

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Strange Legacies: The Black International & Black America

Dave Roediger

1986

Dave Roediger

Strange Legacies: The Black International & Black America

1986

Retrieved on August 11, 2016 from web.archive.org

Published in Roediger, Dave, and Franklin Rosemont, eds.

Haymarket Scrapbook. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co.,

1986.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Legal lynchings. The very term so many have rightly applied to the executions of the Haymarket martyrs ought to remind us that the judicial murders of Parsons, Engel, Spies and Fischer occurred alongside the lynchings and burnings of thousands of Black Americans in post-Civil War America. Just as the terror against Afro-Americans had a class dimension-with for example, rises in Populist activism leading to increases in lynchings so too did racism have an impact on the fate of the Haymarket prisoners. This article briefly explores the connections between lynchings legal and otherwise and asks why neither Black nor anarchist activists saw their destinies as intertwined.

The ties of race and class surrounding principals in the Haymarket affair were laced early with irony. The first involvement of IWPA leaders Lucy and Albert Parsons in freedom struggles centered on efforts toward the liberation of Black folk in Reconstruction Texas. Albert edited a Radical Republican newspaper there in 1867 and 1868 and took a bullet in the leg for his attempts to register Black voters. Lucy, probably of African, American Indian

and Mexican ancestry and likely born a slave, was also a Radical and later remembered witnessing Klan horrors in the Waco area, scene of mass murders and gang rapes of Afro-Americans in the postbellum years. Albert, a Confederate veteran and brother of a rebel general, made an unlikely Radical Republican and husband to an ex-slave. He apparently kept up some friendly contacts with ex-confederates as late as 1880 when he visited Alexander Stephens, who had been vicepresident of the Confederacy, and learned that Stephens had come to embrace “communism” and “agrarianism.” Lucy, either during her radical youth or after moving to Chicago in 1873, began what was to be her lifelong practice of denying any Black ancestry.

Among those who would defend the men charged with the Haymarket bombing were many whose longstanding commitment to Black freedom would insure that the case would be placed in the context of broader struggles for human freedom, but again there were ironies and ambiguities. Defense lawyer William P. Black was a Union army hero, and the racially egalitarian participants in defense efforts included the author William Dean Howells, the labor editor John Swinton, the freethinker and orator Robert Ingersoll, Lyman Trumbull, Lincoln’s former law partner, and John Brown Jr. who recalled that his celebrated father was a communist as well as a fighter against slavery. Dyer D. Lum, the first post Haymarket editor of *The Alarm*, was a descendant of the Tappan family of antebellum abolitionist crusaders. On the other hand, the Grinnell family, with its illustrious abolitionist past, furnished the prosecutor during the trials; nor did the antislavery roots of Terence Powderly keep the Knights of Labor leader from endorsing the class-based brutality which followed Haymarket.

If an antislavery heritage proved compatible with both prosecution and defense of those accused of the Haymarket bombing, racist ideas unambiguously hurt the anarchists’ cause. The press, noting that most of the defendants were immigrants, branded them as “the offscourings of Europe,” as “foreign savages” and as “the

When reports of Black anarchist activity in Boston surfaced in 1892, Frederick Douglass argued, “If the Southern outrages on the Colored race continue the Negro will become a chemist. “ But he could not envision Black-anarchist cooperation, only that “Anarchists have not a monopoly on bomb-making, and the Negro will learn.” Similarly, the Boston Republican’s sympathetic editorial treating the use of “dynamite, the dagger or the bomb,” by fellow Blacks who were deprived of other recourse, added “We do not encourage dynamiters and bomb-throwers where no cause exists for indulging in such a warfare, as is the case of the Chicago anarchists a few years ago. “ Besieged by foes on all sides, it is perhaps understandable that a Lucy Parsons would not choose to add her Black heritage to the list of reasons she was despised or that a T. Thomas Fortune would not add defense of the Haymarket defendants to his formidable task. The history of Haymarket and Black America was one of close connections, never made.

of the Socialistic Labor Party, took a similar tack but with monumental racial insensitivity. Referring to lynching as, in theory at least, a kind of “people’s justice,” Hepner held that “.. if lynching shall go unpunished it would seem that the Haymarket affair at the 4th of May should not be an object of complaint.” He added, in an interesting aside, “I regret that the influence which the American usage of lynching had in the culture of anarchist tactics was not once considered ... and presented as an extenuation. ”

So long as it did not aggressively champion the anti-racist principles briefly articulated in its 1883 Pittsburgh Manifesto, the IWPA had little hope of making a case for Blacks to group the IWPA with the opponents and victims of lynching rather than with the advocates of the kind of mob law which so often victimized Afro-Americans. Indeed, in all likelihood no amount of propaganda would have done the trick. Even on the Left, as Hepner’s statements illustrate, there were few whose sense of racial egalitarianism would have made Blacks trust in the results of “[white] people’s justice” undertaken through direct action. Throughout the late nineteenth century Blacks and Chinese were far more often the victims of such direct action than were capitalists. Moreover, an odd anarchist like Dyer D. Lum. could write-not publicly but in an 1893 letter to Voltairine de Cleyre -that he would have joined in burning a Black Southerner at the stake:

“I would have carried the wood myself if I had been there. ‘Awful!!!!!! Yes, and so was the offense, of which every week some similar proceeding at the hands of niggers-to shoot him would only have made a county sensation. Burning him made the flesh of every nigger brute in the South to creep.”

