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Radical Women: The Haymarket Tradition

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The Haymarket police riot and the ensuing miscarriage of justice in Chicago affected everyone interested in progressive social change. The influence of these events on several generations of women radicals has been enormous and persistent.

Jessie Bross Lloyd, whose father William Bross was one of the owners of the Chicago Tribune and a former lieutenant-governor of Illinois, was disinherited from an estimated \$5-million fortune because of her and her husband Henry Demarest Lloyd's efforts on behalf of the anarchists. Undaunted, in later years she participated in anti-imperialist agitation and assisted her husband's "muckraking" efforts.

Although Hortensia Black, wife of the anarchists' chief defense counsel William P. Black, had initially opposed his taking the case, she became intimately involved in it and in the clemency movement. She and her husband endured a lowered standard of living after the trial as well as ostracism by former friends. The Blacks suffered a great emotional loss at the deaths and imprisonment of the men they had come to respect and love.

When Jane Addams and Julia Lathrop established Hull House in 1889, the pall of Haymarket still lay over the city. More than once it served the interests of city officials and/or the police to link the settlement-workers with the “terrorist” doctrines of 1886, as for example in 1901 when Jane Addams arranged for Abraham Isaak, editor of the anarchist journal *Free Society*, and his family to be released from jail during the “anarchist scare” following the assassination of President McKinley. Again in 1915 the police accused Jane Addams of anarchism after she secured the release of Lucy Parsons, Fanya Baron and other female “hunger demonstrators” from jail.

If the repercussions of Haymarket affected women such as these, whose social and political views were comparatively moderate, one can imagine the effect the events had on women who were already active in the anarchist movement in pre-Haymarket days, and who had personally known and worked closely with the Chicago Martyrs.

Sarah E. Ames, an important figure in the Chicago IWPA's American Group and leader of the Knights of Labor Women's Assembly 1789, played an appreciable role in the Haymarket defense and amnesty campaigns. Her Open Letter to Judge Joseph E. Gary (1893) is a detailed and sharply-worded refutation of a magazine article in which the “Hanging Judge” tried to justify the Haymarket trial and executions.

Another leading figure in the Chicago IWPA, Lizzie Swank Holmes, continued active in the movement for many years, focusing much of her attention on the more philosophical issues of American anarchism. Later she helped form the Ladies' Federal Labor Union and the Illinois Women's Alliance. She contributed commemorative articles about her martyred comrades to many publications, frequently describing the profound effect which Haymarket had had on her life. The hardest task, she wrote in *Free Society* ten years after the executions, was “learning how to live without them; of taking up the burden

of life again... Many a true comrade came through the ordeal changed and broken, never to be again what he had been.”

Haymarket brought untold suffering and hardship, but it also brought many newcomers into the anarchist movement, among them two women who became well-known and highly articulate spokespersons for the poor and oppressed: Emma Goldman and Voltairine de Cleyre. In 1886, a woman socialist speaker, Johanna Greie, confirmed Emma Goldman’s belief that the Haymarket defendants were innocent. Devastated by the executions, Emma resolved to devote her own life to the cause for which they had sacrificed theirs. She wrote of her I awakening:

I had a distinct sensation that something new and wonderful had been born in my soul. A great ideal, a burning faith, a determination to dedicate myself to the memory of my martyred comrades, to make their cause my own, to make known to the world their beautiful lives and heroic deaths.

In a few years Emma Goldman was the best-known anarchist in America, an outspoken advocate of free speech, sexual freedom and birth control, and a popularizer of the modern drama.

Beginning as a lecturer in the free thought and secular movements, Voltairine de Cleyre became an anarchist in 1888 as a direct consequence of Haymarket. One of American anarchism’s finest prose-stylists, she was also a poet; her “Light Upon Waldheim” is a powerful tribute to the Chicago Martyrs. A collection of her November Eleventh commemorative addresses was published in 1980 as “a classic of anarchist literature.”

Emma Goldman and Voltairine de Cleyre are both buried in Waldheim Cemetery, close to the Haymarket Martyrs’ monument.

A less well-known but no less articulate and courageous woman who came to anarchism as a result of Haymarket was Kate Austin, whose articles and letters from her backwoods

farm in the Ozarks were a regular feature of many anarchist periodicals in the 1890s and early 1900s.

Emma Goldman, Voltairine de Cleyre and Kate Austin became anarchists in the immediate aftermath of Haymarket and continued to promote the message of the Chicago Martyrs for the rest of their lives. Esther Dolgoff is a woman anarchist of a later generation who has directly carried on what we might call the “Haymarket Tradition.” Active for many years in the old Libertarian League in New York, and a regular contributor to its journal, Views & Comments, she has also translated many important anarchist writings into English, most notably Joseph Cohen’s history of the Jewish anarchist movement in the United States. Today Esther still writes for several anarchist publications as well as for the IWW paper, the Industrial Worker.

Many other women were radicalized by the Haymarket events without necessarily becoming anarchists. Indeed, virtually every female radical labor activist since Haymarket—whether anarchist, IWW, socialist, communist or just plain radical—has found lasting inspiration in the strength and courage of the Haymarket Martyrs.

Mary Harris “Mother” Jones devoted a chapter of her famous Autobiography to “The Haymarket Tragedy.” “Although I never endorsed the philosophy of anarchism;” she wrote, “I often attended the meetings on the lake shore [in Chicago in the 1880s], listening to what these teachers of a new order had to say to the workers.” And the “Miners’ Angel” concluded:

In the cemetery of Waldheim, the dead were buried. But with them was not buried their cause. The struggle for the eight-hour day, for more human conditions and relations between man and man lived on, and still lives on.

Many women radicals of the next generation—women and men—were brought close to Haymarket by personal encounters with Lucy Parsons. In her autobiography, *The Rebel Girl*, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn warmly recalled meeting Lucy at the 1907

IWW convention in Chicago. Many years later, when Lucy died, Flynn wrote a tribute to her for the *Daily Worker*.

Vera Buch Weisbord—also an IWW member and later a Communist; a key figure in the textile-mill strikes in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929; and in more recent years an independent radical—recalls hearing Lucy Parsons speak at a meeting. “I sat very close to the front so that I had a good view,” she says. “I can’t remember what she said, but it was eloquent.” Vera further recalls Lucy’s “warm, outgoing personality.”

Vicky Starr—organizer for the Packinghouse Workers and later of the University of Chicago clerical staff, and more recently a star of the documentary film, *Union Maids*—also has warm recollections of meeting Lucy Parsons. Tears came to her eyes as she grasped Lucy’s hand in solidarity, linking past, present and future. As she looked into the old woman’s eyes she saw there the source of her strength and courage. For women activists of the Great Depression years, Lucy was the living embodiment of the Haymarket spirit.

These activists, in turn, helped bring the Haymarket legacy into the new women’s movement that began to emerge in the 1960s. Across the country, women’s centers began displaying posters of Lucy Parsons and Emma Goldman. Women whose destinies were directly linked to Haymarket became heroines of a whole new generation of radical women.