

May Day with Heart

By Peter Linebaugh

April 29, 2006

The moon and hours have revolved again, dear hearts, and May Day is upon us. Spring has sprung as usual, though a strike, a boycott, a holiday, a refusal—call it what you will—looms hopefully on Monday morrow, and that is unusual. We'll wear white in solidarity with the immigrant worker against rampant criminalization, against the universal miserablism, the broken levees, the constant enclosures, great walls, razor-wired borders, burning frontiers, and the castrametation of the planet by the USA (as the Romans called the science of military base construction).

I asked Massimo De Angelis, a family man, who went up to Gleneagles last year to protest against the G-8, what to say on May Day. He replied, as is his wont, as if he were a hobgoblin sitting on a mushroom. He likes the mushroom because it is nocturnal, it may cause dreams, and many of the fungi are not yet privatized. As for the hobgoblin it is a country figure of tricks and mischief against the masters. Plus, I know he likes Helen MacFarlane's translation of *The Communist Manifesto*, "A frightful hobgoblin stalks throughout Europe."

"Well," the hobgoblin said to me, says he, "whatever you say, say it with heart."

Very well, but James Green, the splendid labor historian, says that after the terrible events in Chicago beginning on May Day 1886, Americans suffered "a loss of heart." The labor historian tells us we have lost precisely what the hobgoblin asks us to find.

How are we to resolve this dilemma? This year the answer must come from the South. Eduardo Galeano, the historian from Uruguay, reminds us of a simple etymology, that the word "record" as in the record of the past, derives from Latin, to pass again through the heart ("cordis").

We cannot avoid the ache of history; its grief we feel in the gut. In preparation for the May Day general strike (will it be general?) by the undocumented workers we organize our banners (and May poles?), prepare our slogans (open borders, troops home, no enclosures, health care for all), hopefully many will try their hand at a manifesto, and we alert our lawyer friends to prepare defense for the inevitable victims. It is also essential to study our past, and to learn about our May Day. We must study the record. It must pass through our heart again.

So, we take off the classics from the shelf, or make sure our local library has them at hand Martin Duberman's fine novel on Haymarket, Roediger and Rosemont's timeless scrapbook, the late Paul Avrich stirring monograph, or the old CP classic on May Day by Philip Foner. To these we now add James Green's just published [Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America](#) (Pantheon Books, 2006). Go get it! We need it for Monday and every May Day thereafter. The book is trying to put some freedom back into history telling us that it could have been otherwise. We call this human agency. The theory is something like this. It's human history, we're humans, history is something we make with our deeds and words. This is where free-will rubs up against determinism. As soon as you put class into the theory it begins to make sense: the ruling class is determined to exploit us, so naturally it says that it can't help it – the steam hammer is stronger than John Henry, you can't stand in the way of progress, and so on. That's the determinism. On the other hand, the working-class will be free. We are not cogs in a wheel; we have not forgotten the good old wooden shoe. We do have choices. We will (for instance) wear a white t-shirt on May Day. Human agency thus resolves itself into the struggle between the classes.

It never took any multicultural brilliance to discern that the actual fundamentals of the USA are threefold:

- a) it was robbed from the indigenous peoples,
- b) its swamps were drained, forests felled, and fields prepared by African slaves, or
- c) that the railroads, factories, mills, and mines were built and run by immigrants from Europe and Asia.

The ruling class from Madison on forward knew its duty to keep these three, if not fighting one another, then separated. Thus, radical reconstruction came to an end in 1877 in New Orleans beginning that period of Afro-American history called “the Nadir”; the plains Indians were destroyed in 1877 taking the death of Crazy Horse for a symbol of the destruction, and the third, in a word, death at Haymarket.

The Cuban poet, José Martí, lived in exile in New York at the time and wrote brilliantly on the Haymarket martyrs. Although “the disagreements and rivalries of the races already arguing about supremacy in this part of the continent, might have stood in the way of the immediate formation of a formidable labor party with identical methods and purposes, the common denominator of pain has accelerated the concerted action of all who suffer.” Here is heart as a political principle.

