



**Jacqueline Jones.** *Goddess of Anarchy: The Life and Times of Lucy Parsons, American Radical.* New York: Basic Books, 2017. 480 pp. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-07899-8.

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Despite her central role in the Haymarket events and five decades as a leading activist in the anarchist movement, Lucy Parsons has received little attention from historians. Until this volume, there was only Carolyn Ashbaugh's *Lucy Parsons: An American Revolutionary* (1976/2013) and Gail Ahren's anthology of her writings, *Lucy Parsons: Freedom, Equality & Solidarity—Writings & Speeches, 1878-1937* (2004). Jacqueline Jones, professor of women's and southern history at the University of Texas at Austin, has done extensive research into Parsons's life and written what will likely be the definitive biography for years to come. Yet despite her impressive scholarship and extensive citations, Jones does not fully grasp the nuances of the radical and labor movements—and especially the anarchist movement—of the time.

Jones has done extensive work with primary sources to document Lucy Parsons's birth and early years as a slave, before refashioning herself in the early years of Emancipation. The certainty with which Jones derides Lucy Parsons's "fiction about her origins" (p. ix) goes well beyond the documentary record—relying heavily on an 1886 newspaper article Jones terms "the Rosetta Stone of Lucy Parsons's early life" (p. 361n1), but the argument that she was born a slave is persuasive. Although Jones dismisses Parsons's claim to Mexi-

can heritage, her birth name, Lucia, suggests otherwise. There seems to be no surviving evidence as to who her father was; Jones speculates that it was either the man who owned her mother, Thomas Taliferro, "or another white man" (p. 12). Jones's documentation of Parsons's final decades is less impressive, no doubt largely because Chicago police and the FBI seized her papers and books in the aftermath of the fire that killed her.

In Texas, where she changed her name to Lucy and met and married Confederate soldier turned Reconstruction Republican Albert Parsons, the Parsonses defied the racial status quo and worked to build a multiracial alliance before fleeing north to Chicago. While official records might be afforded less deference (Jones concludes, for example, that Albert lied about his age based upon an 1850 census report listing his birth in 1845 rather than 1848—something that could be a result of clerical error or confusion, especially as both parents were dead within months of the interview), she draws on a rich array of primary sources for this period.

Jones criticizes Parsons for denying her African American heritage after fleeing Texas, and especially for failing to adequately address the violent oppression African Americans faced or to organize among Chicago's African American population. Albert and Lucy Parsons only occa-

sionally addressed this reign of terror in their speeches and writings after leaving Texas, although when they did address it they consistently denounced racism, and the anarchist International Working People's Association (IWPA) program demanded equal rights. Chicago was hardly a safe place for African Americans. Illinois's infamous black codes were repealed in 1870 and its antimiscegenation law only in 1874, the year after the Parsons arrived in Chicago. African Americans remained a tiny proportion of the Chicago population until the early 1900s. Lucy Parsons was far less involved in organizing by the time a substantial African American population had developed in Chicago, largely focused on preserving the memory of the Haymarket Martyrs and working to expose contemporary repression, often through the lens of the Haymarket legacy. Indeed, Lucy Parsons shared a platform with the mother of one of the Scottsboro "boys" during this period.

In Chicago, the Parsons quickly became active in the labor and socialist movements, joining a handful of English-speakers in what was a predominantly immigrant movement. The movement soon abandoned electoral reform, and Albert and Lucy joined efforts to build the IWPA. Jones states that native-born IWPA activists "presented themselves as the new abolitionists ... [but] most native-born workers found this analogy highly offensive" (p. 121). References to wage slavery might connect with immigrants, she contends, but to "white, American-born men" such rhetoric registered as an insult. No doubt some found it so, but the language of wage slavery continued to be employed well into the twentieth century, suggesting that it resonated for many. And, of course, immigrants made up the core of Chicago's working class. Jones insists that the Parsons' rejection of religion, voting, and temperance alienated them from ordinary workers, ignoring the substantial numbers who joined "free-thought" and anarchist organizations, were in any event denied the right to vote as immigrants, and held their meetings and celebrations in taverns and beer gardens. At

the same time, she criticizes Lucy Parsons for her failure "to speak openly and honestly of her enslavement as a youth and of her free-spirited sexuality" (p. 348). Jones believes Parsons had a number of sexual partners both before marrying Albert Parsons and after he was hanged; she offers strong evidence for some, but for many others little more than speculation.

