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## Civil Disobedience in Chicago: Revisiting the Haymarket Riot

by Samantha Wilson

(English 1102)

The city of Chicago, Illinois, is no stranger to political uprisings, riots, protests, and violence. However, there has never been a movement that the police and Chicago elite desired to squash quickly quite like the anarchist uprising during the 1880s. In the period of time after the Chicago Fire, the population of the city tripled, exceeding one million people (Smith 101). While business was booming for men like George Pullman, the railcar tycoon, and Louis Sullivan, the architect, the Fire left over 100,000 people homeless, mostly German and Scandinavian immigrant laborers who were also subjected to low wages and poor working conditions. In winter of 1872, the Bread Riot began due to thousands marching on the Chicago Relief and Aid Society for access to money donated by people of the United States and other countries after the Fire. Instead of being acknowledged, police filed them into a tunnel under the Chicago River and beat them with clubs (Adelman 4-5). This certainly was not the last instance of police violence against laborers. In 1877, Albert Parsons, one of the four men who would be hanged after Haymarket, led the socialist Working-Men's Party in conjunction with several other labor movements in protests and strikes calling for an eight-hour workday. Although Parsons and other leaders preached peace among the strikers, violence broke out, resulting in Chicago officials calling in the army to extinguish the rebellion (Smith 106). After the protests, Albert Parsons was blacklisted in Chicago, fired from his position at the *Chicago Tribune*, and threatened by then Mayor Heath and police (Smith 107). In response, he published *The Alarm*, and began to preach dynamite as the great equalizer as police continued to beat protestors, eventually killing two striking quarrymen on May 4, 1885, and killing two more striking workers at the McCormick Reaper Works on May 3, 1886, the night before the Haymarket Riots. The latter instance was witnessed by August Spies, another newspaper publisher and anarchist (Smith 117-120). Together with Parsons, Spies would call a rally that would quite literally ignite Chicago, and would pay for it with their lives in the months to come. The Haymarket Square Riots of May 4, 1886, marked the height of the Anarchist movement against the capitalists, government officials, and police of Chicago. The Riot allowed the Anarchist and Labor movements to have a national stage in their fight for social equality and stability in a time of large inequality, monopolies, and opportunities for the wealthy investors in Chicago, all principles which were guarded closely by the Chicago Police, resulting in violence against the people they were sworn to protect.

The first week of May in 1886 began with a peaceful 80,000 laborer strong march for the eight-hour workday down Michigan Avenue in Chicago, led by Albert Parsons, his wife Lucy, and their two small children on May Day, May 1<sup>st</sup> (Adelman 15). While the eight-hour day was largely a labor union issue, Parsons adapted the ideal to promote his anarchist beliefs. At this point in the greater conflict between anarchists and government officials, including the police, Parsons was a well-known figure and looked down upon for invoking the use of dynamite against the capitalists of Chicago. On November 29, 1884, an unsigned editorial was released in *The Alarm*, Parsons' newspaper. This editorial is largely accepted, and highly likely, to be written by Parsons himself. In it, he states, "When people wake up to the enormity of the crime of property holding and property manipulating then dynamite will not be too powerful nor too quick to express their hatred for those who use or uphold it" ("The Property Power" 5). These frequent calls to use deadly force against the growing influence of capitalism in Chicago found roots in the German immigrant population. August

Spies, who edited the German language counterpart of *The Alarm*, the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, was also a prominent figure, often giving speeches in conjunction with Parsons. Together, the men would spearhead the events leading to the Haymarket Riot. The previously mentioned McCormick Reaper Works strike took place later that week on May 3<sup>rd</sup>. In response to the police killing two of the locked out striking laborers for attempting to attack scabs, August Spies and Albert Parsons published flyers rallying all workingmen to Haymarket on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1886. Unfortunately for them, as Donald Miller states in the documentary, *Chicago: City of the Century*, Parson's flyer was headed with "REVENGE!" in bold, black letters against his will, which attracted the attention of the police and other high-ranking officials and capitalist leaders in Chicago. Despite preaching dynamite, neither Parsons nor Spies had engaged in using it, or force in general during their rallies and protests. The rally was meant to be a gathering of anarchists, socialists, and other laborers to rail against the use of force by the police at McCormick. It turned out to be something much deadlier.

