

Monumental Dialectics

Staging Haymarket Confrontation... Anarchists brawl with Teamsters, statues walk & talk, and the incident 120 years ago that gave us May Day is contested for meaning

L.M. Bogad

On May 4, 1886, several hundred workers assembled in Chicago's Haymarket Square to protest the shooting of their comrades on a picket line at the McCormick Reaper Works the day before. The violence happened in the context of a largely successful general strike in support of the eight-hour workday. Anarchist labor organizers and journalists played a key role in the strikes.

Despite the mayor's orders to the contrary, the police ordered the workers to disperse. An unknown person threw a bomb at the police, killing one and wounding several. The police opened fire and killed seven more of their ranks and an uncounted number of workers.

What followed was the first "Red Scare" in US history, with anarchists and immigrants rounded up, beaten and imprisoned, anarchist presses smashed, and eight anarchist labor organizers sentenced to death after a mockery of a trial despite their obvious innocence.

Four of the Haymarket Martyrs were hanged, one cheated the noose by committing suicide in his cell with a smuggled bomb, and the other three were sentenced to years in prison at hard labor. The survivors were pardoned several years later.

* * *

May 3, 1998. I am standing under the Haymarket Martyrs Monument in Chicago's Waldheim cemetery, waiting for it to become a National Landmark. The ritual is about to begin.

All it requires is a magic gesture: Lucy Parsons, the widow of one of the martyrs, has joined us from the hereafter to lift the white veil from the government plaque. When this magic trick is done, the government's blessing will have been bestowed and the transformation will be complete.

The monument looms above. It is the gift of the beleaguered radical workers' movement of the Victorian era to us, commemorating the fallen, and declaring that hostilities have not been suspended, that surrender is not an option, that the struggle continues.

A fallen worker, with European features, lies in the background. In front of him, laying a wreath on his head, protecting his dying corpse, and marching forward determinedly, is the cloaked figure of a woman. As both warning and inspiration, the Monument bears a slight variation of the last words of Martyr August Spies on its base:

"The Time Will Come When Our Silence Will Be More Powerful Than The Voices You Are Throttling Today"

The female figure, representing Liberty, is depicted as a "universal" woman, with an aquiline nose, and "classical" features. In other words, she is white. It occurs to me that a less racially hegemonic statue might honor the leadership of Lucy Parsons, a woman of color, who was such an important figure in the 19th century radical labor movement, and in the story of Haymarket.

But Lucy Parsons was still alive when the statue was commissioned, and, regardless, the artist, crafting a more "purely" symbolic heroine, opted for his unacknowledged default setting of whiteness. Over the years, the Martyrs

Monument has become a site for leftist/anarchist pilgrimage, a sort of sacred setting for atheists and freethinkers. Many radicals, including Emma Goldman and Lucy Parsons herself, are buried next to the Martyrs at their request.

Lucy Parsons is ready to draw the veil away and make the anarchist statue a government monument. Lucy is being played, in period dress, by my friend Alma Washington, a gifted, politically-engaged African-American actor with her own one-woman show about Parsons.

Hundreds of people are watching Lucy/Alma, and the air is heavy with confrontation.

Despite the drizzly weather, there are about a thousand labor unionists facing off a small group of about thirty protesting anarchists holding black flags. Two of the anarchists hold high a banner with an image of Uncle Sam-as-Vampire with the words: "Bite The Hand That Bleeds You."

The anarchists are outraged by the unionists' celebration of the political state putting its stamp of approval on the gravestone of anarchists who died in defiance of that same government. Someone had written on the back of the statue in black marker, "Down With Power," accompanied by an anarchist circle-A.

However, the labor unions staged this event at the foot of the statue because they saw it as a victory for their cause. To them, the statue's new status as a national landmark was a sign of respect for labor history, struggle, and sacrifice, and of the labor movement's strength and prestige.

I had been invited to the unveiling by the Illinois Labor History Society (ILHS) because I was in the middle of writing a play about Haymarket. At the time, there were no full-length dramas written on the subject, and I was hoping to reclaim its history, and its May Day commemoration as an American holiday. I also wanted to engage with the issues of terrorism, repression, xenophobia, immigration, censorship and resistance, themes that have become even more relevant since 1998 and were highly so in 1886.

I interviewed people on video at the event to see why they were there and what the statue meant to them. I already had a sense of the historical erasure that was at work with the history of Haymarket, but what happened during my interview session seemed like it came out of a strange play itself.

I interviewed a Chicago labor organizer, and a grandson of one of the Haymarket Martyrs. With almost eerie precision, in the shadow of the Martyrs' gravestone/monument, both men told me parallel stories of social-historical erasure.

Oscar William Neebe III, a grandson of Oscar Neebe, a Haymarket Martyr (not executed, sentenced to life imprisonment, but pardoned seven and a half years later), told me how he first learned about the Haymarket confrontation in which his grandfather was a key figure.

His family had never talked about it, and, when he was growing up in Chicago, the event was never recounted in any of the school history books. When Neebe was a teenager, he visited Mexico City with a cousin on a May Day. The streets were filled with people celebrating and demonstrating. His cousin said, "Come on, I'll show you how we honor your grandfather here."