Lucy Parsons is of course best remembered for her (and Albert's) role in the Haymarket events, and for her decades-long crusade to keep the memory of the Haymarket Martyrs alive and to prevent future such outrages. Jones's account of Haymarket relies heavily upon Timothy Messer-Kruse, who devoted two books to resuscitating the prosecutors' case against the Martyrs and imagining an international anarchist terrorist conspiracy. (It being impossible to defend the trial as fair to contemporary audiences, Messer-Kruse falls back on the claim that the trial was acceptable by the standards of the time. One need only look to the international protests and Governor Altgeld's pardon of the surviving martyrs to see that the trial outraged contemporary sensibilities.) Jones acknowledges in a footnote that Messer-Kruse's attempt to vindicate the police and prosecutors is controversial (citing but a single critique), but this does not seem to have discouraged heavy reliance on his deeply flawed work.

The resulting account is in many ways reminiscent of Henry David's (uncited) *History of the Haymarket Affair* (1936), with its emphasis on dynamite talk to explain the brutal repression of Chicago's radical labor movement. Somehow, while she acknowledges the mainstream press's advocacy of murder of tramps and labor activists and the severe violence police routinely meted out on picket lines, labor demonstrations, and radical meetings, she does not adequately take this context into account when criticizing the movement's rhetoric. This was an era when soldiers were routinely dispatched to suppress labor disputes, and courts treated labor unions as criminal conspira-

cies (something she suggests on page 318 began in the 1920s). Given this reality, it should not be surprising that activists were looking for means to defend themselves. German and Czech immigrants in Chicago organized workers' militias, but these were promptly outlawed. Western miners did in fact use dynamite as they defended themselves against company and government thugs, martial law, and concentration camps. It is no coincidence that the first popular history of the American labor movement was titled *Dynamite* (Louis Adamic, 1931, 1935/2008), or that a more recent history of press coverage of labor disputes during this era was titled *The Great Industrial War* (Troy Rondinone, 2009).

It is surely worth remembering that the Haymarket rally was called in response to the police murder of workers picketing the McCormick Reaper Works, and that there was no violence at the rally until police attacked it. Who threw the bomb (which almost certainly killed fewer people than the indiscriminate police gunfire) remains a matter of conjecture, though the anarchists' *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung* was convinced that the police were responsible and had killed their own as a result of their incompetence.

Jones's unremitting hostility to anarchism pervades the book. She insists that "principled anarchists ... would have refused counsel [at the Haymarket trial], arguing that the state-run proceedings were inherently corrupt" (p. 145). That it was an inherently corrupt show trial is beyond dispute, but does that mean the defendants should meekly go like lambs to the slaughter? Jones understands anarchism's (or at least the IWPA's) "guiding principle" to revolve around "burst[s] of violence that would awaken the masses from their slumber and impel them to overthrow their masters" (p. 90). This misunderstanding flows naturally into her obsession with dynamite, and she attributes the Parsons' continued involvement in a range of organizing and propaganda as evidence not of her misunderstanding, but rather of

incoherence on their part. She also seems not to recognize that there was an actual mass movement of which they were a part. Jones resorts to the passive voice when discussing August Spies "becoming" editor of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* and "turn[ing] it into an anarchist publication" (p. 91). It was in fact an elected position, and the movement chose to replace an advocate of electoral reform with an avowed anarchist. Similarly, in Jones's account, "Albert withdrew from the [Trades & Labor Assembly], taking twelve unions with him," and "formed a new federation—the Chicago Central Labor Union (CLU), which consisted of an estimated 12,000 members, rivaling the TLA" (p. 93). In actual fact, the CLU was a movement initiative, grounded in an immigrant working class that had developed its own unions, cultural and political associations, and daily and weekly newspapers.

