

**While the Haymarket bomb was unquestionably a terrifying shock, it was no surprise. Viewed in retrospect, it almost seems inevitable that the bomb exploded when and where it did—on the evening of May 4, 1886, at a labor protest rally in a manufacturing and wholesale district in Chicago, Illinois. Even the fact that the perpetrator remains unknown to this day is fitting, since this cataclysmic event seems a creation of its times rather than the act of a single isolated individual, or, as the authorities charged and the jury agreed, the handiwork of a conspiracy. Put another way, what happened in the Haymarket makes a certain dramatic sense, given the time and place in which it occurred.**



### **American Urbanization**

The defining conditions of this time and place were the upheavals of the nineteenth century. Central among these was the Industrial Revolution, which irreversibly altered virtually every aspect of human experience wherever it reached. A second defining condition of the period was the continuation of the democratic movement that began with the creation of the United States in the late eighteenth century. Over the next one hundred years and more, European nations experienced an uncertain pattern of reform and often repressive reaction that, along with uncertain economic conditions, brought masses of immigrants westward across the Atlantic.

As much as Americans would have liked to believe otherwise, they were hardly exempt from these upheavals. Mechanization and the factory system may have originated abroad, but by the 1840s the United States was on course to becoming the world's leading industrial nation, a status it would achieve before the close of the century. Industrialization and the social developments that accompanied it transformed the nation.

No phenomenon embodied these dramatic cultural changes and so profoundly raised the question of where America was going as did urbanization. During the last two-thirds of the nineteenth century, the United States was to a significant extent transformed from a largely rural republic with a relatively homogeneous population to a polyglot urban nation. American urbanization gathered astonishing momentum as the decades unfolded. In the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, both the number of communities defined by the federal census as urban and the number of people living in such places tripled. By 1900, thirty million of America's seventy-six million residents were classified as residents of cities.

The list of places with one hundred thousand or more people jumped from fourteen to thirty-eight between 1870 and 1900, by which time fifteen of these communities had over two hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants.

What makes these figures all the more arresting is the amount of movement within and among American cities, as well as back out to smaller settlements. This movement is more difficult to trace than net changes because it involves tracking individuals over time. Much evidence, however, indicates a constant alteration in the specific composition of the population of any one place, not to mention a remarkable amount of occupational and residential shifting among those who stayed in any one city. These changes mainly demonstrate the energy and attractiveness of American urban centers. Combined with the troubled economy of the late nineteenth century, however, which suffered through three major periods of depression between 1873 and the early 1890s, they also point to the period's social volatility. The tragedy of Haymarket, including the extremely regrettable legal response to the bombing, was both a response to this volatility and a sign of it.

### **The Rise of Chicago**

If urbanization was arguably the defining trend in American life of this period, the rise of Chicago was this trend's most compelling example. Modern Chicago—the city that went from a tiny outpost in 1830 to the nation's second largest urban center within sixty years—owed its origins and



prodigious growth to being in the right place and the right time. The right place was a flat and unenclosed position at the southwestern end of the Great Lakes, accessible through New York's Erie Canal (completed in 1825) to the Atlantic Ocean and, after the Illinois and Michigan Canal opened in 1848, to the Mississippi River. The railroad entered the city the same year the canal was finished, assuring Chicago's critical status as the gateway

city linking the manufacturing East and the agricultural West.

As Chicago grew, it evolved from a trading center to an international manufacturing as well as mercantile giant, based on its access to raw materials, new technologies, investment capital, and a seemingly endless supply of workers. Many of these workers came from abroad, especially Germany and Ireland. In 1850, half of all Chicagoans were born abroad, and this figure remained above 40 percent for the balance of the century. At the time of Haymarket, approximately three out of every four residents were either from another country themselves or had at least one foreign-born parent. One's background usually correlated with how one experienced the city. Those of foreign birth or ethnicity, for example, were far more likely to work in skilled or unskilled blue-collar occupations than the native born, who dominated the professions and office jobs.

In a city so vast and varied, however, it is essential not to lose a sense of some finer distinctions. It is misleading, for example, to talk about "the Germans" as a unified entity, since this group consisted of a multitude of people with widely varied points of origin, education, beliefs, and



expectations. They left their homes at different times and for different reasons, coming to Chicago through numerous routes and stages, and settling for any number of reasons in different parts of the city, albeit often in ethnic enclaves. Even those who organized themselves around a specific common cause, such as Irish nationalism, sometimes exhibited irreconcilable enmities. Likewise, Chicagoans within the same employment category hardly constituted a monolith. While the fledgling unionization movement gathered force, it too was marked by internal divisions over issues of membership, goals, and tactics.

In any case, the most common trait shared by Chicagoans in the late nineteenth century, whether they were of American or foreign birth or ethnicity, was that they were not actually from Chicago. Not only all eight defendants in the Haymarket trial, but virtually all the police who arrested them, the several attorneys who prosecuted and defended them, the jurors who delivered the verdict, and the judge who presided over the case, were born and in most instances raised outside this young city. Six of the defendants, two of the lawyers, the superintendent of police, and the two officers who led the investigation were immigrants from abroad. Even Carter Harrison, the mayor at the time, was a Kentuckian who had only settled in Chicago when he was thirty years old. All this points to the provisional nature of this enormous new metropolis, and to the instability that is one of the sources of Haymarket.

