Haymarket on Trial: Timothy Messer-Kruse's *The Trial of Haymarket Activists*

Posted on November 12, 2012 by Rosemary Feurer

As a regular feature of this blog, *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* will be opening public access and dialogue about one article in its current issue. Given that November 11 (1887) was known as "Black Friday" across the globe because four Chicago anarchist labor activists were hung by the state on that date, it is supremely fitting that we feature the current *Labor* roundtable on Timothy Messer Kruse's book *The Trial of the Haymarket Anarchists: Terrorism and Justice in the Gilded Age.* I invite readers to read the round-table and join in a discussion about the book and the critiques. We thank Duke University Press for allowing us to post it at no charge for six months. Messer-Kruse has garnered quite a bit of attention to his book, some of it based on the hook of Wikipedia "censoring" of his perspectives and evidence, and the provocative charge that the martyrs were part of a terrorist network.

The most startling comment in the roundtable is Messer-Kruse's own closing comment that he has "not endeavored to retry the Haymarket anarchists."

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.

Certainly fair readers would consider his book a retrial and attempt to convict. He renders the anarchists as complicit in a conspiracy, as charged by the prosecution. Thus the word “justice” in his title seems to me to suggest that some measure of justice was done in the case, contra previous works. The book also contains harsh indictments of the work of previous historians, especially that they failed to show that violence and terror was the centerpiece of Chicago anarchist strategies. While most previous authors have sought to place the trial in a wider context of lack of justice for labor activists, Messer-Kruse’s book has almost nothing of that context.

Messer-Kruse’s characterization of previous work doesn’t square with my own. Just one example: Messer-Kruse claims that historians ignored the possibility that Rudolph Schnaubelt may have thrown the bomb at Haymarket.(p.226) I know that whenever I’ve taught about Haymarket, I’ve mentioned that historians have pointed to Rudolph Schnaubelt as one possibility. Dave Roediger’s fine *Haymarket Scrapbook* has 10 mentions of Schnaubelt, including those of Paul Avrich, who instead suggests another possibility, one that Messer-Kruse himself ignores. Even the popular website The Dramas of Haymarket, to which I have sent my students regularly, suggests that “most people at the time and since, regardless of which side they were on, believed that the likely bomb-thrower was anarchist Rudolph Schnaubelt.” The prosecution wasn’t able to prove Schnaubelt did it. Messer-Kruse attempts to do that for them, and to connect the condemned men to Schnaubelt in a wider conspiracy than even imagined by chief investigator Michael Schaack.

I’m more troubled by Messer-Kruse’s use of Schaack’s book, *Anarchy and Anarchists: A History of the Red Terror*, as a credible source for reducing the anarchists to part of a terrorist network. My 13 year old son Joe Rathke used the book for his Illinois history fair project last year and reacquainted me with it. Joe wrote this in response to his project question about what he had learned about using primary sources: “My favorite part of researching this was reading Chicago Police Captain Schaack’s distorted stereotype of the anarchist women in the movement. (Ch. 12) His description was so vividly exaggerated, calling the women “squaws” engaged in “war dances,” and using images of old witch-like women plotting deaths of capitalists. This showed me that anarchists were treated the same as Native Americans, as though they were barbarians who should have no rights. Reading that first-hand account, you could see how much propaganda was put out to destroy this movement.” Yet Messer-Kruse has to redeem Schaack and this source in order to make his case, and he goes to great lengths to do so. The larger context—that all of the evidence was tainted and is debatable, not

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.

definite—which my son got from the Schaack source, gets lost in the Messer-Kruse's treatment.

Author

Rosemary Feurer

Rosemary Feurer is Professor of History at Northern Illinois University. She is the author of *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950,* among other books and essays. She is working on The Illinois Mine Wars, 1860-1940 and a new biography of Mary Harris "Mother" Jones.

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.