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Independent Research into Radical Theory

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Lucy Parsons was raised in chattel slavery; she was an black anarchist woman who, once she became free, organized labor against wage slavery and capitalism. During the “Haymarket riots” in May 1886, her husband, Albert Parsons, and seven others were arrested for allegedly setting off a bomb that killed multiple police officers and wounded many more. Lucy continued to organize black communities, workers, and women even after her husband was hung in Chicago for events at the Haymarket. I value what Lucy had to say in her travels across the U.S. on speaking tours as well as in her writing. She was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World and critiqued patriarchy within the radical union; there are not enough radicals who discuss patriarchy and anarchism from a woman’s perspective. This quarter I have purposely chosen multiple women who identify as anarchist or communist in order to better understand my own position as a person who challenges patriarchy and yet witnesses it and often carries the weight of educating anarchist men about it.

Lucy discusses many ideas within her writings that reflect what other theorists I have read throughout the quarter have discussed; she, however, is coming from a black woman’s perspective rather than a white man or white women. In an attempt to establish that the abolition of slavery was not actually as liberating as capitalists wanted to make it seem, she mentions that before the Civil War, chattel slaves were “valued at $1,000 apiece” while “sixteen years after the abolition of chattel slavery, wage workers employed in Massachusetts were worth, commercially, $850” (Greer, 23). Through this data, she comes to the conclusion that capitalist are forcing workers into competition on the labor market and must often sell themselves to low wage-paying employers because if they do not they will starve (Greer, 23).

There has been a lack of analysis or comparison between slavery and capitalism from most theorists I have read this quarter. From Kropotkin, to Malatesta, to lecturers like Richard Wolff, there have definitely been understandings that capitalism is relatively a different form of slavery; there has not been much discussion that actually compares the living standards of each type of labor as well as I see Lucy doing it. Other theorists have described capitalism and wage slavery but have failed to bring statistical analysis onto the stage. Lucy quotes John Adams in 1787 “when he said: ‘What matters it whether you give the food and clothes to the slave direct, or whether you just give him enough in wages to purchase the same?’” (Greer, 22). This comment shows that capitalists were aware that by using a wage system, labor could be bought and sold very similarly as slaves were bought and sold before slavery was “abolished.”

Although Lucy brings new insight, at least in my case, into the ideologies that were present during the Civil War, she also speaks on topics that have been discussed by anarchists for hundreds of years. Murray Bookchin, an anarcho-communist and social ecologist, has said that toil can be replaced by technology, leaving space for creative human developments in challenging ecological and social issues (Bookchin, 156). Everything that has been developed up until now within a capitalist system is rooted in production and capitalist value, which destroys the environment and treats human bodies as if they are disposable; if, however, we built off what Lucy calls, “inventions” of “common inheritance” among humans, we could invest wholeheartedly into revolution (Greer, 11). Inventions of common inheritance refer to what Kropotkin might describe as products of mutual aid: developments that have been created by humans and built on over time. Bookchin thinks that a liberated society can have a balance with technologies that have been used for exploitation if capitalism is destroyed (Bookchin, 156).

Like Errico Malatesta and Emma Goldman, Lucy sees the government, sometimes referred to as the state, as a vessel for authority, control, and exploitation. She puts forth the idea that if “every law, every title deed, every court, and every police officer or soldier (were) abolished tomorrow with one sweep, we would be better off than now” (Greer, 11). Bookchin has also discussed governments and institutions as no longer having any “social rationale” in modern society; once they were thought to be put in place to challenge scarcity and inaccessibility to jobs and resources, but have become unnecessary for human survival and actually manifest scarcity where it does not exist (Bookchin, 59). In fact, education, philosophy, history and politics have all “nurtured the belief in the necessity of a government and its beneficial effects” (Greer, 116). When this belief has been challenged, such as at the Haymarket Affair, anarchists were sentenced to death; even into the 1900’s anarchists, communists, and socialists were being deported from the United States out of fear that they may collapse the government.

While we live in a country that claims in its Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal,” we can see through the wealth gap and the power of corporations over governmental bodies that this is not true. In North Carolina, House Bill 467 has been passed recently; this bill restricts the amount of damages that communities can claim due to pollutions by agricultural farms and forestry (Democracy Now!). So, even though majority communities of color are living through terrible odors and adverse health effects due to pollution from hog farms, the bill has been pushed through by a legislator who was previously working for the agricultural industry. The U.S. is experiencing the largest wealth gap between the rich and poor since the Great Depression, growing at an accelerated rate since the 2008 financial crisis (Aquinas); 75% of minimum wage laborers are adults and more than half identify in the census as women (Weber). Access to food and resources are a basis for equality: “the first condition of equality, without which any other progress is merest mockery...is that every man shall have bread” (Greer, 123). When such a large portion of the population is struggling to buy bread, the way that the state insists we live in a free country is an obvious farce.

Though Lucy was active in the late 19th and early 20th century, many of the issues she organized against are still happening today. “Others may turn their eyes from these horrors; we socialists look them full in the face, and seek out their cause. That cause is the monopoly of the soil, the appropriation by a few of the. land which belongs to all;” in modern capitalism we see the control over land a constant struggle (Greer, 124). Pipeline projects are being pushed through on indigenous land, and people are being brutalized for attempting to protect their water and other resources. Black communities, such as in Flint, Michigan and North Carolina, are experiencing toxins in their water that the government ignores while investing tax money into war instead. A solution to this is to abolish capitalism, invest in creative solutions to ecological and social issues, and attempt to create a more equitable labor system:

“Anarchy is freedom from artificial regulation and restriction; and, in freedom, the farmer, as well as the artisan and all the classes into, which society is now divided, will find that wider scope to activity will bring increased comfort; and in freedom to use of land and to organize credit, rent, interest, and profits will disappear together like bats before the dawning light; and in co-operation find full security for wealth attained and opportunity for its application” (Greer, 134).

Lucy’s analysis of capitalism has thus far been one that I favor over others. Even if she has discussed topics covered by other theorists, she was a radical who did not just write about these theories but attempted to live them, just as Emma Goldman did. What the anarchists at the Haymarket Affair experienced radicalized more anarchists, including Goldman. I can only hope that the repression that activists, anarchists, communists, and socialists are facing under the Trump administration radicalizes even more people. If not, then maybe the repression against those who would consider themselves “progressives” or “moderates” may radicalize people.

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