

Review: *The IWW and The Making of a Revolutionary Working Class Counter culture*

Paperback. Charles H Kerr (2003)

James Redmond

25 May 2010

A number of years ago Franklin Rosemont, Illinois based and a wobbly red card carrier himself, carved out a massive slab of social history called Joe Hill: The IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Working Class Counterculture contributing to the mythology of the IWW that haunts the imagination of so many radicals.

Whatever about an unfortunately dated show-card cover – inside there's a breathtaking orgy for the mind of the contrary worker. So with that said, you are probably expecting a short biography of Joe Hill disguised as a review, and with good reason.

Hill's background was Swedish, he emigrated to the states and laboured in the San Pedro docks and became involved in the IWW there; leading him to furore into Mexico "under the Red Flag" of it's revolution and later to travel to Canada to support the 1912 Fraser River railroad strike.

And of course along the way he knocked off a dozen or so labour movement standards in strike camps across the country, songs that'd eventually make their way across the Atlantic to our own pubs with time. Towards the end of 1915, he was fitted up as a "stick up man" in Salt Lake City for the murder of an ex-cop.

So from the start Rosemont is forced to build his Hill narrative from "*an armful of solid facts, some strong possibilities, and a bedraggled suitcase of educated guesses*" – apart from some oral histories and letters passed down, there wasn't much to sketch his life from.

An old wobbly, Richard Brazier, who matched Hill's traits of song and migratory labour, summed up the biographical problem facing Rosemont rather neatly: "*we wobblies were very restless men and, as we were mostly migratory workers, were on the move continually...Most of us were only concerned with the present, and our origins and pasts were seldom talked about.*"

What's been left to float down the stream of history to us about Hill is mostly legend. Myths themselves exert a mobilising passion on us but to learn from history, as Rosemont's wants us to, requires clear cutting through any approach that hoists Hill up as another "*superman, saint and saviour*" or an almost comic book like abnormal "*proletarian super hero.*"

These popular caricatures of Hill as "*labour's supreme organiser*" imply a herding of the masses, and are deeply antithetical to the every day wobbly disdain, Hill's own included, for them ordering us from above. As the author points out, this hagiography writing arose from the Stalinist

cultural tradition's attempt to integrate Hill into their political pantheon, much like how our lot squabble over the bones of Connolly.

The book can be read in a number of ways; on one hand it rescues the IWW from Stalinist critics that fashionably flounced after Russian Bolshevism; it gives insight to the politics and personalities of the union itself and rescues Hill the man. But as suggested by the subtitle, it's Rosemont's treatment of how the IWW built a counter hegemonic working class culture that is the most interesting facet of this brick thick work.

Hill's life path becomes a tool for Rosemont, a scaffolding around which to thread an examination of the wider wobbly milieu and the culture it generated. From this angle he quickly sketches the IWW as a deeply indigenous radical traditional, both uniquely American and working class: spawned from the melting pot of immigration, where democratic ideals flirted with European socialisms and a heavy refusal of the dogmatism prevalent among the early American left.

Born in an era of capitalistic expansion and the brute pitting of class interest against class interest in dusty company towns, places where the mediation of a welfare state was an idlers dream; the wobblies argued that the self-organisation of working people against exploitation, to provide themselves a means to life, required, direct, rather than later action. One cartoon bluntly puts it: a migratory worker chases a pork chop being waved by Lady Liberty while a shop keeper, under a sign engraved "*working man's friend,*" shouts from his porch: "*Hey lad! Why don't you stay in one place and vote the socialist ticket?*"

Rosemont places huge importance on everyday collective intellectualism, a practice he finds uniquely special to the early wobblies. From the vantage of the 1970's, Fred Thompson, an IWW old timer in Chicago, reminisced about the "*marxism in overalls of his youth,*" how his fellow wobs used theory as a method of getting at reality. Resisting divisions into intellectuals and activists, Wobs met through study groups and in workers colleges, being both familiar with the exploitative character of work from theory and experience, they ribbed in iconoclastic songs about old "*Karl Marx's Whiskers.*"

The alternative to is presented in a cartoon from One Big Union Monthly called The Ass in the Lion's Skin. The American Communist Party, or the Comical Party as the Wobs had it, pops up as a Frankenstein's monster – not patched together from those dispossessed by a modernizing capital, but hewn from poorly digested ideologies, a clumsy vaudeville villian, wearing Lienknecht's hat, Lenin's coat and Gorky's hair and totally alien to the experiences of American workers.

We all know the IWW was a union movement, but Rosemonts focus bends more towards it as a social movement of class, with its union halls evoking parallel principles for how culture and society could take shape once the shell of capital was cracked. This culture was important to the IWW, both as a method of leaving organisational stains in workplaces constantly washed over with high turnovers, and to spread politics in a lightening fast, almost viral manner.

It made use of the social technologies of working class people during the period and its philosophy of disobedience was carried as much on the informal rail road of migratory hobo's travelling through the circuits of capital from harvest to dock than through it's official publications.