James Green recovers forgotten dreams, that one, for instance which tied Abraham Lincoln to the cooperative commonwealth. The great sacrifices included the death of Lincoln whose funeral catafalque came through tens of thousands of mourners in Chicago on May Day 1865, amidst a light drizzle of rain. America could become a cooperative commonwealth instead of a competitive camp of capitalism. William Sylvis, Andrew Cameron, and Ira Steward maintained continuity in the north after the Civil War. William Sylvis rebuilt the Molders’ Union, foundry workers at the farm reaper works of McCormick. They were the industrial vanguard by 1865. Andrew Cameron was a Scottish Chartist, and an editor in Chicago of the Workingman’s Advocate whose idea was that production should be for use, not profit. Ira Steward, an abolitionist and machinist from Massachusetts, established the Eight-Hour Leagues in 1866, on 2 May of that year in Chicago. A year later the first eight-hour law took effect on May Day, passed by the Illinois legislature and signed by Richard Oglesby, governor and friend of Abraham Lincoln, the rail-splitter. Q.E.D.

What happened in 1886? The context was this. The imperialists had divided up Africa the year before “accumulating mansions and factories on the one hand, and wretched masses of people on the other,” is how Martí painted the background. Otherwise, the founding of the American Federation of Labor by the cigar maker

Samuel Gompers, riots in Seattle against Chinese laborers, the capture of Geronimo, the gold rush to Witwatersrand in South Africa, Gottlieb Daimler perfected the internal combustion engine, Das Kapital was published in English, the French Impressionist pointillist canvas Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte is displayed and was designed to erase thoroughly the visual memories of the Paris Commune and *la semaine sanglante*.

Despite boom and bust of the trade cycle, despite unemployment, union workers “began to anticipate their own emancipation from the endless workday and growing tyranny of wage labor.” The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, they called themselves, mystical and with a moral code of chivalry and generous manhood. The motto of the Knights was One for All, and All for One.” From squalor they proposed nobility. An 1877 circular read, “Working men of Chicago! Have you no rights? No ambition? No Manhood? Will you remain disunited while your masters rob you of your rights and the fruits of your labor? For the sake of our wives and children and our own self-respect, LET US WAIT NO LONGER! ORGANIZE AT ONCE!”

The freight handlers struck, the upholsterers struck, the lumber shovers went on strike. 400 seamstresses left work in joyous mood. A storm of strikes swept Chicago, on the First of May 1886. The great refusal, Jim Green calls it. It was a new kind of labor movement that “pulled in immigrants and common laborers.” Irish, Bohemian, German, French, Czech, Scots, English, to name a few. Socialist Sunday Schools, brass bands, choirs, little theatres, saloons there was a working-class culture in Chicago. The Chicago Tribune (6 May 1886) hated it and compared the immigrants to zoological nightmares. It demanded deportation of “ungrateful hyenas” or “slavic wolves” and “wild beasts” and the Bohemian women who “acted like tigresses.”

In the spring of 1886 strikes appeared everywhere in industrial centers; called the Great Upheaval agitating for shorter hours. Of course they were against mechanization of labor, against the exploitation of child labor, opposed to the convict lease system of labor, and opposed to contract labor. The anthem of the Knights of Labor was the “Eight-Hour Song,”

We want to feel the sunshine;
We want to smell the flowers;
We're sure God has willed it.
And we mean to have eight hours.
We're summoning our forces from Shipyard, shop and mill;
Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, Eight hours for what we will.

Sam Fielden joined the International Working People's Association in 1884 after fifteen years hauling stone and digging ditches. His father was a Lancashire handloom weaver and a ten-hour man. Sam was a Methodist.

Thanksgiving Day of 1884 they had a poor people's march and Parsons quoted from James (the brother of Jesus?) chapter five,

"Next a word to you who have great possessions. Weep and wail over the miserable fate descending on you. Your riches have rotted; your fine clothes are moth-eaten; your silver and gold have rusted away, and the very rust will be evidence against you and consume your flesh like fire. You have piled up wealth in an age that is near its close. The wages you never paid to the men who mowed your fields are loud against you, and the outcry of the reapers has reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts. You have lived on earth in wanton luxury, fattening yourselves like cattle and the day for slaughter has come. You have condemned the innocent and murdered him; he offers no resistance."