Oscar said, "What?," and was led to a huge Diego Rivera mural in the Palace of Justice where he saw the visage of his grandfather on the wall along with all the other Martyrs. It was an astonishing moment of revelation and political awakening. I was stunned to hear this story. It personalized the greater themes of the Haymarket narrative—a terrifying erasure, its reclamation and retelling, all in the form of a dramatic family story.

A dissident Teamster told me a similar story of first learning about the incident from the same mural on his trip to Mexico City.

White Veils, Black Flags

Back to the statue.

The turnout was huge for a rainy day, signifying the resonance of this symbolically-loaded site. The unionists had gone all out; they built a brightly decorated stage for the speakers, there was singing, a German-American orchestral band, and some rousing speeches, including one from the German consulate in Chicago (after all, most of the Haymarket martyrs were German immigrants).

Throughout the event, the anarchists heckled the speakers. When a progressive priest got up to say a prayer for the gathering, they shouted, “No Gods! No Masters!” and, “What did the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War die for? A bunch of goddamn, fucking priests?” The priest, clearly aggravated, went on with his prayer.

These were two movements colliding at the monument, not one homogenous ideological mass called, “The Left.” Movements use symbols to coalesce support and to create frames of action around which grievances and strategies are formed. Here were two frames of action coming into conflict at a hotly contested symbolic site.

The cat-calls and heckling continued, and many of the unionists were fuming. Alma, as “Lucy Parsons,” came forward and lifted the white veil from the small Government plaque in front of the monument. Some labor people began to applaud.

As soon as the white veil was lifted, an anarchist stepped forward and said, “These people died because they hated government, and they fought the government, and that’s why the government killed them. And for the government to try to rip off their memory is a lie!”

Someone from the labor ranks yelled, “Get a life!” but there was no other immediate reaction.

Then, the anarchist draped his black flag over the plaque, re-veiling the government’s bronze insignia with the anarchist banner that Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons called the “fearful symbol of hunger, misery and Death.” Symbols were now fighting symbols, and it was an electric moment. This nonverbal action was far more potent than the words he had just uttered, and it provoked a stronger reaction. At that moment of greatest provocation, of symbolic confrontation and disruption, the verbal argument turned into a brawl.

A few burly labor men charged into the anarchists and blows were exchanged as the anarchists were driven back. Within half a minute of fighting and cursing, a standoff set in. The stage announcer pleaded, “Everyone calm down, calm down; we’re not going to let them ruin our day.” A cheer came from the unionists, and the speeches went on.

The anarchists, somewhat subdued, protested more quietly for the rest of the event, that is, until the German-American band began playing The Star Spangled-Banner to close the day’s festivities. They howled and laughed in bemused disgust and disbelief. Uncle Sam the Vampire looked down with bloody fangs upon the proceedings.

The Martyrs Monument was erected to honor the fallen and to give hope to the workers movement in a time of enormous pain and loss. It also came as a direct response to the reactionary narrative of Haymarket embodied in the police statue which was built first and erected in Haymarket Square by the Chicago establishment.

Cop Extends His Rule

The police statue was commissioned by the right-wing *Chicago Tribune* and the conservative Union League Club. It depicts a policeman in period uniform, standing with his arm raised in a “HALT!” gesture that, to a modern eye, visually rhymes with the “Heil!” salute a little too closely. While the Martyrs Monument tells a story of workers’ heroism and defiance, this piece, erected in a dominating position at Haymarket Square in 1889, portrays the establishment’s version of the event. A heroic, stern beat cop extends his rule over the street and imposes/restores order on the public space.

There’s some irony in the association’s choice of the image of an average beat cop. The businessmen’s own racism tripped them up. The sculptor chose as a model an actual beat cop; like many of the police of the time, he was of Irish descent. The white Anglo-Saxon Protestants of the Union League were horrified when the design was unveiled to see what they imagined as Irish features on the face of the figure. The actual officer-model was hardly a model officer; like his superiors in the Haymarket story, he was later kicked off the force for criminal activity, and died a homeless alcoholic.

The police statue was erected when public anger about the Haymarket confrontation was still intense. Since its creation, it has been moved several times in response to popular anger, defacement and even destruction.

On the forty-first anniversary of Haymarket, a trolley driver ran his car off the tracks and knocked it off of its base. He was quoted as saying, he was “tired of looking at that policeman with his arm raised.” On the anniversary in 1968, it was splashed with black paint in an expression of intergenerational radical solidarity.

In 1969, the statue was blown off its pedestal at the legs by a bomb. Although no one was hurt in the attack, a prominent police official pronounced this a declaration of war by the radical youth of Students for a Democratic

Society (SDS) and that the situation was now, “Kill or be killed.” The statue was rebuilt a year later, and immediately bombed again in 1970.

Mayor Richard Daley once again had it fixed, at enormous cost. In a twist on the old Roman question, “Who watches the watchmen?,” the police set up a 24 hour guard over the statue including remote TV surveillance. They even considered substituting a fiberglass replica for it which could be replaced relatively cheaply every time it was blown up. Eventually, the police statue was moved to the safer Central Police Headquarters, and finally, the courtyard of the Police Training Center where it stands today along with a plaque telling the official version of the event.