In 1914 a Californian economist Carleton Parker surveyed eight hundred casual labourers, noting half were familiar with the Wobbly programme: "*where a group of hoboies sit around a fire under a rail way bridge many of the group can sing IWW songs without the book. This was not so three years ago.*"

Much has been written on the failings of the IWW, but its real success was contributing a tense residue of emerging ideology of class power to American popular culture, one that accompanied and flanked their organising, hammering away in song that *“if the workers took a notion, every mine and every mill, will at their command stand still”* as well as organising shops.

Rosemont makes clear how other organisations of the left published papers to be consumed by workers reaching into libraries for pre-cast models straight off the assembly line as it were. Taking a different approach, the Wobblies put out material by pissed off workers and for other bored workers. Their writings were quirked with the consequences of alienation, often spilling over into a romantic vision and a poetry that could animate their struggles through immense criticism of life as lived.

Just because they'd become radicalised, they refused to think themselves out of their class. So, within the IWW literature he presents, class isn't talked about just in theoretical terms. It was given the nuance of different characters and contemporary behaviors, creating a point of identification for the reader and birthing the social actors that could carry out the great Wobbly liberation.

On the other side of the great Wobbly class divide we have the masters and their Pinkerton detectives, “sky pilot” clergy and most famously of all, illustrated in the form of Mr Blockhead, the sniveling work place fool that buys just about everything the boss has to tell him.

The book could equally serve as perfect coffee table fodder with pages and pages of simple yet gorgeous humorous art leaving you reeling with thoughts of how impoverished our contemporary movement is despite the reign of knock off Photoshop copies.

The first generations of Wobs used silent agitators — stickers stuck prominently around workplaces, in a technique scammed from the hobo habit of leaving marks on safe places, or near their camps. Many echo contemporary adbusters. One has the stripes of the American flag replaced with lines accounting for patriot driven anti-radical legislation, and another has the HMMV dog listening to his masters voice crackle *“be concentrated, work hard!”*

Card games were used to illustrate anti-capitalist economics too, simple graphics dotting the IWW's politics around the deck. Missing a Mister Block cartoon, an early paper even carried a joke futurist etching of a square to represent that common arselick.

Their habit of soap boxing of course was a very immediate form of communication, utilizing talented story tellers and orators that cleverly used manufactured folklore to emphasize, for example, anti-racist solidarities such as the origins of the IWW “wobbly” pronunciation from a Chinese chief and other ways to push back capital. One such character, Jack Phelan known as the *“silver tongued boy orator,”* fought in Mexico like Hill, and always stood up, with an umbrella over his head whatever the weather, and let roar *“help, help I'm being robbed!”* Once a crowd gathered he'd launch into: *“I'm being robbed by the master class”* in an intriguing mashing of performance art into radical street rhetoric.

Many of the classic IWW songs, such as “Long Haired Preacher” were parodies of Salvation Army hymns, an organisation union soap boxers battled with for street corner space before speaking from the stoop. Often banned by the local judiciary, leading to mass jailings as more and more ploughed into towns like Spokane to take the place of the busted.

Its possible to be critical of Rosemont, letting his own words bite back against him, he describes one of his tangential paths from Hill a “digressive and admittedly speculative discussion.” And some of it really is.

Rosemont ends up seeking the Wobbly spirit in the world of the culturally hip, from surrealism to beat poetry, and by pleading to the images of these later sub culture rather than seeking out class counter cultures he veers way off. None of this denies the books stature as a worthy contribution in the absence of a more controlled and schematic approach to the autonomous counter culture bred by the IWW.

The book doesn't really focus too much on why the IWW collapsed. Though the vicious anti-repression and foreigner hysteria; how it was stamped into the ground and politically ruptured by others on the left during the twenties does get a look in. Maybe Rosemont saw little point poking around the corpse of the wobbly movement?

If the almost "what if" banter of the biographical aspect is a failing, the real value of Rosemont is read between the lines; how he smacks down ahistorical visions of working class culture. Asking us to look at what we have around us, what oddities and networks are already out there piercing through the shell that we can give revolutionary definition to, along lines suggested by Piet Mondrian, creating "*images of what society must one day make a reality.*"

Here's where such social history is a viagra to the impotence of thought put into revitalising our radical labour movements. The radical cultural utopianism incubated and informing the IWW's working class horizontalism, bred a movement that could sit alongside the daily lives of workers where an old time crafts unionism couldn't, allowing them to express their dreams beyond work and build organizations relevant to the structural forms of employment foisted on them by a shifting capitalism.

That's an organisational form we are starved of today and a pattern of resistance our own constantly moving service industry and out-sourced hobo's could well do with. Pick up Rosemont if you want to look back for inspiration to push ourselves forward, not if you want to salivate over the wistful obscurity of history or write photocopied odes to dead movements.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



James Redmond

Review: *The IWW and The Making of a Revolutionary Working Class Counter culture*
Paperback. Charles H Kerr (2003)

25 May 2010

Retrieved on 17th December 2021 from www.wsm.ie

Published in the *Irish Anarchist Review* Issue 1.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net