What a remarkable prophecy! The Sioux Wars removed the people of the Plains, the U.S. Cavalry thundered up and down, murdering Indians, and lathering the land with blood, while the mechanical reaper shaved the grasses. When historians speak of "the open frontier," it means the Indians were wiped out. This is the genocide which led to the agricultural depression in Europe, produced by the mechanical reaper scalping the prairie. No, the reapers were not paid.

Fast Food Nation perhaps may not yet have been up to speed yet the starting gun had been fired. Swift and Armour were the big meatpackers: they organized the mechanization of death, the machines of mass slaughter of cattle and swine. The

Union Stock Yards had just been constructed. The employers threatened to employ “the whole machinery of government,” including the army, “to enforce the laws of the market.” Mechanization indeed was taking command.

On May Day 1886 as the workers of the USA struck for the eight-hour day, the police shot and killed four strikers at the McCormick works. August Spies issued the flyer, calling the workers to rise, to arms, for revenge. On the 4 May strikes resumed, now joined by union switchmen, laundry girls, even students from some of the schools.

At the Haymarket, tons of hay and bushels of vegetables were brought in from the Dutch truck farms. Transportation was by horse power. Indeed, then horses were part of the working class, as Jason Hribal has provoked us to thinking. Haymarket in Chicago in May 1886 was like Guernica in Spain in 1937 when the Condor Legion wiped it out by bombing: that is to say it was a busy, crowded market, ideal for terrorism.

The weather changed, the moonlit sky suddenly turned dark, as a cloud blew over, just preceding the blast. The police advanced. A bomb was thrown. In the mêlée a large number of police were wounded by the friendly fire from their own revolvers. Sam Fielden was shot in the leg. Henry Spies took a bullet for his brother. Seven policemen fell. But who threw the bomb? John Swinton, the most influential labor journalist in the land, argued that the police themselves provoked the violence to stop the strike movement for the eight-hour day.

A period of police terrorism ensued. There were hundreds of arrests. There were raids at meeting halls, saloons, and newspaper offices. Captain Schaak put suspects into the sweatbox (small pitch-dark wooden container) for hours to make them talk. Albert Parsons fled to Mexico, it was rumored, or was “hiding out among the negroes.” That summer there was a trial, conducted by passion, judged by bigotry. Green tells the story with verve and drama. Witnesses were paid off. The jury consisted of salesmen, clerks, a high school principal, well-off all. Nina Van Zandt, the handsome Vassar graduate and heiress, made eyes at August Spies during the trial. In the jailhouse, the love affair developed. Spies told the

court, "Here you will tread upon a spark, but here, 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. The ground is on fire upon which you stand."

Michael Schwab defended anarchy saying it was the antithesis of violence. Parsons charged the court with "judicial murder." He explained socialism and anarchism. "I am doomed by you to suffer an ignominious death because I am an outspoken enemy of coercion, of privilege, of force, of authority. your every word and act are recorded. You are being weighed in the balance. The people are conscious of your power your stolen power. I, a working man, stand here and to your face, in your stronghold of oppression, denounce your crimes against humanity." Neebe was found guilty but punished with 15 years in the penitentiary. Louis Lingg killed himself. Fielden and Schwab had their sentence commuted to life imprisonment. Albert Parsons refused alcohol. He sang "La Marseillaise" and songs by Bobbie Burns. August Spies newspaper editor of the Arbeiter Zeitung in 1884. On August Spies had said, "The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today."

We are finding voice. Cindy Sheehan gives us voice. "*Si se puede*," gives us voice. The Chicago idea' was this: trade unions could take mass action against capital and the state. This idea has been disappeared or throttled. The magical realism of the ruling class proclaims May Day to be Law Day (had they not heard of Ozymandias, or Humpty Dumpty?) None died from a broken neck, all strangled to death, slowly as it appeared to the witnesses, convulsing and twisting on the rope.

