Lucy Parsons and Haymarket Days

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> "Let every dirty, lousy tramp arm himself with a revolver or a knife, and lay in wait on the steps of the palaces of the rich and stab or shoot the owners as they come out. Let us kill them without mercy and let it be a war of extermination without pity." (Lucy Parsons quoted in *Women Building Chicago* 2001, p. 671)

This paper examines women's involvement in late 19th century class struggle. In the days of the Haymarket Square massacre in Chicago, women were in the forefront as labor union organizers. Women were workers as well, both in waged workplaces and in household and community activities. This paper explores these issues through particular life stories — such as labor organizer Lucy Parsons, an African, Native and Mexican-American anarchist labor activist who dedicated

her adult life to the struggle for social justice. Pursuing the eight-hour work day caused Lucy and her husband to be jailed several times in Chicago. We suggest that Lucy's life illustrates the pitfalls of using a narrowly masculinist notion of activism, and indeed a similarly masculinist notion of work itself.

The Gilded Age in Chicago

The stark differences between rich and poor that animated Lucy Parsons' provocative rhetoric (in the epigram above) characterized late 19th century Chicago, a gateway city to the expanding West. Foreign and domestic immigrants streamed to the city during intermittent recessions as well as periods of rapid growth. As William Cronon (1991) demonstrates, rural commodities flowing to and through the city also fueled its exponential expansion, and the swift concentration of wealth for the city's boosters and investors. At the same time, the immiseration of many was so evident that Mark Twain's moniker "Gilded Age" took hold and persisted as a term referring to this U.S. era. We examine Lucy's life as an organizer in Chicago focusing on her dedication to direct action.

Police in late nineteenth century Chicago considered Lucy Parsons and her fiery speeches to be "more dangerous than a thousand rioters" (Lucy Parsons Project website). Her oratory skills were matched with a fierce intellect and tireless organizing campaigns both before and after the Haymarket Riot. Lucy and her husband Albert Parsons were jailed several times in Chicago for anarchist activities, and Albert was executed as one of the Haymarket martyrs accused of throwing a bomb at a public rally. Lucy remained an influential activist for several decades after the death of her husband. As Steve Fraser described an elderly Lucy recently in the *Nation* magazine:

> Eighty-five, bent and nearly blind, as poor as the day she arrived there more than a half-century earlier, Lucy Parsons addressed a rally in Chicago on November 11, 1937. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the day her husband, Albert Parsons, and three other anarchists were hanged by the State of Illinois for allegedly throwing a bomb in Haymarket Square at an open-air rally in May 1886, a rally called to condemn a brutal attack the previous day by police on striking workers at the McCormick Reaper Works. (Fraser, *The Nation*, 2006)

As evident in the quotation above, Lucy Parsons believed it was necessary to engage class struggle in a direct way because ordinary people would continue to suffer extreme hardships until capitalism was overthrown. Among many specific goals, she and her husband advocated for an eight-hour-work day. Apparently Lucy was fearsome even in death; police confiscated her vast collection of books, manuscripts, letters, and papers and not a single item was ever recovered. In this essay, we explore Lucy's life as well as her friend and fellow activist Lizzie Swank

Holmes. We argue that the public and private lives of these two women illustrate the pitfalls of narrowly masculinist notions of activism, and indeed masculinist notions of work itself. Such constrained concepts limit our understanding of historical events, and can also limit our imaginative ability to advocate social justice and construct a more equitable future. Attention to the material and bodily necessity of social reproduction is one way to sharpen our analysis of class struggle (see Heynen, this issue; Mitchell et al., 2004). That is to say, hunger, daily rest and sustenance can be indicators of the physical limits of the human body and of social reproduction. Attention to the gendered dynamics of social reproduction and production offers additional insights on political struggle. Immigrant flows and immigrant identities are also caught up with the politics of social reproduction in 19th century Chicago.

Immigrant Solidarity and Anarchist Organizing

Lucy Parsons and her husband Albert were among the diverse groups and individuals converging on Chicago in the second half of the 19th century. They arrived in the city in 1873 as refugees from Southern states racked with turmoil from reconstruction. At the time, many European immigrants, especially from Germany, were seeking work in Chicago's factories. Meanwhile veterans from the U.S. Civil War streamed to the city and competed for employment with women and children, sometimes expressing bitterness that their personal sacrifices in the war were not fully recognized. Economic hardship was commonplace and compounded in situations of substandard, crowded housing, high infant mortality, and rampant public health hazards. Working class people endured further difficulties after the devastation of the Chicago fire and a subsequent recession exacerbated the deplorable conditions in their neighborhoods and districts of the city (Tax 1980; Green 2006; Lucy Parsons Project website).

