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Anarchism According to the Haymarket Anarchists

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The trial of eight anarchists for the May 4, 1886 bombing in Haymarket Square is a well-documented event in labor and radical history. The events of the Haymarket Affair were important events of their day, held deep ramifications for generations of anarchists and other radicals, and are key events in the history of the American labor movement. However, the anarchism of the Haymarket anarchists is less well documented and understood.

In the course of the trial, which began July 16, 1886 and ended August 14, 1886,¹ the court and jury heard testimony from police, witness to the events, and from the anarchist themselves. At the conclusion of the trial, the defendants each made a statement before sentence was passed on their case.² Albert

¹ Chicago Historical Society, "Haymarket Affair Chronology." *Haymarket Affair Digital Collection*. www.chicagohistory.org.

² *The Accused, the accusers: the famous speeches of the eight Chicago anarchists in court when asked if they had anything to say why sentence should not be passed upon them. On October 7th, 8th and 9th, 1886.* (Chicago, Illinois. Chicago, Ill.: Socialistic Publishing Society, [1886?]). www.chicagohistory.org.

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Parsons, August Spies, Michael Schwab, Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe, Louis Lingg, George Engel, and Adolph Fischer, argued that they were tried and convicted not for what had taken place on May 4, 1886, but for of their political beliefs.³ Further, in pardoning Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe, and Michael Schwab, then Governor John Altgeld stated that the eight anarchists were not found guilty of producing or throwing the bomb in Haymarket Square, but rather,

[T]he prosecution was forced to proceed on the theory that the men indicted were guilty of murder because it was claimed they had at various times in the past uttered and printed incendiary and seditious language, practically advising the killing of policemen, of Pinkerton men and others acting in that capacity, and that they were therefore responsible for the murder of Mathias Degan.⁴

But what did these men believe, utter, and print? What political and economic ideas had they advocated, and what had they advised working people to do?

By examining the trial transcript we have one have one answer to these questions. In defending themselves, the Haymarket anarchists described and explained to the court what anarchism was and why they were indeed anarchists. From the trial transcript and also from the publication, *The Accused, the Accusers* we can piece together, in their own words, what anarchism meant to these men.⁵

The events of the “Haymarket Affair” began on May 3, 1886 when police opened fire at the McCormick’s Reaper works against striking workers, killing and wounding several

³ *The Accused, the Accusers*. www.chicagohistory.org.

⁴ John P. Altgeld, *Reasons for pardoning Fielden, Neebe and Schwab, signed June 26, 1893* (Chicago: s.n., 1893). www.chicagohistory.org.

⁵ *The Accused, the accusers*.www.chicagohistory.org.

men. The strike was part of a citywide, (and organized labor throughout the country) attempt on the part of organized labor to fight for and institute the eight-hour day for workers. In Chicago, by May 1886 Albert Parsons, August Spies, Samuel Fielden, and Michael Schwab had, according to Paul Avrich, taken the helm of the movement, imbuing it with revolutionary tenor and making it one of the most vibrant eight-hour movement cities in the country.⁶ Following the violence of the police against the striking workers, a meeting was called for the evening of May 4, 1886 in Haymarket Square to protest the police attack and encourage workers to continue in their struggle for the eight-hour day.

The meeting was announced in a series of broadsides, leaflets, and statements in the anarchist press, including one that urged “Revenge! Workingmen to Arms!!”⁷ and another in the *Arbeiter Zeitung* that simply stated “Let him who condemns the hideous brutalities of yesterday be present this evening at the Haymarket, corner Desplaines street.”⁸ Another broadside that appeared in English and German, actually appeared in two forms, both announced a mass meeting in Haymarket Square, where “Good speakers will be present to denounce the latest atrocities by the police, the shooting of our fellow workers yesterday afternoon,” organized by the

⁶ The two standard texts on these events, Henry David’s *History of the Haymarket affair; a study of the American social-revolutionary and labor movements*. (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1936) and Paul Avrich’s *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). The above narrative background is drawn from these texts, however this essay will rely entirely upon primary source documents available online through the Chicago Historical Society’s Haymarket Affair Digital Collection, www.chicagohistory.org.

⁷ People’s Exhibit 6. “Revenge” circular, 1886 May 3, Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial evidence book. www.chicagohistory.org.

⁸ People’s Exhibit 61A. *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (Newspaper), untitled, 1886 May 4, Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial evidence book. www.chicagohistory.org.

executive committee.⁹ However, one version of this leaflet also suggested “Workingmen Arm Yourselves and Appear in Force!”¹⁰ These announcements were used by the prosecution to suggest that the bomb-throwing was the result of an anarchist culture of violence and that the speakers and organizers of the May 4th meeting were responsible for the bomb and the fight that broke out in its wake. However, the anarchists in the trial, while not denying the culture of violence, (on the part of the working people and the police), also understood anarchism to be more than violence.