The night of May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1886 began peacefully enough. According to an account from the *Chicago Herald* from May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1886, the speeches began at approximately eight o'clock, with Mayor Harrison, the popular Mayor of Chicago, in attendance. Spies spoke first, and then introduced Parsons. After Parsons had spoken, the weather was beginning to threaten rain, and some people left the rally. It wasn't until Samuel Fielden, described in the aforementioned article as, "a grim-visaged Anarchist, wearing a black slouched hat" began to speak that the problems started (11). While Spies and Parsons focused on issues such as unfair wages and long workdays, the *Herald* report states that Fielden began to call the remaining crowd to arms against the police (11-12). According to Captain John Bonfield, Inspector of the Police in his trial testimony for the state, the police were alerted to the rally on May 4<sup>th</sup>, and gathered policemen at the Des Plaines street station until a little after ten o'clock in the evening. At that point, the force marched to Haymarket in order to put an end to the rally, despite being told by Mayor Harrison on his way home that the rally was "tame" ("Testimony for the Defense" 38). The police had specific orders not to draw their weapons or fire without direct command from their commanding officers ("Testimony for the State" 26-27). Per Bonfield's testimony, upon approaching the meeting, Bonfield directly confronted Fielden and stated, "I command you, in the name of the people of the State of Illinois, to immediately and peaceably disperse" (27). Fielden responded with, "We are peaceable" (27). A bomb went off at this point, and gunshots began to echo throughout the city. The police, including Bonfield and his subordinate Captain William Ward insist that the crowd began firing first in their trial testimonies ("Testimony for the State" 29). Donald Miller's documentary suggests that the police who were injured and died during the incident were largely harmed by friendly fire (*Chicago: City of the Century*). It is not known how many casualties the rallied workingmen sustained, as the Chicago Historical Society states they were largely dragged to safety upon being wounded by their comrades (Reilly np). While the loss of life during the Haymarket Riots was great, the events following were arguably the greatest injustice to take place in the City of Chicago.

After the Haymarket Riots, America experienced its very first Red Hunt. According to Donald Miller, martial law was declared in the city the following day, and public backlash toward the Anarchist movement fueled the police to track down anyone involved in the rally and arrest them (*Chicago: City of the Century*). It is stated that State's Attorney Julius S. Grinnel told police to "Make the raids and look up the law afterwards", completely disregarding all processes of arrest. (Adelman 17). Grinnel would later be the one to prosecute the "Haymarket Eight", which consisted of George Engel, Samuel Fielden, Adolph Fischer, Louis Lingg, Oscar Neebe, Michael Schwab, August Spies, and later Parsons, who would come out of hiding and turn himself in to stand trial with his fellow workingmen (Adelman 17-21). The trial of these eight men began on June 21, 1886, with Judge Joseph E. Gary assigned to the case (Adelman 20). Adelman states, "Gary made the trial a travesty of justice", as the jury was stacked in favor of the police, even containing the relative of a policeman killed in the riot; and as he forced the eight men to be tried together in a "conspiracy

trial”, in which if one were found guilty, all were guilty by association (20). By beginning the trial with improper arrests, no hard evidence to link the bomb-thrower to any of these men, and the popular opinion that Anarchism should be halted in its tracks, the eight men being tried understood their plight. Carl Smith suggests that the defendants recognized this was less of a trial and more of a public spectacle, and it presented them with an opportunity for their message to be heard (128-129). Each man had time to present the case to the judge and jury in October prior to sentencing, with Louis Lingg briefly stating, “I despise you. I despise your order; your laws, and your force-propped authority. HANG ME FOR IT!”, and A. R. Parsons speaking for eight hours straight, outlining his vision for the future of America, attacking the effects of capitalism on its laborers (Smith 129). The State, for its part, focused less on presenting evidence that any of these men were directly tied to the actual bombing and subsequent murders, and focused more on what these men represented, wishing to purge their beliefs from the city of Chicago (Smith 132). Despite the lack of evidence, all eight men were convicted, seven sentenced to death by hanging, and Oscar Neebe sentenced to fifteen years hard labor (Cole 1). Despite appeals made to the higher courts in the land, on November 11, 1886, George Engel, Adolph Fischer, and the two men who originally called the workingmen to arms, A. R. Parsons and August Spies, were hanged (Matson 1). Louis Lingg would commit suicide in prison, and Michael Schwab and Samuel Fielden would have their sentences commuted to life in prison, and later be pardoned, along with Oscar Neebe, in June of 1893 by Governor Altgeld of Illinois (Altgeld 1). William J. Adelman, from the Illinois Labor History Society, often refers to the four hanged men as martyrs for the Labor Cause, and the Society has erected a monument in Haymarket Square to immortalize the struggle of workingmen under a corrupt, capitalist government, in which those sworn to defend, protect, and deliver justice, instead murder and sentence men to death unjustly (28-29).

The Haymarket Riot and the following trial of the “Haymarket Eight”, was a battle for power in the city of Chicago between two opposing forces with different ideals for America. The capitalists of Chicago were largely profiting off of the rebuilding of the city, and hoped to keep their workforce disenfranchised while driving them to produce at maximum capacity for poor wages. Parsons and Spies believed that this kind of oppression was the equivalent of tyranny, and must be halted in its tracks, even with the use of dynamite, and the power given to the people. Excessive force was used in both sides of this conflict, and contributed largely to the sham of a trial the men were given. However, if the police and other elected officials of Chicago would have done their duty to protect those in the community they serve, instead of doing the bidding of the capitalists, tycoons, and other moneyed interests of the city, perhaps the Haymarket Riots would have never taken place. While Parsons and Spies were slightly inflammatory in their rhetoric, the use of dynamite was not seen until the moment the police of Chicago, led by Bonfield, marched on an entirely peaceful and admittedly tame protest. To this day, it is not known who detonated the bomb, who created it, and for what reason they ignited or created it. What is known is four men were wrongly put to death for the work of an unknown individual, giving their lives for the cause of social justice and equality in a divided city which struggles with corruption and inequality to the present day.

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