



Which Side are You On? From Haymarket to Now

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Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between the Haymarket Affair, class struggle, and a radical geography of free speech. Rather than focusing on the events of Haymarket itself, it examines how what the Haymarket Martyrs were struggling for – and why control of place and space was so crucial to that struggle – is deeply connected both to the radical strategies of organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World and to contemporary progressive and radical protest movements.

There is a venerable and really quite simple question asked over and over in union halls, left organizing, and among progressives: “Which side are you on?”² It is a strikingly simple, strikingly straightforward question, but it is one that asks us to make a choice, a commitment, a decision about with whom we will stand and with

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² See for example Geohegan, 1991.

whom we will work in solidarity. It asks us to choose sides. It therefore asks us to recognize that there *are* sides, there are commitments to be made and solidarities to be developed. In that sense it is a question, simple and straightforward as it is, that always requires a complex analysis. In particular (though not exclusively), it requires a complex *class* analysis, and an ongoing analysis of the changing nature of *class struggle*. For no matter how much we might wish it otherwise, the class war has not gone away, and it is not getting any less intense (cf. Smith, 2000).

Choosing sides and focusing on class: neither of these has been an especially popular endeavor in the academy over the past generation (as is made abundantly clear in Amin and Thrift, 2005). Yet both are crucially important at this historical moment, and they are crucially important for progressive scholars. There is, in fact, some room for optimism at the moment that there *is* room to engage in complex class analysis while choosing sides – while working in solidarity. Since it is now more than ten years old, for example, it may no longer be appropriate to speak of the *new* Center for Working Class Studies in Youngstown, Ohio (see www.as.yosu.edu/~cwcs/). It is now so well established that offshoots are developing (in Chicago, at Stony Brook, and elsewhere) and a new Working Class Studies Association has been formed. The Working Class Centers and Working Class Studies Association are putting class firmly back on the agenda, and they are doing so in ways that are theoretically and politically sensitive to how class is always constructed through relations of gender, race, sexuality, citizenship, etc.

There is a great deal of intellectual and political vibrancy to this project. But the problem with the Working Class Studies movement, at least as it has developed in the United States, is that it focuses too squarely on class as identity (cf. Russo and Linkon, 2005).³ There is no doubt that class-as-identity is vitally important, and there is much that we need to know about how class is lived, felt, internalized, and reworked: this too is crucial to answering and acting on the question: “Which side are you on?”

Yet what too often gets lost in the Working Class Studies project is the degree to which it is vital to understand class *materially* – class as a relation

³ The Working Class Studies Centers and Association are pre-dated by, and complement the efforts of, the Labor and Working Class History Association (which now publishes *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas*). The LWCHA differs from WCS in three critical respects. First, it tends to focus less on the identity aspects of labor and working class life (and hews more closely to an older tradition of labor history); second, it is less interdisciplinary, being more firmly rooted in disciplinary history; and third, it is a more exclusively academic pursuit, less actively involved in directly involving activists and community members in its programming. The LWCHA, together with the H-Labor internet discussion group provide vital forums for the exploration of class histories and politics.

between producers, owners, and those in between.⁴ In particular, there is an increasing need to understand class in relation to material geographies. That is to say, and as David Harvey (1973, 1982, 2001, 2005) long ago made clear, class as a material relation needs to be understood as it is structured through the circulation of capital (and as that capital intersects with other forms of power). To understanding the materiality of class relations and thus the forms that *class struggle* can take, therefore, it is helpful to recall what Harvey (1989, 234) once called a “simple rule:”

Those who command space can always control the politics of place even though, and this is a vital corollary, it takes control of some place in order to command space in the first instance. The relative powers of working-class movements and the bourgeoisie to command space [have] long been an important constituent in the power relations between them.

In this regard that question of which side are you on requires an analysis of which side of various boundaries and borders you stand on, what kinds of spaces you are standing in, and how you are going to defend or transform them. Such analyses of borders and spaces are essential to undertaking a realistic analysis of class relations, class power, and class struggle.