It was one thing to trust in the judgment of Lucy Parsons in undertaking direct action and choosing a target, and quite another to trust in Dyer Lum’s or that of countless other white Americans. Through the early twentieth century, anarchism and lynch law were to be equated, by Teddy Roosevelt, among others, and anarchists seldom found a wholly effective response.

lowest stratum found in humanity’s formation. “ The widely popularized works of the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso took these characterizations a step further by fleshing out an hereditary anarchist type, marked by a deformed head, discolored skin, facial asymmetry, large sinuses and more.

Hermann Raster, the editor of the Illinois Staats Zeitung and himself an immigrant, rejected the identification of the defendants with “foreign stock” but still proposed to treat anarchists as a type which could be placed within the framework of American racism. Writing to Illinois Governor Richard Oglesby to urge that the defendants be hanged as scheduled, Raster argued, “General Sheridan is credited with the remark ‘Good Indians? pshaw! There is no good Indian but dead ones.’ Say anarchists in place of Indians and I subscribe to the sentiments with both hands. ”

Lucy’s race was an issue during the time of the trial and the Waco Daily Press headline before Albert’s execution read: “BEAST PARSONS. His Sneaking Snarl From Some Moral Morass in Which He Hides. Miscegenationist, Murderer, Moral Outlaw, For whom the Gallows Wait. ”

Chicago press accounts portrayed Lucy as an animal and the Parsons’ children as “anarchist sucklings.” Hate mail to Lucy ranted, “Your parentage was engendered in the jungle along with the hyena. “ In Lucy’s case racism directly applied and, in the cases of all the Haymarket defendants, the biologicistic assumptions and acceptance of brutality characteristic of late nineteenth-century race-hatred conditioned the treatment accorded to the anarchists.

Nonetheless, only in response to the most outrageous acts of racist terror did the IWPA hesitantly and inadequately address the issue of Black freedom. Lucy Parsons’ “The Negro. Let Him Leave Politics to the Politician and Prayers to the Preacher” was the fuller of only two pre-Haymarket *Alarm* articles on the issue. In it, Lucy reacted to a series of lynchings which took the lives of thirteen Blacks in the Carrollton, Mississippi area. Writing a month before Haymarket, she advised Afro-Americans, “You are not absolutely

defenseless. For the torch of the incendiary, which has been known to show murderers and tyrants the danger line, beyond which they may not venture with impunity cannot be wrested from you.” At the time Lucy had little sense of racial oppression, however. She absolutely denied that “outrages” were “heaped upon the Negro because he is black. “ “Not at all,” she wrote. “It is because he is poor. It is because he is dependent.”

Albert, meanwhile, wrote frequently on the comparison between chattel and wage slavery, but without attention to the role of racism. His words sometimes suggested a hatred of Black slavery, as in an 1884 riposte against Jefferson Davis’ contention that Africans’ benefited from being enslaved to Southern Christians: “How thankful the slave must have been to be rescued from a barbarian master and sold to a Christian one. “ However, Parsons generally accepted Davis’ contention that wage slavery was a more efficient way to exploit Black workers than chattel slavery, and saw no special problems for Black workers arising from the heritage of slavery.

In 1892, under Lucy’s editorship, *Freedom* would return to the race issue during the period of the greatest wave of lynchings in U.S. history, with protests which allowed that racism and the heritage of slavery were central to anti-Black violence. But, remarkably, the staunchest advocates of revolutionary self-defense in late nineteenth century America had little to say with regard to defense of Black Americans, lynched during these years throughout the South and in Illinois as well.

And, despite interest in self-defense among Black activists, anarchism had little impact among Afro-Americans. The positions taken by T. Thomas Fortune, “the most noted man” in Afro-American journalism at the time are suggestive of the gulf between even a militant, pro-labor Black editor and the anarchists. Fortune, editor of the *New York Freeman* had since 1884 developed an increasingly apt critique of racial and class relations in the U.S. and the world. He used ideas from Marx and from Henry

George to argue for Black-white labor unity and was an enthusiastic supporter of the Knights of Labor even as he lambasted racism within that organization. Fortune also advocated Black self-defense, sometimes in language not less explosive than that of Lucy Parsons. Writing in the *A.M. E. Church Review* in January, 1886, he began with a discussion of the “essential element in which the Afro-American character was most deficient ... the dynamite element –a trait which “resists an injury promptly. “ On another occasion he offered a strategy for ending Southern terror against Blacks: “The only way to stop it is for colored men to retaliate by the use of the torch and dagger.” When the May 1, 1886 strikes began, Fortune wrote of them as part of a long conflict inspired by “ the capitalist, landowner and hereditary aristocrat against the larger masses of society ... the disinherited proletariat of the world. ”

Nonetheless, in the wake of Haymarket, Fortune did not comment on the arrests in Chicago, editorializing instead on behalf of tax-reform as a solution to the “pernicious aggregation of capital in the hands of a limited number of men,” and castigating strikes for higher wages and shorter hours as “absurd.” Four months later he would reprint a significant editorial from the *Detroit Plaindealer*, a Black weekly:

“In the North men are condemned to suffer the extreme penalty of the law for urging men on by anarchistic utterances to the destruction of life and property. In the South they murder and outrage a people and yet go escaped of justice.”

Fortune added that “the Anarchists are hunted down and punished by the officers of the State,” who ignore outrages in the South. Elsewhere in the *Freeman*, the Chicago correspondent praised the “great verdict” handed down against the Haymarket defendants.

The Black press was not alone in making the parallel between the anarchists and lynchers rather than between the anarchists and those threatened by and resisting lynchings. Adolf Hepner’s lukewarm 1888 defense of the IWPAers still jailed, written on behalf