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Each of Us Imperfect Comrades

or: An Army of Fuckups Cannot Lose

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In 1887, after one of the more dramatic and unjust trials in US history, a German immigrant toymaker named George Engel walked onto the scaffold in Chicago. His hanging was far from public—the prison was ringed with machineguns in case the anarchists or their allies decided to storm the place to free their martyred comrades.

Three other men were with him. One was his friend, Adolph Fischer. One, Albert Parsons, spoke English instead of German. The other man, though, was August Spies (pronounced “Speez,” I’ve heard).

This fucking guy.

Engel hated Spies. They hadn’t been on speaking terms for more than a year. See, there was more than one German-language anarchist paper in Chicago in those days. Engel and Fischer worked for *Der Anarchist* (The Anarchist), the radical paper, which advocated for individuals and small groups to take direct action against capitalism. Spies worked the moderate paper, *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (Worker’s Newspaper)

that advocated building a mass movement with which to overthrow the capitalist order.

None of their differences mattered to the state, who put the noose around each neck all the same. So died the men we know as the Haymarket Martyrs, from whose memory springs much of the modern labor movement.

None of us in our movements that fight for a better world are perfect people.

Albert Parsons is perhaps the most famous of the Haymarket Martyrs, maybe (and unjustly) because he was the one who was born in the United States. Maybe because he was married to one of the most famous labor organizers in history, the immortal Lucy Parsons, who spent decades remembering him publicly and loudly as she rallied workers to action.

Their marriage was illegal—Albert was white, while Lucy was Black.

Albert Parsons, through both his work and his martyrdom, is one of the most important figures in not just anarchist history but labor history. He also, as people conveniently forget, spent years of his life as a Confederate soldier. He wasn't conscripted; he volunteered. In fact, he lied about his age to volunteer, because he was just a kid when he went off to fight for one of the most evil systems the world has ever seen.

I say this not to disparage the man or his memory, but instead to say: none of us are angels.

Now, if there's a clearer redemption arc for a former Confederate in history, I haven't found it. He was literally a child when he went to war, and perhaps the single defining characteristic that separates childhood from adulthood is that we don't hold children morally culpable for their actions.

After the war, Albert Parsons dedicated his life to fighting against everything the Confederacy stood for, and was regu-

larly assaulted (including at one point being shot) for his work registering Black voters in Texas. After he and Lucy moved to Chicago (which still, despite being a northern state, would not legally recognize their marriage), they grew tired of the futility of reformist politics, grew tired of watching their comrades shot by rightwing militias and police, and began to organize with the largely immigrant anarchist socialists.

Then, in 1886 when someone threw a bomb at the police at a labor rally (two days after the police had opened fire on another rally, killing several people), the police suspended the rule of law to round up all of the anarchists in the city. The repression was focused on the editors of the newspapers, so Albert went into hiding, staying with a more moderate socialist friend on a farm a few hours away.

Yet when Albert realized that the anarchists, especially these immigrant newspaper editors he knew, were facing the death penalty, he turned himself in to stand trial at their side in solidarity.

It's probable that he did so because he thought they would win in court, because he still harbored illusions about the justice of the legal system. There was no evidence that any of them had thrown the bomb. None of them were even accused of throwing the bomb. They were tried, and hanged, for running newspapers.

If I'm being honest, I probably wouldn't have liked Albert Parsons. Everything I've read about him or by him leaves me to believe he was a try-hard activist who puts himself in the center of everything and never shuts up at meetings.

We don't have to like each other to stand in solidarity, because the state has no problem standing us side by side on the gallows.

Earlier this year, I was doing a favor for a friend, and we were driving in my truck through the mountains, and the sun lit up the trees and the world all beautiful.

“I’m afraid you’re going to figure out I’m a fuckup and stop being my friend,” my friend told me. “Everyone eventually figures out that I’m a fuckup.”

I thought for a moment while we drove.

“Of course you’re a fuckup,” I said. “I never doubted that. I’m Catholic. I start from the assumption that every one of us is a fuckup. I’m a fuckup, you’re a fuckup.”

I’ve never been much for institutions like the Catholic Church, and I don’t believe that there’s a bearded man in the sky sitting on a throne, but there’s plenty of stuff from the religion I was born into that I resonate with still as I age. First among these things is the idea that, well, we’re all fuckups. I suppose if I were properly Catholic I’d say “sinners,” but that word has too many complex connotations for me most of the time. Every single person is deeply and permanently flawed simply because every single person is a human. We, all of us, make mistakes—sometimes cruel and selfish mistakes—on a regular basis.

We try not to, and that trying matters. But we’re going to fail sometimes. We’re never going to stop failing. Nor are we going to stop trying to act with virtue.

This realization, that we’re all of us sinners, shouldn’t drive us towards the famous Catholic guilt. It should serve as both a relief and an impetus to try to do the right thing when we can.

I’m frustrated, more frustrated than words can convey, that I am left explaining my point of view by saying “I’m Catholic” instead of “I’m an anarchist.” Because anarchists should know this stuff too. I should be able to say “I’m an anarchist” as shorthand for “I understand that people are complex and prone to acting terribly just as much as they are prone to acting good.”