Lucy's place in the history of class struggle is sometimes obscured and many details of her life are unclear and ambiguous (McKean, 2006; Ashbaugh, 1976; Schultz and Hast, 2001). A case in point is that Lucy's origins in Waco, Texas remain poorly documented. Many of the biographical details of her life are in conflict even as Lucy herself reported them. Perceived by contemporary media as being at least partly of African descent, Lucy self-identified as a Latina and Native American. She met her future husband Albert Parsons, a white Confederate veteran of the Civil War, in Texas, where he had come as an orphaned youth to live with an older brother. Albert and his older brother participated in the Reconstruction of Texas as Radical Republicans after forsaking their Confederate activities.

Lucy and Albert were married in Austin in 1872 and the mixed-race couple endured increasingly hostile and violent personal situations as the social and political environment of Texas deteriorated. In 1873, Albert had accepted an offer to work as a journalist on a tour with a railway company. No doubt he recognized

that opportunity, even survival, would not be easy or possible if the mixed-race couple remained in Texas. Lucy joined her spouse in Philadelphia later in the year and the couple ultimately arrived in Chicago during the winter of 1873-1874. Lucy immersed herself in the city and found it to be a good environment in which to continue her life-long path of self-education through direct engagement with collective action, reading, writing and editing for worker audiences, studying and learning.

Amidst all the strife in working-class Chicago, Lucy found a political culture that welcomed her energy. She was a tireless writer. She had a prolific intellectual presence, yet as an activist also put her physical body at risk in countless actions: marches, rallies, and meetings. In 1879, pregnant with her first child, Albert, Jr., Lucy joined a new endeavor, the Chicago Working Women's Union (WWU). This organization proposed to aid female domestic servants as well as affiliate women into trade organizations. Several significant women were to meet under the aegis of the WWU: Alzina Parsons Stevens, Elizabeth Rodgers, Elizabeth Morgan, and a woman who would become a close friend and trusted ally, Lizzie Swank Holmes (Lucy Parsons Project website; Tax, 1980).

Lucy and Lizzie rapidly developed a special bond. Distinct from Lucy's multicultural origins, Lizzie was a daughter of a rural Iowa family of radicals and free thinkers. She had followed a typical career path for women in the Midwest, teaching a few terms in a rural school at age fifteen and leaving the profession (as required by custom at the time) to marry at seventeen. Widowed five years later, she taught music to support her two children and herself. Strikes and other radical labor activity inspired Lizzie's move to Chicago. She continued to support her family by giving music lessons and she began to take jobs as a seamstress. What Lizzie experienced in the city's sweatshops confirmed her convictions about the need to transform working conditions and unjust treatment of working women. Isolation and the force of societal norms made organizing this population especially challenging.

Lizzie lived in working class neighborhoods in close proximity to Lucy on the near Westside of Chicago. She often took walks with Lucy and Albert. Through her deepening friendship with the Parsons, Lizzie was exposed to anarchist politics. In 1884 the anarchist group International Working People's Association launched a newspaper, *Alarm*, naming Albert Parsons as editor and Lizzie as assistant editor. The first issue of the newspaper carried Lucy's notorious address "To Tramps" on the front page.

As political activists and mothers of young children Lucy and Lizzie knew the demands of family responsibilities. As women living outside of traditional extended family networks, they often included their children as participants in their political activities. Thus, Lucy and Lizzie experienced the class and gender

hardships about which they wrote and looked for ways to creatively combine their political work, paid work, and social reproductive work.

A few key dates in the late 19th century illustrate these overlapping commitments. On the very first May Day in 1887, the date celebrated throughout the world as International Workers Day because of the widespread coordination of demands for an eight-hour workday on this date, Lucy Parsons and her husband led a march down Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago. Their children marched alongside them. Two days later, Lucy and her activist friend Lizzie Holmes led a march of several hundred seamstresses through the streets of Chicago. This same day, the Chicago police violently confronted striking workers who had been locked out of the McCormick reaper factory. In a bloody incident, police shot unarmed workers and their supporters. The now infamous Haymarket Rally was planned for the following evening in order to publicly condemn the police violence at the reaper factory. Lucy's friend Lizzie was accused and arraigned along with her husband Albert. The government apparently dropped the charges against Lizzie knowing that it would be hard to get a guilty verdict against a woman if there were a death sentence involved. In order to get a conviction against Albert and the other men, the prosecutors sacrificed their case against the slight, unobtrusive, and forty-ish woman.

Lucy Parsons dedicated her adult life to the struggle for social justice. In the late 19th and 20th century she helped to break down the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, and skill that separated hard rock miners, packing house workers, farmers, female shoe sewers, and whole urban neighborhoods. Lucy's own background as a person of color probably gave her insight and empathy into subtle and overt exclusionary practices that shaped the harsh workplaces and communities of immigrant workers in the late 19th century.