Thinking in these terms, it becomes easy to see a direct line from the protests at Haymarket Square on May 4, 1886, to the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905.⁵ It is a direct line not only because some of the same people were involved, nor only because Chicago in those years – as a space and a place – was a crucible of radical formations from anarchists to socialists to feminists, but especially because both movements – the eight hours struggle of 1886 and the IWW in the first decades of the twentieth century – knew so well that in order to organize, in order to advance the class struggle, in order to make a world in a form appropriate to the needs and wants of working people, control of *certain kinds* of places was crucial. The Eight Hours Movement claimed not only time, but specific places. Through parades and demonstrations, they took control of city streets, key intersections. For only with control over places could the struggle be pushed into wider arenas and the control of space – relationships across and through space – become at all possible. Employers understood this as

⁴ Such material relations of class are not eliminated by the growing complexity of class relations – through such things as stock ownership, retirement portfolios, homeownership rates, etc. – if anything they are made more intense. Their geographical shape is changed: intra-regional and intra-national class relations, for example, are shaped and defined through international class relations (between e.g. core and periphery) and visa versa.

⁵ The now standard histories of the IWW are Foner (1964); Dubofsky (1969).

well, of course. As the development of the Pullman factory and company town made so clear, corporate capital knew that in order to control life (and thus the production of surplus value), it had to make places that fulfilled *its* needs and – they hoped – formed certain *kinds* of workers (docile, subservient, reliant on capital for all their needs). Hence the extreme violence of the Pullman Strike: it was not just wages that mattered but control, control over the places and spaces that defined what life could be.⁶

Given the importance of struggles over place and space, the IWW thus developed a quite radical politics of free speech. In Chicago and New Castle, Pennsylvania, but particularly in western cities like San Diego, Fresno, Spokane, Denver, Vancouver, and Seattle, the IWW waged concerted battles for control over street corners in downtown and skid row districts – in just those places that migratory, so-called casual, laborers gathered to look for work and socialize (see Foner, 1964, 1981; Mitchell, 2002). Control of the streets was critical to the IWW in part because of high degrees of monopolization, and certainly of capitalist collaboration, in the media of the day – the newspapers – meant that the only way the IWW could get its views seen and heard was by speaking in the streets.⁷ Control over the streets was also important because that is where the IWW found the people it sought to reach. Gathered in parks, outside cheap bars and lodging houses, or in line at employment bureaus, masses of (mostly) men gathered each day. For many, employment was always short-term and sequential and entailed long periods of lag time. Organizing the *workplace* did not make sense. Workers themselves had to be organized, and to do that required access to them on the streets where they congregated.

The struggle by the IWW to speak on the streets of western cities was met almost invariably by extreme capitalist violence. Area farmers or lumber barons, labor contractors, owners of construction firms, and so forth, rallied the “respectable” people of the city to oppose IWW street organizing with all the vigilante violence they could muster. Street speakers were beaten and jailed, run out of town and through the gantlet, tarred and feathered.⁸ The IWW met these

⁶ On the development of Pullman as a company town, see Buder (1970); Crawford (1996). On the links between the Eight Hour Movement and the Pullman strike, see Green (2006).

⁷ While it was true that the IWW built often quite vibrant union halls (which served as meeting places, libraries, dining halls and sometimes bunkhouses), they functioned best for those who were already part of the union. The trick was for the IWW to get to workers where they were, rather than to wait for workers to come to it.

⁸ The full accounting of the violence visited upon the IWW and its supporters in San Diego is detailed in an official report commissioned by the California Governor and written by prominent Progressive Harris Weinstock (1912). It is well worth reading, if only to see the extent we bourgeoisie will often go to protect our privileges.

vigilante campaigns with a great deal of cleverness and (given the circumstances) a surprising degree of humor. A classic tactic of street speakers during a Free Speech battle was to climb up on the soapbox and begin reading the First Amendment to the Constitution, only to be pulled down by the police just as they got to the free speech clause – usually on the pretext that they were “speaking without a permit.” In many cities they packed the jails, with arrested speakers refusing arraignments or compromises that would release them, thereby becoming a heavy burden on local taxpayers. They went on hunger strikes; or they made such a racket their jailers felt they were going insane. The pages of the *Industrial Worker* and other IWW publications are filled with anecdotes from the jails and the streets (some are collected in Kornbluh, 1964; see also Foner, 1981). As I have argued in the case of Denver, the control of the streets for the IWW was vitally important to their strategy of controlling space at a broader scale – especially in developing a large, regionally cohesive, working class movement that was invulnerable to the capitalist ploy of constantly shifting the site of work and recycling the workforce (Mitchell, 2002). In this sense the IWW’s desire to control and use the streets for organizing large-scale radical transformations was little different than the 1886 eight-hour movement’s need to make places to speak and organize and that led to the Haymarket affair.