Throughout the trial the defendants argued that anarchism was a belief in an economic and political culture that was without force or authority and which was entirely at odds with the present culture. The present culture, they believed was based on force and would not willingly give up its power and control. Samuel Fielden, an English immigrant and member of the American Group of the International Working Peoples’ Association described anarchism as liberty and the absence of force, while at the same time refusing to disassociate himself from revolutionary action. In the cross examination, the prosecution’s lawyer asks Fielden about his political beliefs as they pertain to overthrowing the “existing order.” Fielden responds, I have always been of the belief and am yet that the existing order of things will have to be overthrown either by one method [force] or the other.”¹¹ August Spies, editor of the *Arbeiter Zeitung* explained, “I have called upon the workingmen for years and years, and before me others had done the same

⁹ Defense Exhibit 1. “Attention Workingmen” flier, 1886 May 4, Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial evidence book. www.chicagohistory.org.

¹⁰ People’s Exhibit 5, “Attention Workingmen” Flier, 1886 May 4, Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial evidence book. www.chicagohistory.org and Testimony of August Spies, 1886 Aug. 9, Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial transcript no. 1. www.chicagohistory.org

¹¹ Testimony of Samuel Fielden, Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial transcript no. 1 (first appearance resumed), 1886 Aug. 7. Volume M, 334–365, 32 p. www.chicagohistory.org.

deaths, their statements, their defense of their actions, beliefs, and work for a better world would be the final statement of the injustice of the current world. To fully understand the beliefs of the Haymarket anarchists, and of anarchism in Chicago during this period it would be necessary to study the papers, writings, and speeches of these men which were not presented by the state or by the defense in the trial. However, through a close reading of the eight defendants explanations of their beliefs we begin to understand the basics of their anarchism. These men were executed by the state because they believed that the current capitalist world was inherently unjust. They understood that the masses of workers produced great wealth that was held by a very small minority. They believed that those with wealth also held and controlled political power over the masses and would not relinquish that power without a fight. The Haymarket anarchists believed they were justified in using force to rectify this situation and protect themselves from the violence, starvation, and servitude they lived under. And finally they believed they were part of an American tradition of revolutionary fighters for freedom from tyranny and justice for everyone.

Spies argued in his final statement that anarchism, “deduces that under a co-operative organization of society, under economic equality and individual independence, the “State”-the political State-will pass into barbaric antiquity. And we will be where all are free... Anarchism means peace and tranquility to all.”²⁴ For Spies, for Engel, Parsons, Schwab, Fischer, Neebe, and Fielden, anarchism was the solution to the inequalities of a capitalist organized society.

The three themes that run through all the Haymarket anarchists statements reiterate their belief that anarchism was the positive and necessary evolution of society, one that would bring about a better, more free and equal organization of society. They all believed that capitalism and the state were propped up by force and violence, that the low wages and long hours the working class worked to survive were morally wrong. Further, they understood that because capitalism was maintained through force, people would, of necessity, use force to free themselves. Finally, the Haymarket anarchists saw themselves as part of a historical tradition of revolutionary movements toward freedom. They harkened back to actions and beliefs of revolutionary America, and saw themselves as descendants of men like John Brown, who used force to fight political and economic systems they believed were morally corrupt.

These are the Haymarket anarchists beliefs, and the way those beliefs were represented to the Court. The presentation of their beliefs was first to defend themselves, and then, when it became apparent that they would all be convicted regardless of the evidence, they spoke for propaganda, to call attention to the injustices being heaped upon them. As Spies argued, “My defense is your accusation.”²⁵ It they were to die, then their

²⁴ August Spies, *The Accused, the Accusers*, 1–23. www.chicagohistory.org.

²⁵ August Spies, *The Accused, the Accusers*, 1–23. www.chicagohistory.org.

thing to arm themselves, and they have a right, under the Constitution, to arm themselves, and it would be well for them if they were all armed.” Spies explained that he called for the working people to be armed, not to incite violence, or because he wanted to tell them what to do, rather, “I didn’t want them to do anything in particular. I wanted them to be conscious of the condition that they were in.” For Spies, Fielden, and other anarchists, it was not incitement to violence, but rather a call to consciousness that those in power would never give up their power without a fight. In suggesting that workers arm themselves, Spies explained, “I wanted to arouse that mass of working people who are stupid and are ignorant, and who will run and be shot down as they had at McCormick’s on the previous day. I wanted to warn them to go into a conflict with the police like that.”¹² Louis Lingg in his statement before being sentenced to death has probably the most powerful statement of his belief in force, “I tell you frankly and openly, I am for force. I have already told Captain Schaack, “If they use cannons against us, we shall use dynamite against them.” I repeat that I am the enemy of the “order” of today, and I repeat that, with all my powers, so long as breath remains in me, I shall combat it. I declare again, frankly and openly, that I am in favor of using force.”¹³

The use of arms, dynamite, and other forms of violence was a protection against the violence used against working people. The events at McCormick’s Reaper works suggested nothing more to anarchists than that the working people should arm themselves in defense and protection. Albert Parsons, editor of *The Alarm* explained as much in his testimony under cross-examination.