The IWPA's and CLU's relations with the mainstream labor movement were often contentious. Jones criticizes Albert Parsons for his denunciation of the National Typographical Union and other business unions, suggesting that "his animus toward the local seemed to stem not only from broad ideological differences with its members but also from his bitter memories of those members who had abandoned him when he was blacklisted" (p. 121). Of course, their decision to allow employers to blacklist a union member because of his political activities was symptomatic of a class-collaborationist approach that led the Typographers to routinely scab on other newspaper unions and to boast, when they were finally locked out by publishers in 1947, that the union had gone one hundred years without striking. For much of her life,

Lucy Parsons made her living as a dressmaker—Jones says she "probably" employed one or two assistants in a small "factory" with Albert as her "business partner" and salesman (p. 55, 69). The evidence cited to support this insinuation that she

was an employer is a business card for “Parsons & Co.” (pp. 372-3n1).

Jones repeatedly asserts that the Parsons routinely lied about their lives and about the Haymarket events, including when they challenged the prosecution’s claim that the martyrs had planned violence at the Haymarket rally, noting that they would not have brought their children with them if they had any reason to expect violence. Jones says the claim that they were at the Haymarket was “untrue,” a “myth,” and notes that no one testified during the trial to seeing the children at the rally (pp. 150, 200, 344, 349). Elsewhere she acknowledges that the entire family was at Haymarket Square that evening when the rally was scheduled to begin, before proceeding to a meeting of the American Group of the IWPA called to discuss organizing seamstresses. Jones suggests that the meeting was called for some other unspecified, sinister purpose, but offers not the slightest evidence for this. Albert and several others left that meeting when a messenger arrived saying speakers were urgently needed at the Haymarket rally. Jones says they “may have arranged for someone else to take their children home” from the meeting, though Albert and Lucy insisted they had brought them to the rally (p. 132). It is not clear why she insists they were lying about this, as no evidence contradicting them has ever been produced. It appears that the children were sent home at some point, as the rally ran until 10:30 p.m., when it was broken up by the police attack, but the details have never been established. Jones claims that the Parsons must have known that an attack against police was planned, offering as evidence only the fact that Albert went into hiding after police opened fire on the demonstration. This suggestion is unsupported by any evidence (police were not even present until after the mayor left, creating an opportunity to attack the rally), and seems to have been concocted to support the claim “that Albert needed the ruse of his chil-

dren’s presence there in order to dispel suspicions that he was privy to the information” (p. 152).

A major theme of the book is Jones’s concern that the Parsons paid insufficient attention to racial oppression after leaving Texas and that Lucy betrayed her heritage by trying to pass as Mexican. She devotes several passages to demonstrating that reporters did not go along with this. She also discusses instances where Lucy Parsons addressed racial issues, including an article (“one of only a handful of *Alarm* pieces devoted to southern blacks,” p. 127) on a massacre of 23 African Americans in Carrollton, Mississippi. In that article, Parsons suggested that blacks were terrorized not because of their race but because they were poor and powerless, and that the key to their liberation lay in arming themselves to enforce their rights. Jones claims Lucy Parsons made only a single passing reference to lynching and black oppression in her writings and “denigrated the black freedom struggle”, including “the opportunity to advance within the workplace, to swim at a lakefront beach on a hot summer day, [and] to send their children to decent schools” (p. 349). The first claim is disproven by Jones’s own book (though there are other writings which she does not discuss), even if racism received less attention than it deserved; the second appears to be a complete fabrication, unsupported by any footnote or textual evidence. In 1915, Parsons agreed to speak under the auspices of the African American Alpha Suffrage Club (p. 302), raised funds for the Magonistas, and offered her Spanish-speaking skills to the movement. Jones, nonetheless, insists that Parsons did not speak Spanish, offering no source for the claim.