## **Capital and Labor**

This instability underlies one of the fundamental oppositions of the period, the widening division between capital and labor. Capital, broadly defined, encompassed stockholders, executives and managers, and even many office workers. Labor included those who earned their living by selling their physical skill and effort, receiving compensation either at an hourly rate or on the basis of how much they produced. Much of the story of the late nineteenth century involved the battle between capital and labor over who controlled wages, hours, and the process of production. The trajectory of industrial capitalism tended towards larger workplaces with layers of supervision, increased use of technology, and division of the manufacturing process into discrete parts that required limited skills and training. Labor correctly understood this trajectory as a threat to the worth and power of the individual worker, who was becoming an interchangeable, cheap, and readily replaceable cog in a system driven by the logic of production and profit.

Union organizers saw their efforts as an attempt to counterbalance these trends. They faced powerful resistance from a middle-class public—which included most political and economic leaders, as well as most journalists—suspicious of unions either on principle or for self-interested reasons.

Repeated and persistent economic downturns both exacerbated class divisions and inspired attempts by workers to rectify the inequities between capital and labor. The Panic of 1873 created widespread unemployment and led to angry demonstrations, some of which were met with violent reprisals by the police. The shortage of jobs, and reductions in wages and hours for those who were fortunate enough to get work, led to political agitation on many fronts. The shrill rhetoric on all sides mounted rapidly. Labor organizers denounced the arrogant practices of predatory bosses, while businessmen, government officials, and editors lumped immigrants, tramps, union leaders, and communists together as enemies of the public good. Chicago experienced a series of traumatic confrontations, the most profound of which were local disorders relating to the national railroad strike that swept across the country during the summer of 1877.

The strike entered Chicago on July 25, when a mob vandalized two Burlington & Quincy locomotives and police fought with strikers near the McCormick Reaper works southwest of downtown. This police action hauntingly foreshadowed a similar event almost nine years later that led directly to the Haymarket meeting. The 1877 rioting came a day after switchmen for the Michigan Central walked off the job, leading to an effective call to other workers across numerous trades and industries to do the same. Soon Companies E and F of the United States Twenty-second Infantry arrived to get the trains and the city up and running again, which they did within a few days. But a series of deadly skirmishes between mobs and the enforcers of order, and a brutal unprovoked raid by police on a meeting of furniture workers became sources of continuing resentment.

The strike further heightened social tensions and deepened political enmities, with most of those in positions of authority calling for repression rather than reconciliation. Businessmen, for example, demanded that Congress increase the size of the army and establish local armories to assist police and state militias to discourage and defend against "urban insurrection." At an emergency meeting of Chicago's commercial and political elite on July 25—the same day Mayor Monroe Heath issued proclamations summoning "all good citizens" to serve on patrol and other duties and ordering police to "arrest all disorderly persons"—an eminent clergyman proposed a force of at least thirty thousand special constables and the requisite funding to support Heath's orders. Some of these same men soon donated two Gatling machine



guns to the local militia to defend the city from the enemy within.

## **The Path to Haymarket**

The path to Haymarket for several of the principals began earlier in the decade. Julius Grinnell, who successfully prosecuted the case, came to Chicago in December 1870 from northern New York. Albert Parsons, who would be convicted in August 1886 and hanged in November 1887 for being part of the alleged conspiracy that caused the bomb, arrived in the city from Texas in November 1873. Parsons joined Typographical Union Number 16, and he soon found work for the Chicago Times. What Parsons called his "interest and activity in the labor movement" originated shortly thereafter, as he grew increasingly radical in response to the conditions he saw around him. Parsons soon became the most prominent English-language spokesman in Chicago for the socialist movement dominated by German immigrants.

A few days before the railroad strike of 1877 hit Chicago, Parsons addressed a rally organized by the Socialist Working-Men's Party, which was formed in 1876. He denounced railroad executives for their stance toward labor, condemned industry's use of machines to displace workers, and demanded the adoption of the eight-hour day. At another protest rally soon after, Parsons urged his audience to avoid violence, arguing that it would be counterproductive to their best interests. He told them to join unions and to use the ballot to elect officials sympathetic to their interests. The following day the police dispersed still another rally of the Working-Men's Party. As one of the most visible agitators, Parsons lost his job and was told by the police superintendent that he risked physical danger if he continued his political activities.

August Spies, who would be hanged alongside Parsons in 1887, followed a parallel career in Chicago. He arrived in the city from central Germany the same year as Parsons, having landed in New York shortly before. By 1876 Spies ran his own upholstery business, but soon he was deeply engaged in the socialist movement. The railroad strike further confirmed his beliefs. Spies also joined several German cultural organizations, whose social and political activities were often closely intertwined. As with so many other movements, however, it is important to remember that there was nothing approaching complete consensus among Chicago socialists, or even among German socialists within specific organizations. Groups divided and



reassembled, with members who had resigned or were expelled from one often forming or joining another. The socialists could attract the multitudes for particular events, such as massive rally in March 1879 to commemorate the French Revolution and the Paris Commune, but individuals found their own way through the tumult of events and ideas.

During the 1870s, Parsons and Spies remained active in electoral politics, working for socialist candidates and even running for office. They supported the union movement and spoke out for the eight-hour day. By the end of the decade, however, Parsons and Spies were convinced that social, political, and economic harmony and justice were impossible within the currently constituted order. A critical event in the evolution of their thinking occurred when a socialist candidate who had been duly elected to the City Council in 1880 was prevented from taking his seat by election officials.

They were also concerned that to dedicate one's efforts to choosing officials in the existing government was to endorse a framework of authority that was fundamentally flawed. Similarly, Parsons and Spies felt that to work for unionization or the eight-hour day implied tacit acceptance of the capitalist wage system. Meaningful change required more extreme measures.