In the shadow of the gallows, as I stand, I have done nothing wrong. I have not done everything right during my life, but I have endeavored to live so that I need not fear to die. Monopoly has crushed competition and the poor man has no show, but the revolution will surely come, and the working man will get his rights. Socialism and Christianity can walk hand in hand together as brothers, for both are laboring in the interest of the amelioration of mankind. I have no religion but to wrong no man and to do good to everybody.

I have not done everything right during my life, but I have endeavored to live so that I need not fear to die.

There are many doctrines that teach us to live this way. And anarchism is one of them.

With the noose around the neck, Engel said simply “Hoch die anarchie!” (Hurrah for anarchy) and his life ended. Spies, though, spoke something prophetic. He said “there will come a time when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today.”

The injustice of their trial and deaths shook the American legal system, but more than that, their names were soon on the lips of workers across the world. Their unabashed radicalism (including that moderate radicalism) ignited passions and led to uprising after uprising, to organization after organization, to action after action. They made the world better even though they all kind of hated each other over petty bullshit, which they did because they were fuckups, the same as us.

An army of fuckups cannot lose.

If we don’t build a world based on forgiveness, how can we build a world without prisons and police, without rulers and ruled?

Recently, a friend asked me if we should still support some particular political prisoner, despite the fact that that prisoner had done something they should not have. (Not the crime they were convicted of, but something that anarchists tend to agree people shouldn’t do. I actually can’t remember the specifics in this case.) I didn’t have to think very long on this question. I don’t know if anyone who has ever done prisoner support work would need to think long on this question.

“I volunteered for a little while with a books to prisoners program,” I said. “I spent my time picking and packing books to send sometimes to literal murderers. We didn’t ask what they were in for. We just sent people books, because prisons should not exist.”

There may or may not be a hell in the afterlife (I’m guessing there isn’t) but there is a hell on earth we have built, and its name is prison.

At the risk of building a dichotomy, and knowing full well that every dichotomy is false, I will say we stand at a crossroads. There are two ways we can walk.

We can try to build a better society with a dwindling cadre of angels, of perfect anarchists who have harmed no one who did not deserve it, or we can have an army of fuckups.

Rest assured, your cadre of angels will grow ever smaller, as one by one each of you is cast out for failing to meet some standard or another.

The Left has spent decades now analyzing every aspect of how power functions, which is good and worthwhile work, but it’s left us better equipped at pointing out flaws than pointing out virtues. We know exactly how to tear one another down,

because we know exactly how every single thing we do contributes to the systems of oppression. We don't spend enough time analyzing how each of us contributes to liberation. For all our talk of solidarity, we don't spend enough of our time building each other up, gassing each other up. The Left turns its adherents into gatekeepers to keep people out instead of ushers to help people find how they fit in.

Anarchism should be, but isn't, more resistant to this tendency than other Leftist ideologies.

About ten years ago, some health issues left me bedridden plenty of hours of any given day, and I was left with little to do but consume media. Being me, and desperate for ways to be productive even when I was sick in bed, I started running a review site for media, the now-defunct *Anarcho-Geek Review*. I wrote reviews of movies, books, and games several times a week, and often after I finished a review I would go looking to see what other people had to say on the same topic.

Progressives, I found, and in particular those with academic backgrounds, were a whole lot harsher on media than I was. This made no sense to me. Surely, as the anarchist, I had the more all-encompassing critique of power and oppression?

But what I realized is that the progressives expected media to conform to its standards. As an anarchist, I am very, very used to finding the glimmer of beauty within media because I never expect media to be written with me in mind. In order to engage in media at all, I had to learn to look past all the fucked up stuff to focus on what was good. And I wasn't alone in that—the other reviewers on the site had the same tendency. “Holy shit, there's anarchist themes in this video game if you think about it right!” was a more common refrain than “here is an alphabetized list of every system of oppression that this piece of media reinforces.”

This is what I hope to generalize in our movements. Our goal is to find what is beautiful in each of us and nurture it, and to help one another in that process. This doesn't mean that

we need to accept when people hurt each other, or that we shouldn't look to interrupt harm. It just means that we need to understand that each of us are fuckups. That all of us are stumbling, awkwardly, towards grace and beauty, and that we can help lift one another instead of shoving one another down. (see: *adrienne maree brown's post “we will not cancel us.”*)

The brittle sword has no use in battle. We temper blades so that they flex instead of break, because that which is rigid will shatter. We also don't fight with noodles—a blade needs to flex, not give way completely.

It's a bit embarrassing that I had to fall back on “Sorry, I'm Catholic, which means I understand that everyone sucks but that that's okay” instead of being able to say “I'm an anarchist” to mean the same thing. But I stand in alright company saying what I said.

I want to return to George Engel, the toy shop owner who died because he believed, and was working towards, a world without prisons or police or capitalism. He was the oldest of his martyred peers, going to his grave at fifty years old. He was also among the fiercest. While the moderate anarchists were planning a labor rally (the one that the police attacked and were met with a bomb... because a “moderate” anarchist is only so moderate), George and his comrades were sitting in front of a map of the city, planning, if necessary, for the workers to take the place over.

He was innocent of the crime he was convicted of, but he was not a helpless fawn in the woods.

And the night before he met his death, a priest came to visit him in his cell. He told that priest: