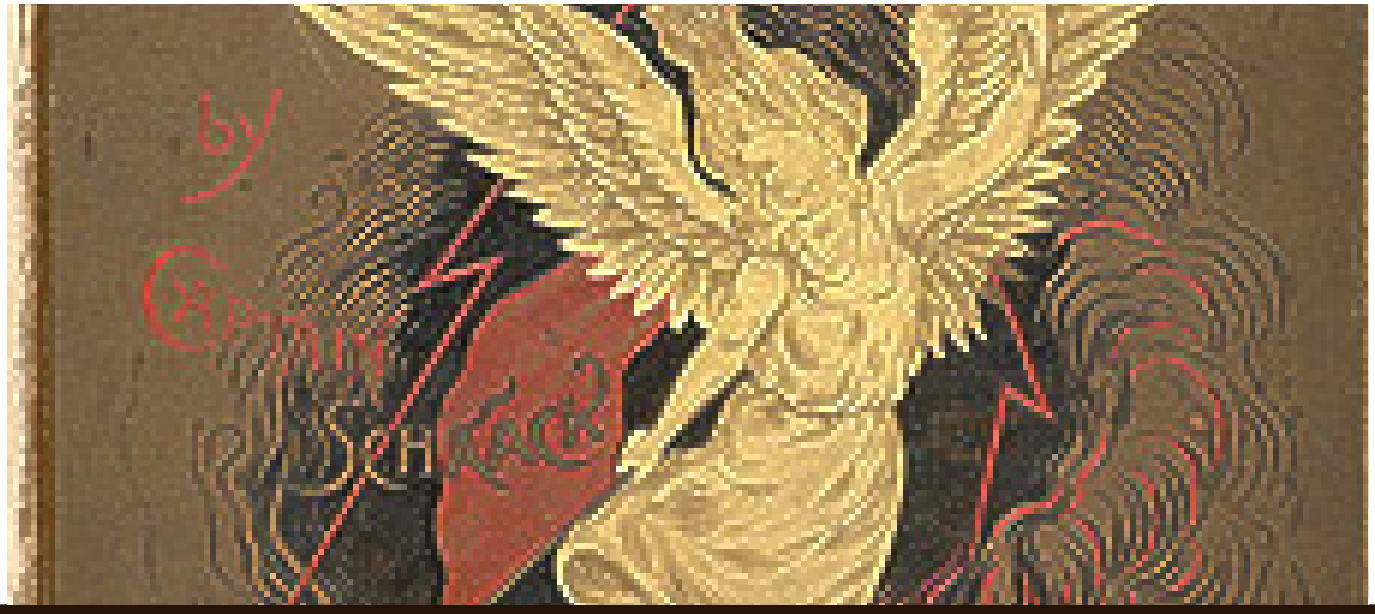


Some Thoughts on Retrying the Haymarket Martyrs

Posted on February 11, 2013 by Bryan Palmer

Editor's note: The conservative journal *National Review* recently gave this blog and the journal *Labor: Working Class History of the Americas* a blast of publicity about the forum on Timothy Messer-Kruse's book on Haymarket. *National Review* lauded Messer-Kruse for taking on leftist historians who were in "denial" about the role of the anarchist left in the period, and suggested that the books show that the police and the prosecution were correct. Conservative historian Ron Radosh crowed "Haymarket! Another Leftist Historical Myth Gets Destroyed". Other blogs suggested that it took tenacity and temerity to produce "honest scholarship," compared to leftist labor historians who refused to examine the evidence. The article and blog placed labor historian Bryan Palmer among the leftist historians who sought to deny Messer-Kruse's evidence. Labor Online asked Palmer to respond. -RF

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> The Hammonds, in their lifetime, turned too often towards their critics a genteel cheek of silence; and, after that, they were dead. For more than twenty years the ideological school of history has been able to knock the 'sentimentalists' with impunity, in articles and seminars. Meeting only with silence, they have become careless: a certain professional scowl, a suggestion of anti-sentimental rigour, has served to cover any lacunae in scholarship.
>
> *E.P. Thompson*

I have not managed to carve out the time to read Timothy Messer-Kruse's recently-published two volumes on the Haymarket trial and the international network of anarchists that was ostensibly responsible for what is now labelled the 'Haymarket conspiracy'. I intend to read these books, and hope that I will learn from them. Without reading the books, my commentary on the discussion that is now taking place in various venues around Messer-Kruse's revisionist assessment of what happened in Chicago in the 1880s is necessarily limited, and I am thus quite restrained in what follows. But I can offer some thoughts on past installments of this ongoing debate, and how they have been constructed. On the basis of this it is possible, also, to ask questions about questions not asked of Messer-Kruse.

