded Parsons that she was still "well known in Europe" and that any advice she could offer on the perils of trade unionism would "make a good impression" on Parisian radicals.⁷⁷ Clearly, Parsons could travel in Europe. Thus, not all of the typical restrictions facing Black women affected Parsons. Instead, a comparison of class and cultural constituencies would serve as better mechanisms for understanding Parsons' and Emma Goldman's differing experiences in Europe. Furthermore, such a comparison would require scholars to more fully engage with Parsons on a class level.

Parsons' legacy has also been transformed into the history of a feminist hero. Especially in arenas of public memory, Parsons is routinely referred to as a feminist.⁷⁸ Throughout her life Parsons tackled many issues facing women. She raged against the corrosive practices pressed upon female domestic servants, and encouraged women to embrace birth control.⁷⁹ As a working mother Parsons believed she spoke on behalf of all working women when she participated in the founding of the IWW.⁸⁰ Yet Parsons'

⁷⁵ ASHBAUGH, p. 200.

⁷⁶ QUAIL, John. *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists*. Paladin, 1978, p 82. For her warm welcome see "Mrs. Parsons in London." *The Alarm*, 1 December 1888, p. 2.

⁷⁷ CUSAS, Lawrence. "Correspondence." *The Liberator*, 10 September 1905, p 3.

⁷⁸ See the *LucyParsonsProject.org*'s "About Lucy Parsons", where she is called a "prominent feminist" and "early civil rights pioneer." Apparently Julia Bachrach, a Chicago Parks Division historian, deemed Parsons a Suffragette, a claim completely nullified by Parson's long-standing rejection of electoral politics. ROSENFELD, KATHRYN. "Looking for Lucy (in all the Wrong Places)". *Social Anarchism*, 28 June 2006, *WorldWide Web*

⁷⁹ "Working Women." *The Socialist*, 1 February 1879, p. 42-43; "The Women Question Again." *The Liberator*, 3 October 1905, p 1.

⁸⁰ "Speeches at the Founding Convention of the IWW," 28 June 1905, p. 79.

efforts on behalf of women were always part of her dedication to the class struggle.⁸¹ Her interest in female liberation remained focused on issues that to her were more directly linked to labor and capitalism. Parsons responded to anarchists who advocated for women's increased sexual freedom by pointing out that the rejection of traditional sexual and family relations could increase the oppression of working women by removing them from the economic safety net of the family.⁸² Nevertheless, with Parsons' scattered writings on women's issues as evidence, revisionist historians have successfully used the feminist label to counter the conception of Parsons as the doting widow. Yet, the feminist label too is problematic. It can further detract from exploring Parsons' dedication to the Haymarket history by making it difficult to explore the ways in which Parsons' power was positively derived from her position as a woman and a widow. Also, like the term civil rights, the feminist label tends to be used in ways that conflate Parsons' ideas with the ideas and objectives of the 1960s women's movement. Rather than using the term feminist, it might be simpler to state that Parsons was a hero for all working people.

The idea that Parsons was a member of the Communist Party is the most hotly contested and unsubstantiated identity placed on Parsons. The image of Parsons as a communist is solely Ashbaugh's creation. Writing in 1976, toward the end of an era of Marxist intellectualism, Ashbaugh claimed that Parsons lost her faith in anarchism in the early 1930s and as the Communist Party USA grew in prominence she became active in the International Labor Defense, a communist front group. In 1927 Parsons was elected to the National Committee of the ILD, and she did indeed work on a number of cases including the Scottsboro case.⁸³ However, Ashbaugh then took a leap of faith, claiming that in 1939 Parsons formally joined the Communist Party but failing to provide any solid evidence for this claim. The Party did not note Parsons' membership, either in promotional literature or their records. Instead, Ashbaugh used Parsons' work with the ILD and her speeches before communist audiences as evidence

⁸¹ For example, Parsons was willing to advocate for entrance of women into the labor market only if women refused to accept "lower wages than those demeaned by men." If women accepted such low wages she believed women's labor would only be a "detriment... [to] her fellow workers." "Woman: her Evolutionary Development." *The Liberator*, 10 September 1905, p 2

⁸² Parsons also pointed out that the discussion of female sexual freedom, referred to at the time as sexual "variety," was dominated by men. "Comrade Lucy Parsons Writes." *The Firebrand*, 14 February 1897, p. 6. Dunbar-Ortiz situates Parsons within the history of American feminism, but carefully articulates the class-based nature of Parsons' work for women. "One Infallible, Unchangeable Motto: Freedom? Reflections on the Anarchism of Lucy Parsons," p. 171- 174.

⁸³ ASHBAUGH. *Lucy Parsons*, p 251

of membership. It has already been noted that Parsons' work with the ILD was first and foremost a continuation of her efforts at defending labor leaders victimized by repression. Parsons' speeches before communist audiences indicate not necessarily that she was a member of the party, but that she reached out to an organization that she considered effective in addressing labor issues.

