

# A review of Anarchism by Albert Parsons

“Hurrah for anarchy!”

Anarcho

May 1, 2005

**Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Scientific Basis**, Albert R. Parsons, University Press of the Pacific, Honolulu, Hawaii, ISBN: 1-4102-0496-5

“*Hurrah for anarchy!*” These were the last words of two of the five anarchists murdered by the state in 1887. They were murdered by the state because of their revolutionary politics, union organising and their role at the head of the strike movement for the eight hour day which started on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1886. The nominal reason for their trial and murder was the bomb explosion which killed one of the policemen sent to break up an anarchist meeting on May 4<sup>th</sup>. The meeting was protesting the killing of a picket the day before by the police.

The real reason for their deaths was their anarchism and role in the eight-hour day strikes which were rocking America. “*Anarchism is on trail,*” proclaimed the state and a packed jury and biased judge ensured their conviction. Four anarchists were hung on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1887 and another cheated the hangman by committing suicide. Three others has their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. Six years later, the new Governor of Illinois pardoned the Martyrs because of their obvious innocence, saying “the trail was not fair.” By then, the May 1<sup>st</sup> had been adopted as international workers’ day to commemorate the “Martyrdom of the Chicago Eight”. May Day had been born.

While the Haymarket events radicalised a whole generation of people to become anarchists, including Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, very little is known about the politics of the Chicago Anarchists. This is, in part, deliberate. How many times have Marxists talked about May Day and failed to mention the anarchism of the “labour leaders” involved? Or that the anarchists were union activists? In anarchist circles, there is little material written by the Martyrs available. Luckily, this has changed with the republication of Albert Parsons’ book “***Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Scientific Basis.***”

Albert Parsons was the only native born American among the Martyrs. A former Confederate soldier, he became a socialist after the civil war. Soon seeing the pointlessness of the ballot box, he, like the rest of the Martyrs, turned to anarchism. Its direct action and union organising proving to be far more effective in the class war than the socialist strategy. He compiled this book while in prison waiting for execution in order to explain the ideas of anarchism. And it succeeds.

Thus we find Albert Parsons arguing that *“anarchy is the social administration of all affairs by the people themselves; that is to say, self-government, individual liberty ... the people ... participate equally in governing themselves ... the people voluntarily associate or freely withdraw from association; instead of being bossed or driven as now ... The workshops will drop into the hands of the workers, the mines will fall to the workers, and the land and all other things will be controlled by those who possess and use them.”* For *“wealth is power ... The chattel slave of the past — the wage slave of today; what is the difference? The master selected under chattel slavery his own slaves. Under the wage slavery system the wage slave selects his master”* and he refused *“equally to be a slave or the owner of slaves.”*

Modern anti-capitalists have raised the slogan **“the world is not for sale”** and would, undoubtedly, agree with Parsons when he argued that the *“existing economic system has placed on the markets for sale man’s natural rights ... A freeman is not for sale or for hire”* While nowadays wage labour is commonplace, in 1880s America it was different. The first few generations of workers had just become wage slaves and hated it. Parsons spoke for them (and us!): *“the wage system of labour is a despotism. It is coercive and arbitrary. It compels the wage worker, under a penalty of hunger, misery and distress ... to obey the dictation of the employer. The individuality of the wage-worker ... is destroyed by the wage-system... Political liberty is possessed by those only who also possess economic liberty. The wage-system is the economic servitude of the workers.”*

Yet the Martyrs were not just critics. They constantly stressed the positive and constructive aspects of their ideas. Michael Schwab, for example, argued that *“Socialism ... means that land and machinery shall be held in common by the people ... Four hours’ work would suffice to produce all that ... is necessary for a comfortable living. Time would be left to cultivate the mind, and to further science and art ... Some say it is un-American! Well, then, is it American to let people starve and die in ignorance? Is exploitation and robbery of the poor, American?”* No, this was not meant to be a trick question!

The Martyrs had, originally, been Marxists and this can be seen from some of the terminology used by the eight. Parsons quotes extensively from Marx’s **“Wage Labour and Capital”** as well as the **“Communist Manifesto”** when he discusses the development of capitalism in the United States and Europe. However, while they agreed with Marx’s economic analysis of the system they rejected his ideas on how to get there. *“Anarchism and socialism,”* wrote George Engell, *“differ only in their tactics ... Believe no more in the ballot, and use all other means at your command.”* Instead of elections they followed Bakunin and saw the labour movement as both the means of achieving anarchy and the framework of the free society. As Lucy Parsons (the wife of Albert) put it *“we hold that the granges, trade-unions, Knights of Labour assemblies, etc., are the embryonic groups of the ideal anarchistic society ... We ask for the decentralisation of power.”* For the Martyrs, working class people had to liberate themselves by their own efforts and using their own organisations. This is just as true today and is their most important legacy.

They equally rejected the false notion of a **“workers’ state.”** *“Anarchists,”* wrote Adolph Fischer, *“hold that it is the natural right of every member of the human family to control themselves. If a centralised power — government — is ruling the mass of people ... it is enslaving them.”* However, *“every anarchist is a socialist but every socialist is not necessarily an anarchist ... the communistic anarchists demand the abolition of political authority, the state ... we advocate the communistic or co-operative methods of production.”* In the words of August Spies: *“You may pronounce the sentence upon me, honourable judge, but let the world know that in A.D. 1886, in the State of Illinois,*

*eight men were sentenced to death because they believed in a better future; because they had not lost their faith in the ultimate victory of liberty and justice!”*

The passion for justice and freedom which inspired the Martyrs comes through. They are utterly unapologetic for their activism and anarchism: “*I say to you: ‘I despise you. I despise your order; your laws, your force-propped authority.’ HANG ME FOR IT!*” (Louis Lingg). Equally, they did not try and hide their revolutionary ideas. They knew they faced class justice and knew that “*only by force of arms can the wage slaves make their way out of capitalistic bondage*” (Adolph Fischer). Yet the injustice meted out to the Chicago Eight failed to crush the labour or anarchist movements for obvious reasons. They were born from resisting capitalism and would remain as long as it does. As August Spies put it:

*“But, if you think that by hanging us, you can stamp out the labour movement — the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil and live in want and misery — the wage slaves — expect salvation — if that is your opinion, then hang us! Here you tread upon a spark, but there, and there; and behind you, and in front of you, and everywhere, flames will blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out.”*

Unfortunately, the new edition lacks a modern introduction which could have summarised the events and their aftermath for a reader who is unaware of them. However, for someone who knows the general history of the Haymarket events and wants to read what the Martyrs thought and did then this book is essential reading. Moreover, it includes essays by Elisee Reclus, Dyer D Lum and C.L. James (anarchists whose works are extremely rare to find these days) as well as the original two articles by Kropotkin which became the pamphlet “***Anarchist Communism: Its basis and principles.***”

As such, it is a well rounded account of the ideas of the Chicago anarchists, why they became anarchists and their role in the events that created May Day. While undoubtedly dated, the book is essential reading for those interested in the ideas and history of anarchism. The Martyrs accounts of their lives and activism show why people have died fighting for a better future, for anarchy, far better than any pseudo-neutral history. As Michael Schwab wrote: “*Anarchy is a dream, but only in the present. It will be realised.*” This book should inspire others to fight to realise that dream.

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A review of the book Albert Parson produced while in prison awaiting execution after the Haymarket police riot of 1886. An essential introduction to the ideas of the Chicago Anarchists.

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