Lucy also understood and sought to illuminate for others the dense dialectical connections between class and gender. In many organizations throughout her life, Lucy called attention to gender inequities within the working class. For instance, when the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) formed in 1905, Lucy called on the organization to recruit women and insisted that women's dues be lower than men's since the women received much lower pay. Speaking to 200 male delegates at the IWW founding convention of the situation of women, Lucy said:

> We are the slaves of slaves. We are exploited more ruthlessly than men. Whenever wages are to be reduced the capitalist class uses women to reduce them, and if there is anything you men should do in the future it is to organize the women. (The Black World Today website).

Lucy Parsons networked with many other union women organizers who directed their efforts toward organizing sites where the workers were predominantly female. For example, the Working Women's Union organized sewing girls (seamstresses). In this era, women workers were required to pay for their own sewing machines, as well as needles and thread. In spite of working a grueling 16 hours per day, these women often did not make enough to sustain their families, and did not have time for childcare and other domestic tasks.

Lucy Parsons' own life experiences made her sensitive to the problems encountered by the working class, by immigrant workers, by non-white workers, and above all by women workers. In Chicago, Lucy made a livelihood as a dressmaker, allowing her to support a blacklisted husband, raise two children, and maintain a high profile public persona—as a writer, editor, organizer, and speechmaker. When her husband lost his job as a printer and was blacklisted for his own political activities, he took orders for the dress shop, and helped to keep the family business running. Upon his death, Lucy found herself in the position of many other single mothers who supported families on their own.

Discussion

The Haymarket events are all the more remarkable and complex if we pay attention to the participation of notorious women like Lucy Parsons, and analyze the gendered dynamics of work and social reproduction. Lucy fought with her words, her actions, and her extraordinary example. Countless other women participated in the "great upheaval" in myriad other ways, sometimes as activists, sometimes as workers and unionists, and sometimes simply by cooking meals, raising children, and keeping families together. Worker advocacy today requires a broad vision of work and workplaces — one that includes waged workplaces, informal workplaces, household domestic work, worker migrations which are increasing exponentially in scale and scope, as well as the less visible work of social reproduction, denigrated and ignored as women's work (Mitchell, et al., 2004).

Gender and social reproduction are useful concepts for understanding the complexities of labor organizing and social change. In late nineteenth century Chicago, workers' foreign-born status was used to divide them against themselves. While these divisive strategies were effective in media representation and in workplaces, labor organizers sought to bring immigrant groups together and unite them with native-born workers. In turn, capitalists used violent events such as the Haymarket Riot to incite fear and manipulate the fear and distrust of foreign people and ideas. At the same time, Chicago industrialists relied upon and took advantage of the flows of healthy immigrant bodies to improve their bottom line and fuel profits. With an abundant supply of healthy bodies from elsewhere, industrialists were not concerned about social reproduction of the working class locally (Katz, 2001). This lack of interest in general welfare (and the social reproduction of

working people in Chicago) is evident in violent class-war rhetoric of the day such as these examples in Caroline Ashbaugh's biography of Lucy Parsons:

> "Give them the rifle diet." Tom Scott, president of Pennsylvania Railroad quoted in Ashbaugh 1976, p. 57
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> "When a tramp asks you for bread, put strychnine or arsenic on it and he will not trouble you anymore, and others will keep out of the neighborhood." *Chicago Tribune* quoted in Ashbaugh 1976, p. 57
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> "Hand grenades should be thrown among these union sailors who are striving to obtain higher wages and less hours. By such treatment they would be taught a valuable lesson and other strikers could take warning from their fate." *Chicago Times*. Ashbaugh 1976, p. 57

Lucy Parsons worked tirelessly to analyze and politicize working class life. While her life is poorly documented, it provides a way of thinking broadly about the connections among work, gender, and social reproduction. In the context of late 19th century Chicago, her struggles are emblematic of the most marginalized individuals and groups. Her life also illuminates the ways she was able to stitch together various political concerns and social groups that capitalists sought to separate. Her story highlights the limitations of masculinist notions of activism and masculinist notions of work. These concepts can be overly narrow and can limit our collective ability to fully understand the complexities of social change, and fully use our imagination.

Lucy Parsons' embrace of social justice was wide-ranging: sweatshops, waitresses' unions, cloak workers, racial justice causes, homeless veterans who were turned away from public charity, and free speech concerns were all worthy of her attention. She supported these causes with direct action such as hunger marches, rallies, and picket lines. As these efforts and many similar activities demonstrate, the strength of Lucy's personality could command mass participation in the streets. By emphasizing the connections between her own personal experiences with more general class, race, and gender dynamics, she inspired the actions of countless others.

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