Parsons' presence in the history of American communism exposes one of the main ways Parsons' history is manipulated. In the 1920s the American anarchist movement had been virtually wiped out by anti-radical government policies. By the 1930s the Communist Party USA was the most prominent organization focusing on labor issues. Since the Haymarket affair, Parsons professed a simple radical ideology: only a solid, class-based organization that had the attention of the masses and accepted the violent nature of class warfare could bring about the revolutionary ideal of a free society.⁸⁴ Parsons spent a lifetime moving from organization to organization in order to support the association with the strongest revolutionary might. She explained in the 1930s that she had "seen many movements come and go" and had "belonged to all those movements," yet she was always "an anarchist, because anarchism [carried] the very germ of liberty in its womb."⁸⁵ A short list of organizations Parsons worked with includes the Socialistic Labor Party, the IWPA, the Socialist Party, the IWW, the Syndicalist League of North America, and the ILD. Parsons' fluid movement from organization to organization undermines Ashbaugh's claim.⁸⁶

Instead of recognizing Parsons' willingness to work with a wide array of working-class organizations, Ashbaugh introduced something akin to a competition over who could claim Parsons. For example, Gale Ahrens' documentary history was an attempt to rescue Parsons "for the anarchist movement."⁸⁷ In doing so Ahrens provides anarchism with another hero but does little to demystify Parsons' legacy. In stressing their own political affiliations and failing to acknowledge that Parsons' dedication to creating a free society outweighed her institutional loyalties, historians opened the door for Parsons' legacy to be twisted into the history of a mere social reformer.

⁸⁴ Parsons refers to this as "old school anarchism." By 1907 Parsons believed anarchists had abandoned the idea of an "organization" built of "members" responsible for "paying monthly dues and collecting funds for propaganda" aimed at grand ideal of a free society. See "A Wise Move: on Anarchist Organization." *The Demonstrator*, 6 November 1907, p. 131.

⁸⁵ "I'll be Damned if I Go back to Work under Those Conditions! A May Day Speech," p. 156-157.

⁸⁶ Paradoxically, Ashbaugh acknowledges that Parsons did not care "under whose auspices she worked" as long as she worked for "the working class." Yet Ashbaugh still indefensibly declares her a member of the Communist Party. PARSONS, Lucy, p. 256.

⁸⁷ FLOOD, Andrew. "Review of Lucy Parsons: Freedom, Equality and Solidarity." 5 May 2005.

Finally, it must be stressed that this mythologizing of Parsons has resulted in downplaying and expunging her revolutionary commitment. Parsons' adherence to the idea of "propaganda by the deed" has largely disappeared from the historical record.⁸⁸ Grappling with Parsons' and anarchism's history of promoting sometimes violent direct action has been a difficult task for the American left. Moreover, in a post-9/11 world, discourse around the emergence and merits of revolutionary violence has been almost entirely limited to its abhorrence. It has become difficult to publicly celebrate Parsons while acknowledging her dedication to "propaganda by the deed." Yet, Parsons' life can serve as a case study for understanding the connection between experiences of repression and belief in the necessity or inevitability of violence as a mechanism for change. Such an exploration would allow us to view Parsons' beliefs not as an anomaly to be overlooked in an otherwise praiseworthy life, but as a pivotal element in a radical ideology deeply influenced by the personal experience of repression.

The Lucy Elk Gonzales Parsons Park

On 7 March 1942 Lucy Parsons died when her house caught fire, bringing an end to over seventy years of tireless work on behalf of America's working class. Parsons left behind a long record of influential contributions to American radicalism, but the fire and the removal and obliteration of Parsons' personal records by state authorities all contributed to obscuring Parsons' legacy.⁸⁹

Historians and public officials further buried Parsons' influence by molding her life to fit current political and cultural interests. This historical reshaping is at the root of the creation of a heroic image of Parsons that contradicts many of her own beliefs. By striving to view Parsons' life within the context of her own time and returning to many of the historical records available it is possible to address these contradictions and to shine new light on Parsons' contributions to American radicalism. Parsons was clearly the most formative figure in ensuring that the history of the Haymarket Affair would be remembered and not be distorted by those in power. Parsons used this history to educate America's young labor leaders on the repressive power of the state and infuse the labor

⁸⁸ For example, in her biographical introduction, Ahrens devotes a single paragraph to Parsons' belief in revolutionary violence, while giving ample space to Parsons' involvement in the Chicago Society of Anthropology Forum. "Lucy Parsons: Mystery Revolutionist", p. 13, 17-19.

⁸⁹ When friends went to retrieve Parsons' extensive library from the rubble they were told by Chicago police that it had been taken by an FBI agent. Yet no agency has ever admitted to receiving Parsons' library and her papers have never been found. ASHBAUGH, p. 266.

movement with passionate indignation. Moreover, Parsons added to the American ideal of justice by fostering racially inclusive labor policies that helped strengthen America's traditionally weak understanding of class.