This is why Haymarket continues to resonate so strongly, why it has been such a touchstone for socialists, anarchists, and all manner of other radicals and progressives for more than a century,⁹ and why there was such a long fight to get the martyrs of Haymarket publicly recognized in the square itself. As David Harvey’s discussion (this issue) of William Dean Howells’s response to the Haymarket massacre makes clear, the ability to control and use the streets to organize served not only as a node in an ongoing struggle for the ability to organize, but also as a metonym for how power worked in Gilded Age capitalism, who held it, and what it meant for life for most people – the massacre was a metonym for what capitalist society really *was*. And for what it remains. For that reason, as Sarah Kanouse (this issue) explains, the monument to the Haymarket martyrs that was finally built is ambiguous at best. What was built was not a monument to the struggle for workers’ rights, for socialism or anarchism, or even for the eight hour day (all of which were being debated and struggled for the Square), and certainly not for that persistent strain in American social history of radicals seeking to overthrow the system and create, as the IWW put it, a new world out of the shell of the old. Rather, it is a pretty anodyne celebration of highly abstracted “free speech” – not the free speech the martyrs and the IWW (or later radicals in Berkeley and elsewhere) fought for, free speech that was instrumental,

⁹ James Green’s (2006) excellent new history of the Haymarket Affair not only gives details of the event and its aftermath, but by making so clear the context of labor and class struggle that shaped it, shows why this was such a pivotal event – and place – in American capitalism.

that served a goal, that was only a stepping stone to a new society – but “free speech” of the most abstracted, disembodied, ineffectual kind. The monument seems more a memorial to the kind of free speech celebrated in eighth grade civics textbooks, than the kind actually struggled for in the streets of the United States.

And yet Haymarket Square remains (like the vandalized Ludlow monument in Colorado, see Green, 2004; Saitta, 2004), a significant place of pilgrimage for radicals – and as a significant site for protest: the monument itself served as a focal point for the immigrants’ rights rally in Chicago on May Day, 2006. How come? Precisely because it is one of those places where Harvey’s “simple rule” became so obvious, so concrete. Haymarket was a fight over the control of place: It was a place the capitalists knew they could not afford to lose.¹⁰ Whatever the iconography of the Haymarket monument, the *place* remains a radical one, a touchstone for all of us who believe it is still possible to make a new world, to create something better. It was certainly a touchstone for the IWW, and much of their propaganda makes reference to Haymarket Square and the martyrs.

Not infrequently, such appeals to the memory of Haymarket were, like the street theater that was so much a part of the IWW Free Speech fights, direct appeals not only to those the IWW sought to organize, but especially to potential allies. The IWW knew that controlling places was critical to their struggle; but they also knew that allies were vital to the struggle. Emma Goldman and her consort Ben Reitman, various New York salon hostesses, but especially the fledgling American Civil Liberties Union and numerous Progressives, who may otherwise not have been overly sympathetic to IWW ideology, rallied in support of the IWW’s right to speak and organize on the streets. The language of “free speech” – instrumental as it was to IWW organizing goals – was also deeply resonant among many factions of the bourgeoisie. Enshrined in the Constitution, one of the inalienable rights of the people, free speech is as much a bourgeois good as it is a proletarian one: indeed, the expansion of speech rights is a hallmark of the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. In other words, through their free speech fights, the IWW called on its allies, of whatever radical or progressive orientation, to always consider that question: Which side are you on? They had to answer it in the context of struggle after struggle in the American West, just as the Haymarket massacre required so many before them to starkly face it.