¹² Testimony of August Spies, 1886 Aug. 9. Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial transcript no. 1, Volume N, 17–105, 89 p. www.chicagohistory.org.

¹³ Louis Lingg, *The Accused, the accusers*, 39–42. www.chicagohistory.org.

Q. Did you tell them that they should retaliate. Did you in that connection in substance tell your audience that they should retaliate with similar means, with similar weapons?

A I told them they should defend themselves against such things, protect themselves.

Q. How?

A Anyway they could.

Q. By arming?

A If necessary.

Q. By the use of dynamite?

A If necessary, but I didn't mention dynamite at that meeting.¹⁴

Parsons, like others, believed the working class arming itself against the armed force, power, and violence of the police, and the those who controlled the police, was their moral right, and the only possible strategy for survival. For the Haymarket anarchists, capitalism was based upon force, both economic and political. If this were true than it made sense that force would eventually be necessary to change social conditions. Parsons' explained, "the existing order of things was founded upon and maintained by force, and I think I said that the action of the monopolists and corporations, and congregated and concentrated wealth of the country would drive the people into the use of force before they could obtain redress."¹⁵

Besides a belief in using force to bring about social and economic change for the better, the Haymarket anarchists also understood themselves as American revolutionaries. They com-

¹⁴ Testimony of Albert Parsons, 1886 Aug. 9. Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial transcript no. 1, Volume N, 108-143, 36 p. www.chicagohistory.org.

¹⁵ Testimony of Albert Parsons, 1886 Aug. 9. Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial transcript no. 1, Volume N, 108-143, 36 p. www.chicagohistory.org.

I had again been duped. I came to the opinion that as long as workingmen are economically enslaved they cannot be politically free. It became clear to me that the working classes would never bring about a form of society guaranteeing WORK, BREAD, AND A HAPPY LIFE by means of the ballot."²²

For Engel, anarchism or any other political system should first and foremost provide "work, bread, and a happy life." However, because 1886 Chicago, like other industrial cities in the United States at this time did not guarantee work, freedom from hunger, and the chance to be happy, Engel and others searched for an economic and political alternative. It was this situation that brought Engel and others to anarchism, which Parson explained is the opinion,

THAT GOVERNMENT IS DESPOTISM; government is an organization of oppression, and *law, statute law is its agent*. Anarchy is anti-government, anti-rulers, anti-dictators, anti-bosses and drivers. Anarchy is the negation of force; the elimination of all authority in social affairs; it is the denial of the right of domination of one man over another. It is the diffusion of rights, of power, of duties, EQUALLY AND FREELY AMONG ALL THE PEOPLE.²³

For the Haymarket anarchists, anarchism was the economic belief that people would be better under a different economic system, and further that government could be nothing but an impediment to a better world.

²² George Engel, *The Accused, the accusers*, p. 43-48. www.chicagohistory.org.

²³ Albert Parsons, *The Accused, the Accusers*, 90-188. www.chicagohistory.org.

conomic power. Parson then explains anarchism, the understanding that legislative and electoral reform will have no real effect on the lives of working people, because those with economic power control the “ballot” and legislators:

I then pointed to the ballot — how we were swindled at the ballot box. defrauded and cheated; how we were bulldozed, intimidated bribed and corrupted — yes, corrupted by the very money that had been stolen from us. Men would come to us then afterwards when we were poor, and they would give to us bread money if we would vote their ticket, and that we often did it through necessity; and in this way through these intimidations, through bribery and corruption that the workingmen had but little to expect from the ballot. I then pointed out the fact that we had petitioned or had passed resolutions, and had done everything in our power to redress, but there had been no relief, and no response in fact.