Two years later Parsons embraced the Russian Revolution, and Jones seizes on the moment of revolutionary enthusiasm to tar Parsons with “the Bolsheviks’ bloody suppression of their political opponents, evidenced, for example, in genocidal programs against Jews” (p. 304). That the Bolsheviks were ruthless dictators is now beyond dis-

pute, and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and other radicals published firsthand exposés at least as early as 1921. (Parsons never confronted the Bolsheviks' betrayal, whether out of distrust of press accounts or a misguided commitment to left unity. But she also refused to join the Communist Party, identifying as an anarchist until the day she died.) But genocidal programs were the specialty of the old czarist regime and the White armies that sought to restore it; like the Makhnovshchyna, the Bolsheviks condemned programs and executed progromists. Here Jones seems (the relevant paragraph is footnoted, but the note does not address the issue) to conflate the official anti-Semitism that flourished under Stalin with the earlier years of the Revolution.

Jones describes Lucy Parsons' writing as "descriptive and colorful[,] exploit[ing] melodramatic themes and [taking] considerable care in fashioning her prose" (p. 104). But this does not discourage her from scandal-mongering and constant digs. There is extensive speculation about her relationships after Albert's judicial murder, supported by contemporary gossip and by court testimony by one man following a violent incident when she barred him from her home. Her strained relationship with the Pioneer Aid Society, which maintained the Haymarket Monument and supported the Martyrs' survivors, is documented, as is her discomfort with more "American" elements in the twentieth-century anarchist movement, which emphasized cultural rebellion and sexual liberty in ways that left her uncomfortable. Instead, Lucy Parsons preferred to work with immigrants, who in any event remained a strong majority of both the anarchist movement and Chicago's working class.

Apparently convinced that Lucy Parsons cared more for the spotlight than for the emancipation of the wage slaves, Jones suggests that she might have resented the failure of Columbian Exposition organizers to invite her to speak in 1893. There is not the slightest evidence that she sought

or expected such an invitation. It is not as if Parsons was not regularly invited to address rallies and meetings during this period. Indeed, Jones seems surprised that Parsons and other anarchists sometimes spoke at "respectable" venues; this is an artifact of her pervasive present-mindedness. Albert Parsons and his colleagues often spoke to such audiences in the 1880s; Karl Marx was a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*; and radicals and reformers regularly engaged with one another through World War I at least (and if one considers the Popular Front, for decades beyond). In part, I suspect, this engagement was prompted by the undeniable brutality of the era and a shared understanding that unprecedented concentrations of power posed an imminent danger to nearly everyone.

As she moves into the 1910s, Jones focuses increasingly on broader social trends and Parsons recedes into the background for pages at a time. There are some curious choices in the extensive sections where Jones relies on the secondary literature, and some places where she seems to have misread her sources. For example, she discusses a letter Parsons wrote to Eugene V. Debs "to congratulate him on his decision not to beg for the restoration of his citizenship after his release from prison" (p. 325). While it is true that Debs was under the impression that he had been stripped of his "right of citizenship," by which he seems to have meant the right to vote, the source Jones cites for this letter makes it clear a few pages earlier that Debs was not stripped of his citizenship (and indeed could not have been), and retained the right to vote under Indiana state law.[1]

In her final years, Lucy Parsons tried to bridge ideological divides, working with the Communist Party-dominated International Labor Defense but also the IWW and the anarchist Free Society Group. This led to much criticism, though as anarcho-syndicalist Sam Dolgoff, who met her in Chicago when he was beginning his own revolutionary career, noted, "For her, anyone against capitalism

was ipso facto a revolutionist and she saw no reason why all of them should not bury the hatchet” (p. 326). Nearly blind and increasingly frail, Parsons was killed at age ninety-one when her house caught fire March 7, 1942, but remained a rebel to the day she died. Police officers and FBI agents stole her library and any surviving papers—no doubt a fitting end to a lifetime of struggle against the forces of oppression, but one which will continue to frustrate historians exploring the life of this remarkable woman.

Note

[1]. Morris Hillquit to EVD, March 1, 1926, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 3, ed. J. R. Constantine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 547-48.

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