

More Dangerous than a Thousand Rioters

Book review

Sheila Nopper

a review of

Lucy Parsons: Freedom, Equality & Solidarity, Writings & Speeches, 1878–1937, Charles H. Kerr, Chicago, 2003

As a cop once said during her lifetime, Lucy Parsons is “more dangerous than a thousand rioters.” So strong was her anti-authoritarian presence that 62 years after her death, the revolutionary spirit of Lucy Parsons (1853–1942) continues to arouse the ire of the Chicago police.

Recently, a new generation of “organized bandits,” as she once referred to the police, vociferously objected to a proposal last Spring by the Chicago Parks District to name a small park on the northwest side of the city (where Lucy once lived) in her honor. In some ways, the unabated vehemence of this continuing police vendetta against her says more about her legacy as an anarchist than a municipally-financed park ever could.

Though she is most well known as the wife of Albert Parsons, one of the legendary 1886 Haymarket martyrs, Lucy Parsons was a formidable agitator in her own right. This dramatically provocative woman of Mexican, African, and Native American ancestry, devoted her entire life toward addressing the problems of the poor, achieving equal rights for women, and abolishing wage slavery, private property, and the State. Many of her insightful analyses culled from these struggles—and still relevant today—are included in this illuminating anthology of her work.

In the biographical introduction, editor Gale Ahrens contends that sexist efforts to see her only in relation to her husband dismiss this legendary freedom fighter’s independent contribution to radical history and are merely attempts “to soften the sting of Lucy Parson’s burning truths.”

In her 1905 speech at the Founding Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), for example, Parsons predicted the sit-down actions of the ‘30s when she stated, “My conception of the strike of the future is not to strike and go out and starve but to strike and remain in and take possession of the necessary property of production.”

Though not included in this volume, her notoriously controversial 1884 essay, “To Tramps,” in which Lucy urged the poverty-stricken to “learn the use of explosives!” rather than surrender to their despair and commit suicide, is evaluated by both Ahrens and the author of the Afterward, radical activist/historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz.

In addition to including all of Lucy’s documented IWW-related material and some of her personal stories about the Haymarket events, this book also features her opinions on what was then called “the woman question.” Lucy considered women’s oppression to be exclusively rooted in their economic dependence on men.

To that effect, in the 1880s, she founded the Chicago Working Women’s Union, which demanded equal pay for equal work and even advocated that women be paid wages for housework. As to voting, like her colleague Emma Goldman, Parsons was not fooled by the illusionary promises of electoral politics and refused to participate in the suffrage movement. “The fact is money and not votes is what rules the people,” Lucy declared. “The ballot is only the paper veil that hides the tricks.”

Yet, while she supported reproductive choice for women, she remained steadfastly opposed to the notions of free love espoused by Goldman. Another contentious issue that has reverberations in current political discourse

is the nature of Parsons' involvement with the Communist Party. In the Encyclopedia of the American Left, her sole biographer, Carolyn Ashbaugh, declared, "After years of CP association, she joined in 1939." Outraged by what she perceives as being "a careless and unfounded assertion," Ahrens seeks to redress the tendency by Ashbaugh to downplay Parsons' commitment to anarchy. For example, while Lucy once publicly acknowledged being "connected with the Communists [through the International Labor Defense]," in the same 1930 speech, she also declared, "I am an anarchist, because anarchism carries the very germ of liberty in its womb."

The previously hard-to-find material to be found in *Lucy Parsons: Freedom, Equality & Solidarity* is geared toward an audience seeking primary sources. The book indisputably recognizes her substantial contribution to the cultures of resistance and liberation that continue to kick up dust in the new millennium. Though her language style is somewhat outdated, with a little imagination the reader can feel the inspiring spark of Parsons' fiery disposition become a roaring blaze of verbal rebellion.

The actions that Lucy's words fomented then continue to threaten such present day organizations as Chicago's Police Union. However, despite persistent objections, the Lucy Ella Gonzales Parsons Park was approved. Yet, "the irony," noted Stephen Craig in an April 8 letter to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "is that Lucy Parsons would probably have spit on any honor proffered by any government agency."

True, but as a friend of mine, who is a lifelong Chicago resident, warily concluded with regard to whether there was any redeeming value in this tepid civic gesture, "better Lucy than some real estate developer or capitalist."

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Fifth Estate #367, Winter 2004-2005

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