

Review of *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America*, by James Green

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James Green's, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America*, is a depiction of early labor movements and industrial capitalism, highlighting the plight of Chicago's working class in Industrial Age America. Green devotes most of the text to creating a sense of the rising tensions between unskilled laborers and big business employers, tensions that ultimately led to the catastrophic bombing in the Haymarket Square of Chicago in May 1886.¹ While Green outlines a multitude of factors that played a role in the hostilities leading to the bombing, he spends a great deal of time examining the role of propaganda, which added to growing societal and racial tensions, but also set the scene for the events that unfolded after the bombing. Green's research into the prominent media outlets during this time, and their effects on the labor movement, is a strength to this work; however, Green's greatest success is in his analysis of why the Haymarket bombing has been overlooked as an important part of United States history. Perhaps Green's only flaw, also found in his source work, is his over reliance on the views of the leading anarchists of the labor movement, which hinders the ideas of common working class individuals.

The breadth of Green's book comprises his research into the plight of lower-class workers during the Industrial Age. Chicago's working class began unionizing in hopes of increasing wages and decreasing the workday. Government intervention and legislation was unsuccessful in creating desirable working conditions for the working class poor, which largely consisted of a disillusioned immigrant population.² Clashes between the working class and the middle and upper class were intensified in the media; all outbreaks of unrest and violence were

¹ The Haymarket bombing on May 4, 1886 refers to a violent clash between American socialists and unionists of the working class and Chicago police forces. The events that unfolded are still controversial and unknown; however, reports claim that when a labor meeting on Desplains Street was asked to disperse by police forces, a bomb was thrown into the throng of policemen who then opened fire.

² Further reading suggests that Chicago's upper and middle classes were often wary of the city's immigrant populations. Immigrants were viewed as mysterious and were often suspected of holding socialist and anarchist ideas that would impede on democracy.

printed for public consumption. Green flourishes in utilizing newspaper headlines to showcase how the media terrified middle and upper class readers into believing that the working classes were “tiger anarchist[s]”³ and communists who were “working to undermine society”.⁴ Green references a meat cutters strike, reported in *The Chicago Times*, which displayed the persuasively terrifying headline, “Terror’s Reign”.⁵ *Harper’s Weekly*, a mass distribution magazine that found followers in the middle and upper class ranks, published an illustration depicting police forces firing into crowds of union workers armed with sticks and stones.⁶ As Green proposes, these headlines suggested a virtual war occurring on American soil, between the working class and business leaders.

Green also does an excellent job utilizing newspaper sources to showcase worldwide labor unrest during this time, especially in the context of labor conflicts occurring in France in 1871. When disgruntled Parisians armed themselves and created an independent Commune of Paris, American newspapers delivered news of the uprising, calling the citizens of Paris “rugged democrats and true republicans,”⁷ just like the Americans who only a hundred years prior had fought for their own republic, free from a kingdom of disenfranchisement. However, as worry spread that a similar situation could occur on American soil, response to the Parisian citizens’ stance drastically transformed. The vigilantes soon became viewed as “communists who confiscated property and atheists who closed churches.”⁸ The media compared the citizens of the Paris Commune to savage Native Americans, and stated that they were nothing more than “tramps and criminals,”⁹ demonstrating America’s fear that labor unrest could easily put a halt to the well-oiled machine of industry.

On the other hand, Green demonstrates how the unionists also used the media to their advantage, in hopes that the inflated newspaper headlines would scare business leaders into caving to union demands. Plainclothes detectives, sent to union meetings, brought back stories of

³ Art Young, *On My Way: Being the Book of Art Young in Text and Pictures* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928), 201. Reprinted in James Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement and the Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 242.

⁴ James Green, *Death in the Haymarket* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 44.

⁵ Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, 78.

⁶ Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, 81; picture found in James Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, 207.

⁷ Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, 40.

⁸ Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, 40.

⁹ Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, 40.

“bloody threats and plots to dynamite buildings.”¹⁰ Augustus Spies, one of the four men executed for the Haymarket incident, distributed a pamphlet asking the working class to “rise in [their] might...and destroy the hideous monster that [sought] to destroy [them].”¹¹ This pamphlet, known as the “Revenge” circular, was used as evidence in the Haymarket bombing trial, but was also used as a means of wrangling union support and terrifying corporate America.¹²

As indicated, this culmination of discontent grew over a long span of time, and resulted in the Haymarket bombing on May 4, 1886. The deaths of citizens and police forces, and the subsequent hangings of four prominent men in the union movement led to a significant number of outcomes; however, another success of Green’s work is showing how the largest impact of the Haymarket incident can actually be found outside the United States. While many Americans today have heard little of the Haymarket incident and are naïve to its impacts, those currently living in repressed South American countries, run by dictators, share stories about the Chicago Haymarket bombing, and remember the socialists as martyrs, unlike many Americans who remember the socialists as terrorists. Green suggests that “no other event in United States history after the Civil War has [exerted] the kind of hold the Haymarket tragedy [has] maintained on the popular imagination of working people in other countries.”¹³ Furthermore, Green asserts that we do not look back at the Haymarket incident “as a victory of democracy over anarchy, but as a travesty that betrayed American ideals of liberty and justice for all.”¹⁴

Green’s book, intended to please a general audience as well as a scholarly one, provides an excellent background of information, adequate enough to allow his audience to become up-to-date with the labor quarrels of the late nineteenth century. His research is exceptional including over forty pages of references and notes. His most used resource- newspapers- fairly portrays both sides of the story, as references to *The Chicago Tribune* and *Harper’s Weekly* take on a pro-industry stance, whereas, the German newspaper, *Arbeiter Zeitung*, and the *Workingman’s Advocate*, showcase the plight of the working class. Furthermore, in showcasing a variety of newspapers and their differing testimony on the Haymarket bombing, Green demonstrates how these sensationalized headlines swayed historical opinions. Shortly after the Haymarket bombing, newspapers like the *Chicago Tribune* and *Harper’s*

¹⁰ Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, 143.

¹¹ Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, 171.

¹² Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, 171-172.

¹³ Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, 311.

¹⁴ Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, 320.

Weekly agreed that the bombing was planned and orchestrated by union leaders. Over one hundred years later, many Americans still believe this as fact; however, today's research suggests that Chicago's police force may have been behind the attack, in hopes to stop the advances made by labor unions. Unfortunately, this is a side to the Haymarket story that we rarely hear about.

Green's weakness lies in his strong focus on the eight anarchists who were arrested and tried for the various crimes surrounding the Haymarket bombing. Four of these eight men were eventually hung, including August Spies, a socialist newspaper editor; Albert Parsons, a socialist, anarchist, and activist of rights for former slaves; and Adolph Fischer and George Engel, both German born socialists. Green's overreliance on the memoirs of these leading labor activists is so extensive that their views can easily become confused with those of the working class in general. Readers must keep in mind that the vast majority of Chicago's working class individuals and union members were not socialists or anarchists, but were simply people who desired a shorter work day and a raise in wages.

Overall, *Death in the Haymarket* is an excellent read for those interested in early American labor movements, the rise of capitalism and industry, or for those simply interested in learning about a fascinating, yet widely forgotten event in American history. Green does not disappoint in his study, providing ample resources for those interested in conducting their own research on this topic. Furthermore, he does an excellent job conveying the importance of newspapers as a source of media and propaganda, as in today's internet world, newspapers have widely been disregarded as sources of information. Green's concentration on the leading anarchists in the labor movement can easily warp the reader's sense of the working classes' views and ideologies; however, his multitude of sources provides readers with enough research opportunities to form their own opinions.