That was 11 of November 1887.

James Green tells us that it was a turning point in American history. The killing at the McCormick plant, the bombing at Haymarket, the court proceedings, and the hanging of 11 November 1887 extinguished the Knights of Labor, defeated the eight-hour movement, suppressed the radicals. The Mary Magdalen, so to speak, of the suffering proletariat was Lucy Parsons, widow of Albert, daughter of Mexico. She bore witness to subsequent generations, and touching Mother Jones, Big Bill Haywood, Emma Goldman, Clarence Darrow, Eugene Debs, with the

principles of *los mártiri*. Henry Demarest Lloyd was silenced, then wrote *Wealth Against Commonwealth*, the exposé of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company, the first of the muck-rakers.

Beneath the concameration of the Great Hall at Cooper Union in New York City Samuel Gompers of the new American Federation of Labor appealed against the death sentence. Instead, fifty years of industrial violence, and when workers, especially immigrants, found themselves at war with their employers, the courts, the police, the armed forces. These laid the "bone deep grudges" which Nelson Algren wrote about. James Green concludes, "we are today living with the legacy of those long-ago events."

The 151-foot Statue of Liberty was dedicated only two weeks before the hangings in Chicago. Inscribed on its pedestal were the words of Emma Lazarus:

"Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest
tossed, to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

John Pemberton, a pharmacist, who invented a medicine to relieve headaches and alleviate nausea. It combines coca leaves from the Andes with cola nuts from Africa, mixed with water, caramel, and sugar: Coca-Cola, the Atlantic remedy for the ills of the barbarism of capitalism.

Both William Morris in England and José Martí exiled from Cuba in Manhattan likened the Chicago working class to a cornered animal.

William Morris wrote a death march for the funeral of Alfred Linnell, the young man killed by the London police after the 13 November 1887 Trafalgar Square meeting and demonstration. It was two days after the hanging at Haymarket. Alfred Linnell, lo!, will come knocking at the gate, unbidden, insistent, calm, upright. The Harold Pinter moment:

What cometh here from west to east awending?
And who are these, the marchers stern and slow?
We bear the message that the rich are sending
Aback to those who bade them wake and know.
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.
We asked them for a life of toilsome earning,
They bade us bide their leisure for our bread;
We craved to speak to tell our woeful learning:
We come back speechless, bearing back our dead.
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.
They will not learn; they have no ears to hearken.
They turn their faces from the eyes of fate;
Their gay-lit halls shut out the skies and darken.
But, lo! This dead man knocking at the gate
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

He took it to the street: one week he is beaten up at Trafalgar Square, another week a poor law clerk is murdered by police at Trafalgar Square, and a third time in the streets, to sing this lament. This is heart. With his bids and bides and bades, with the awending and the woefuls, the man is searching for some kind of language that has endurance, that is beneath the radar, off the grid, and might be recognized by hobgoblins and coyotes.

Morris serialized *The Dream of John Ball* between November 1886 and January 1887. The dates give us the clue, the Haymarket trials had passed. The revolutionary attempt in Chicago had been preempted. The Chicago idea had failed, temporarily at least. In these circumstances Morris dove deep to middle ages, and ranged far, to Afro-America. In that way he maintained his revolutionary commitment. He imagines victory! “To dusk the day,” means to win. “They” refers to the police, employers, capitalists, and ruling class. Eloquence arises from silence. He was reading aloud on the same day his own *Dream of John Ball* and

B'rer Rabbit. He is looking for a people's story told in the people's language with the people's future: the opposite of the official story, not at all the evasions institutional prose, nor the commands of cogitation machines.

Prince Kropotkin at the Sunday lecture supper at the Hammersmith socialist hall told the fable of the Russians and the Redskins. He told this story rather than commit himself, one way or the other, to the quarrelsome socialists and anarchists. The African American slave selects a hero, "the weakest and most harmless of animals," Br'er Rabbit of course, "and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox." Not malice triumphs but mischievousness.