Which side are you on? The side of the capitalists who seek to control space for their profit, the side of workers who seek to control and use place and

¹⁰ One of the underappreciated aspects of the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement was the degree to which university officials, city fathers, and tribunes of the elite across the country understood this as a spatial struggle. They worried frequently about what “loss” of the university, or even of Sproul Plaza would mean for the political economy of Berkeley, the prosecution of the war in Vietnam, and the orderly resolution of the civil rights movement. See Mitchell (2003b).

space for their organizing and their living? Which side are you on? The side of “order” that wants to see the Haymarket anarchists executed, or the side of all those struggling for an eight hour day who know that this order serves very narrow ends. Which side are you on? The side that ever more deeply entrenches class privilege for the elite, or that which seeks to promote the class interest of the marginalized so that one day class itself can be abolished?

Both despite and because of electronic communication, the role of struggles over space in presenting *us* with those questions has not diminished.¹¹ Class struggle – the very thing that makes always decide which side we are on – remains a struggle over space. It requires taking places – the wresting away of places – to turn them into places in which organizing is possible. It requires, for example, fighting against the near universal use of protest permits by city officials and police as a means of channeling and even silencing protest and dissent. Such contemporary permit systems, though holding the imprimatur of constitutional legitimacy, are little different from the pre-emptive outlawing of speech by IWW activists in cities like San Diego in 1912 (see Mitchell, 2003a; Mitchell and Staeheli, 2005) – remember that Wobblies were frequently jailed for public speaking without a permit. Indeed, the Supreme Court itself has called the protest permit systems a form of prior restraint (in *Hague v. CIO* 307 U.S. 496 1939), even as it has lauded their use as a means of promoting “order” and “general convenience” – that is, the status quo. Control of the streets and parks, as activists from Seattle to Quebec, Mexico City to Oaxaca, Genoa to New York City (in the protests against the current imperialist war) will tell you, is vital to expanding the struggle – vital to the control of space. Every time the New York or Los Angeles police erect a “protest pen,” or city officials construct “no protest zones” outside big events, we are faced again with the question: Which side are you on? Such fences and barriers, surrounding the World Bank and IMF buildings in

¹¹ Both despite and because: *Despite* the electronic media because in its mainstream forms it is so thoroughly monopolized by (a very small faction of) corporate capital. Much of the media is simply closed to radical voices. But this is not new. One reason the IWW took to the streets was precisely because the access to what they called the “capitalist press” was barred, precisely because the main papers of any city spoke nearly with one voice and always with a pronounced ideological agenda that was not the workers’. *Because* of electronic media because the Internet and Web have become such essential organizing tools, if limited ones. Making claims in and on space requires visibility and often visibility to those who are not seeking to see. The web is horrible at this: it is a fully voluntary media in which people have to be seeking out specific kinds of information or sites in the first place. It is easy even for the best connected to remain completely oblivious of that which they do not want to know. Unlike a street protest a web site can be turned off with the flick of a switch.

Washington, for example, require us to decide with whom we will work in solidarity.¹²

We never have the luxury of *not* choosing sides. We never have the luxury of *not* carefully examining the class dynamics that make this world what it is. We never have the luxury of *not* working in solidarity. For if we do not make these choices actively, they will be made for us, through our actions and inactions. The thing about public protest – by the sort of public meeting called in Haymarket to push for the eight hour day, or the street speaking of the Wobblies, or the recent immigrant rights protests – is that by its very visibility, it *forces* us to confront the world around us. Many people do not like protests – encountering them, being delayed in traffic by them – for exactly this reason. They cannot be turned off. When seen, they cannot be easily ignored. This confrontational aspect of protest is crucial, both for winning allies and for challenging foes, and it should not be minimized. IWW organizers no less than the speakers in Haymarket Square on that May 4th, one hundred and twenty years ago, knew that well. It is a lesson we should all take to heart. It is a lesson that will help us see, in the end, which side we are on.

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¹² The politics of solidarity – like the politics of identity – are by no means simple, nor can they always be readily mapped onto the side of a fence one finds oneself on during a demonstration. Recently, when an employee of the World Bank met me and learned that I was working (with Lynn Staeheli) on a book on property and public space, including analyses of the policing of protests, he said: “I hope you are examining the 2000 protests against the World Bank and IMF. I have never seen such appalling policing, especially against protesters with such legitimate aims.”

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