In May of 2004 the Chicago Park District's board approved the proposed Lucy Elis Gonzales Parsons Park. Parsons' gifts to American radicalism most certainly deserve to be celebrated, and the Lucy Elis Gonzales Parsons Park can serve as a powerful venue for such a commemoration, despite the historically inaccurate assumptions that propelled its creation. Flanked by a number of factories in a working class neighborhood untouched by gentrification, the setting of Parsons' park is quite fitting.⁹⁰ The park could easily serve as a meeting place for diverse groups to unite under their common cause. The park also provides an opportunity for Chicago and America to begin to fully embrace its radical history. America's past is filled with struggles for economic freedom, and our society is not served by limiting our historical celebration to the civil rights movement and other struggles that have often been tamed in their retelling.

Indeed, the real question is not whose hero Lucy Parsons is, but how we can learn from her struggle and how her history can provide a better understanding of American radicalism. Most importantly, Parsons Park should serve as a reminder that the history we find on a plaque, or squeezed onto lists of heroes, has most certainly been influenced by the present. The shaping of Parsons' legacy to fit the needs of a city government unwilling or unable to directly celebrate its anarchist history teaches us that park bench histories should never be viewed as the full story, but instead should serve as starting points for deeper explorations.

The research on Parsons' life has only just begun. With an understanding of how and why her history has been misshaped, a priceless opportunity exists to dig further into the records in an attempt to demystify Parsons' life. There are entire areas of her life, especially in the World War One era and in the 1920s that are missing from the historical record, and should be explored.

Lucy Parsons' history is broader and more complex than its condensation into one biography or a small book of documentary sources can capture. Scholarship on Parsons and radicalism in general cannot be considered final — as she herself remarked:

⁹⁰ ROSENFELD. "Looking for Lucy..." *Social Anarchism*. p. 37.

“Nothing is considered so true or so certain, that future discoveries may not prove it false.”⁹¹

Works Cited

AHRENS, Gale. *Lucy Parsons: Freedom, Equality and Solidarity: Writings and Speeches, 1878-1937*. Charles H. Kerr, 2004.

Anarchy at an End. Lives, Trial and Conviction of the Eight Chicago Anarchists: How they Killed and What They Killed with: a History of the Most Deliberate Planned and Murderous Bomb Throwing of Ancient or Modern Times: the Eloquent and Stirring Speeches of the Attorneys for the Defense and Prosecution, with the Able Charge of Judge Gary to the Jury: Seven Dangling Nooses for the Dynamite Fiends. Hastings Library, California; Chicago: G.S. Baldwin, 1886. text-fiche.

ASHBAUGH, Carolyn. *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary*. Charles H. Kerr, 1976.

AVRICH, Paul. *The Haymarket Tragedy*. Princeton University Press, 1984.

CLYMER, Jeffory. A. *America's Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism, and the Written Word*. University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

DAVID, Henry. *The History of the Haymarket Affair: A Study of the American Social-Revolutionary and Labor Movements*. Russell and Russell, 1936.

GREEN, James. *Death in the Haymarket: a Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement and the Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America*. Pantheon, 2006.

Governor Altgeld's Pardon of Neebe, Fielden and Schwab; Vindication of the Chicago Martyrs of 1887: Parsons, Spies, Fisher; Engel and Ling. New York Labor News Co, 1906.

FLYNN, Elizabeth Gurley. *I Speak My Own Piece: Autobiography of "the Rebel Girl."* Masses and Mainstream, 1955.

MCKEAN, Jacob. "A Fury for Justice: Lucy Parsons and the Revolutionary Anarchist Movement in Chicago." Senior thesis, 2006.

PARSONS, Lucy. *Life of Albert Parsons with Brief History of the labor Movement in America*. Chicago: by the author, 1889.

_____. Twenty-fifth anniversary, eleventh of November, memorial edition. Souvenir ed. of the famous speeches of our martyrs delivered in court when asked if they had anything to say why sentence of death should not be passed upon them, Oct. 7, 8, and 9, 1886. Nov 11, 1887-1912. Chicago: by the author, 1912.

⁹¹ "The Principles of Anarchism," 1905, p. 30.

ROEDIGER, *Dave and Franklin Rosemont* (eds.). *Haymarket Scrapbook*. Charles H. Kerr, 1986.

SCHAACK, Michael J. *Anarchy and Anarchists. A History of the Red Terror and the Social Revolution in America and Europe. Communism, Socialism, and Nihilism in Doctrine and in Deed. The Chicago Hay-market Conspiracy, and the Detection and Trial of the Conspirators*. F.J. Schulte, 1889.

QUAIL, John. *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists*. Paladin, 1978

Newspapers: *The Alarm*, 1885-88; *Chicago Herald*, 1886; *Chicago Times*, 1886; *Chicago Tribune*, 1886; *The Liberator*, 1905-06.