In 1887 Lord Acton wrote "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." U.S. wheat prices fell to 67¢ a bushel, England eats bread from grains of North American plains, indirect consequence of defeat of the Plains Indians and the McCormick workers. Jim Crow law passed in Florida requiring racial segregation among railway passengers.

Pablo Neruda, José Martí, even Walt Whitman had a big, hemispheric conception of America: two continents, half the planet, yet united by the German geographer Humboldt's Afro-America, a big S' New Orleans, Cuba, Venezuela, and Brazil. What happens in one part effects the other sugar, aluminum, gold, bananas, silver, copper, coffee, rum, pot and coke yes, they are the products, the commodities, ripped from the bowels of the earth. They're easier to recognize than the undergrounds of people, whose migrations, sailings, tunneling have preserved the memory of *los martiri*.

José Martí predicted that "the world's working class will revive them [memories of the Haymarket martyrs] every First of May. That is still not known, but Martí always writes as if hearing, where it is least expected, the cry of a newborn child," wrote Galeano.

In Havana in 1887 the anarcho-syndicalists started a newspaper El Productor which covered the Haymarket tragedy. On 1890 they prepared a May Day

Manifesto calling on Cubans to support the international demonstration for the eight-hour day. The workers responded with a unified, musical parade. Speeches calling for equal rights between Blacks and Whites and called for the unity of all workers. The authors of the May Day Manifesto were arrested and brought to trial. Their acquittal was greeted by a huge demo.

May Day celebrated in Mexico in 1913. From then on Primero de Mayo became a national holiday known as the Day of the Martyrs of Chicago. Italy, France, Spain, Argentina, Cuba, Mexico. In 1903 Teddy Roosevelt signed an immigration law denying entry into the US of anarchists, paupers, prostitutes, and the insane.

Galeano celebrated the marriage of heart and mind. “From the moment we enter school or church, education chops us into pieces: it teaches us to divorce soul from body and mind from heart. The fishermen of the Columbian coast must be learned doctors of ethics and morality, for they invented the word *sentipensante*, feeling-thinking, to define language that speaks the truth.”

In Milan on the first international May Day (1890) a correspondent wrote, “On this day laborers all over the world should feel the unity of their class as a bond superior to all others” Is it possible to make such a solidarity? Can heart be so large? On May Day 1894 Coxey’s Army of the Commonweal, arrived in Washington to lobby for the unemployed, only to be arrested and imprisoned for walking on the grass. The Wobblies or I.W.W. printed thousands of stickers, reading,

I Won’t Work More Than 8 hours After May 1st 1912 How about you?

On May Day 1917 all Petrograd was *en fete* as the New York Times reported and business was at a complete standstill. In Germany meanwhile the Spartacus group leafleted, “Women workers! Male workers! The last groans of our thousands of murdered brothers and sons, the sobs of the wasted women and children call us forcibly and imperiously to the red worker’s May 1st demonstration, with the gleaming words: down with the war! Up with people’s brotherliness!” At the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City on May Day 1925 garment workers raised their voices to sing the “Internationale.” Congress mandated the eight-hour

day in the Fair Labor Standards Act. 1886 to 1938 = fifty-two years. In May Day of that year a march on the South Side of Chicago was led by a float featuring a hooded man. In one direction of time, August Spies; in another direction of time, Abu Ghraib.

Galeano visited Chicago but his exploration of Haymarket was fruitless, instead he found an old poster at a bookstore displaying the African proverb, "Until the lions have their own historians, histories of the hunt will glorify the hunter." The hunter had put in 1889 a statue of a policeman at Haymarket. The Weathermen blew up the police monument on 6 October 1969 and then again in 1970.

The urbanocide of Katrina, the castrametation of Iraq, the devaluation of the working class, the absolute rule of the petrolarchs have produced gut-wrenching grief and sorrow. Our head spins and spins in the dizzy search for cause-and-effect, searching the origin of this twisted, agonizing karma.

Half way between the gut and the head lies the heart. The heart and soul of our movement may be found on May Day and it's going to take our arms and legs to find them as well as our brains. So, let us join the hobgoblin.

Take heart with Death in the Haymarket in hand!
All out for May Day!

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