I wondered: as it got pelted and rammed, graffitied and bombed, while frozen into place and unable to dodge, what would that police statue, a front-line symbolic soldier of reaction, be thinking?

The script I wrote focused on the two statues as the symbolic nodes of clashing narratives, as characters and as central, changing symbols in an “anarch-ronistic” setting. The statues were each other’s narrative negation. The final script was an attempt to engage not only with the Haymarket story, but with the telling of that story, the clash between these narratives, and our understanding of its timely themes of labor, terror, immigration, racism, martyrdom, surveillance and civil liberties in the face of a wounded State’s drive for security over freedom.

As the audience enters the theatre, a video of the interviews of Neebe and the teamster are projected on the wall followed by footage of the brawl at the ceremony. In the play, the constantly attacked police monument is a main character, personified, and his identity wavers between that of reactionary monument and the put-upon Irish-American beat cop who was the model for it.

While struggling with abuse by anarchists, and ill use by his superiors on the force and capitalists, JP Morgan, Cyrus McCormick and Marshall Fields, he discovers the history of Haymarket and comes to understand what he really symbolizes. Although this may be taken as a privileging of the position of the police, this character is depicted as a foot soldier of reaction, the cannon fodder of the establishment. The policeman/statue finds that in the unjust order he serves, it is impossible to enforce the law and serve justice at the same time, and that his own existence bolsters the system.

One Martyr’s favorite poem was Heine’s, “The Weavers,” in which the oppressed textile workers of Germany weave curse-laden death shrouds for their masters—state, boss, and clergy. That poem, set to original music by award-winning, contemporary Irish composer Jennifer Walshe, is woven throughout the play, sung by the ensemble in the beginning, middle and end. The performers sing this song as they unfurl and cover the stage with a huge, mournful black flag covered in anarchist slogans of the time in many different languages, reflecting the diverse, immigrant composition and internationalism of the movement, while also suggesting a death shroud for most of the characters.

A dialectic develops between Lucy Parsons, the Haymarket Monument and the police statue that ends with a violent synthesis. The statue realizes he will constantly be attacked, and, worse, his bosses will keep on rebuilding him every time he is destroyed, no matter how much he would rather cease to exist.

He has become a key site of contention, a useful buffer, and the powers-that-be will not let him rest. Instead, he commits revolutionary suicide, blowing himself up with dynamite—evoking both Martyr Louis Lingg’s jailhouse dynamite suicide and the bomb attacks by the Weather Underground on the statue. Exploding, he falls into the position of the slain worker in the Martyrs Monument.

Lucy Parsons steps in front of him and takes the position of the heroic female figure, closing the image as a slide of the Martyrs Monument is projected. The play blacks out with this ambivalent image and a funereal bass drum beat. The ending is contradictory, with an unstable tableau and unresolved, conflicting ideas of race, heroism, and the class position of the individuals that make up the rank-and-file police.

Epilogue/Sequel: The Police Statue Makes a Comeback: To Haymarket Square!

We tried a more whimsical approach in May 2002. I was invited to perform in Haymarket Square by artist Michael Piazza and his crew, who were setting up a whole series of events. The square was totally “clean” of any historical memorial besides the bolt holes where the ILHS plaque used to hang in the wall before it was stolen.

Power had changed its approach—and rather than have a big reactionary shrine defining the space, all trace of Haymarket had been erased (this was before the construction of the ideologically ambivalent statue that stands there today). I know that power abhors a vacuum, especially cultural power, so I wrote a script in which the police statue is back—and he’s fighting mad!

He’s going to take back his rightful, dominating space in the Square he was driven from by the anarchists years ago! The idea of filling the void where the big metallic monument used to be with a silly, soft papier-mache caricature really appealed to me, and working with the great labor puppeteer, Tavia La-Follette, and her student Diana Vencius, we did just that—and marched from City Hall to Haymarket, giving out a flyer with a cartoon of a smiling, waving Police statue, saying:

“The Haymarket police statue (and friends) cordially invite you to walk with them to Haymarket Square, where this edifying edifice will triumphantly reassume his too-long forlorn position of public power and say a few wise words for our consumption.”

The cops were on us immediately. After avoiding arrest by admitting to the police, that, yes, we had no permit, but we weren’t demonstrating—we were just happily celebrating the eight-hour day!—our puppet procession made the march to Haymarket Square. We laid the huge black flag from the 1998 Haymarket show over the former site of the statue. Lucy Parsons, in papier-mache form, came along for the march, of course, and it will be no surprise to the reader to hear that, in the end, she drove the statue from the Square once again.

But the statue, and everything it stands for, survives, still standing in the halls of reaction and repression...hmm...I feel another sequel coming on.

Down With Power!

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Fifth Estate recommended reading: *Haymarket Scrapbook*, Edited by Dave Roediger & Franklin Rosemont. A compendium of the history, biographies, and politics of the event. Available from Charles H. Kerr Publishing; Chicago; charleshkerr.org

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