And finally Parsons states, “I then said to them, “Gentlemen, “socialism means the free association of the people for the “purposes of production and consumption; in other words, “universal co-operation. This is the sum total of socialism.”²¹

The belief that the “ballot box” or participating in the political system would not help the working-class was central to the Haymarket anarchists’ beliefs. George Engel explains,

I took part in politics with the earnestness of a good citizen; but I was soon to find that the teachings of a “free ballot box” ARE A MYTH, and that

²¹ Testimony of Albert Parsons, 1886 Aug. 9. Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial transcript no. 1, Volume N, 108–143, 36 p. www.chicagohistory.org.

pared themselves to the Founding Fathers and saw themselves as part of an American tradition of revolutionary change to end tyranny. Fielden compared his belief in the possible need for revolutionary force for change to the Founding Fathers, explaining:

In speaking of John Brown, Jefferson, Hopkins, Patrick Henry, I referred that we occupied in relation to the present social system which had outlived its day, and no longer provided security for the masses; that we occupied just about the portion that three men occupied with the further government and dictation of Great Britain over the colonies; that they repeatedly appealed to Great Britain to settle the differences in regard to the port duties, and the stamp tax, and so on, and to settle it peaceably, but when it could not be settled peaceably they could not any longer, they could not submit to it, and they were compelled by necessity to resort to something else, and it was always the case that the element of tyarany [sic] was always the inciter of strife, and as it was in that case so it would be in this.¹⁶

Fielden argued that the anarchists were like revolutionaries of previous generations, who when faced with a tyranny they could no longer live under, nor settle peaceably, would revolt, rebel, and become revolutionaries. This second theme in the anarchism of the Haymarket defendants, in which they saw themselves as inheritors of the revolutionary America, and defenders of justice against tyranny, would also be present in the statements of all the defendants.

¹⁶ Testimony of Samuel Fielden, Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial transcript no. 1 (first appearance resumed), 1886 Aug. 7. Volume M, 334–365, 32 p. www.chicagohistory.org.

George Engel makes this connection explicit in his final statement in which he traced the history of the United States, and linked the fighters of wage slavery, to previous fights for freedom from British rule and the abolition of slavery: “We see from the history of this country that the first colonists WON THEIR LIBERTY ONLY THROUGH FORCE; that through force slavery was abolished, and just as the man who agitated against slavery in this country, had to ascend the gallows, so also must we. He who speaks for the workingman today must hang.”¹⁷ By connecting themselves to previous generations of American revolutionaries, who were seen as heroes by history, the Haymarket anarchist wished to show that their movement was part of a long tradition of revolutionary change toward greater freedom and liberty, first from monarchical rule, then from chattel slavery, and now from wage slavery. Parsons asked, “Who believed at the time that our fathers tossed the tea into the Boston harbor that it meant the first revolt of the revolution separating this continent from the dominion of George III, and founding this Republic here in which we, their descendants, live today?”¹⁸ In asking this question, Parsons directly placed himself and the other anarchists as descendants of the American Revolution.

Finally, the Haymarket anarchists had specific economic beliefs. They believed that the best and only free way to organize economic and political life was through communist or socialist anarchism. Unlike other labor reformers and socialists, who were interested in labor and legislative reform, the anarchists were interested in changing the entire mode of production in such a way that workers shared equally in the means and ben-

¹⁷ George Engel, *The Accused, the accusers*, p. 43–48. www.chicagohistory.org.

¹⁸ Albert Parsons, *The Accused, the Accusers*, 90–188. www.chicagohistory.org.

efits of production, without interference from law or state.¹⁹ As Spies stated, “the doing away with the spoliation of labor, making the worker the owner of his own product. That is what I mean by the abolition of the wage system.”²⁰ Albert Parsons, in his testimony recounting a meeting at which he spoke, gave this extended explanation of anarchism:

Here is a distinction between socialism and trades Unions. The Unionist fights the scab. What is a scab? A man as a usual thing that has been out of employment, who is destitute and whose necessities drive him to go to work in some man’s place who has employment, and of course he can only get the employment because he will take the work for less than the man who is employed is working for. He is at once denounced as scab by the Unionists, and war is made on him. Says I, “Gentlemen, socialism don’t do this thing. They regard these man [sic] as the victims of a false system, and to be pitied. These scabs I might say could be compared to the fleas on the dog. The Unionist wants to kill the fleas, but the socialists would kill the dog, and that the dog is the wage system of wage slavery.”

Parsons’ explained that socialists and trade unionists both work for the improvement of workers economic position, but where trade unionism would kill the fleas, or their own less fortunate competitors, socialism would kill the dog, the system itself that creates competition between those with the least eco-

¹⁹ Testimony of Samuel Fielden, Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial transcript no. 1 (first appearance) Volume M, 308–333, 26 p. www.chicagohistory.org.

²⁰ Testimony of August Spies, 1886 Aug. 9. Illinois vs. August Spies et al. trial transcript no. 1, Volume N, 17–105, 89 p. www.chicagohistory.org.