Cover of The Trial of the Haymarket Anarchists

Messer-Kruse has become the darling of the right, and the debate over Haymarket that he has initiated has become a springboard into attacks on the left, the argument being that left historians are not interested in evidence. Messer-Kruse has indeed been engaged in attacking the left on this basis for some time. He continues to do so, and apparently considers almost all past scholarly commentary on the Haymarket trial "shoddy." In his own less than understated words, quoted in a recent commentary by Kevin Boyle, Messer-Kruse considers that his use of a trial transcript that he claims has never before been used by historians, puts "the torch to a century of scholarship." John J. Miller at the *National Review reports* that

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"earlier researchers had not consulted this transcript. Instead they had relied on an abstract of the trial prepared by defense lawyers, drawing their conclusions from a flamboyantly prejudiced account of the bombing and its aftermath," and quotes Messer-Kruse as saying, "The best source had been hiding in plain sight." In a statement to the *Chicago Tribune* in 2011, Messer-Kruse declared: "Textbooks ignore the transcript and say the trial was unfair."

This is overstatement. The voluminous, and complete, trial transcript that Messer-Kruse insists must be utilized, and that became digitalized only recently so that Messer-Kruse could sit "at home in my bathrobe" and read it on the screen (not going to the archives *does* mean that you will not bump into other kinds of evidence that might be useful, such as commentary by jurists, files of evidence gathered, and references to comparable cases, all of which might well prove useful), is lengthy, but much of it is also repetitive. I am not suggesting that this full transcript should not be read. Of course it should.

But two counter points need to be registered. First, Messer-Kruse's claim, in a recent podcast, that by looking at "the actual trial transcript" he was able to use it to "reconstruct events more or less as they actually happened," is rather naïve, for no trial transcript, comprised of testimony and evidence of the kinds secured in 1886, in the climate of that particular highly charged socio-cultural and political moment, can possibly reveal, on its own, "events as they actually happened." Historians can use such evidence, alongside other sources, to *try vigorously to reconstruct events,* but they can never express themselves with the assurance of Messer-Kruse's statement. This is all the more the case given the peculiar nature and circumstances of the Haymarket Trial.

Second, Messer-Kruse has too easily been allowed to suggest that earlier histories of Haymarket have relied on prejudiced distillations when, as a close reading of Henry David's book reveals, a number of compilations, including a lengthy abstract for the record prepared by the defense, a brief on the facts for the state of the prosecution, the John Lawson edited account in the 1919 Volume 12 *American State Trials,* and other sources have been thoroughly explored. These multiple sources contain much verbatim quotation of legal argument, lengthy reproductions of testimony, and are a fuller account of the trial record than is suggested in Messer-Kruse's statements on the evidentiary record. In my own earlier response to Messer-Kruse, "CSI Labor History," that appeared in *Labor: Working-Class Studies of the Americas,* I relied on, among other sources, 1887 briefs on the facts for the defendants in error, prepared by the prosecution. This body of evidence totaled

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hundreds, not thousands, of pages, but it is actually quite detailed. And as Janice L. Reiff has suggested in a recent *Labor* forum on Messer-Kruse's book on the Haymarket trial, the notion that scholars have somehow bypassed the trial transcript that Messer-Kruse mines so assiduously is undermined by the existence of the Carl Smith-curated web exhibit, *The Dramas of Haymarket,* where the trial transcript is utilized extensively.

The Revenge flyer printed shortly before the Haymarket riot. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

None of this is adequately acknowledged in Messer-Kruse's recent statements and interviews because it compromises his capacity to assail historians for their failure– even, according to him, refusal– to engage with '*the evidence'.* He clearly enjoys the assailing. In the process, Messer-Kruse constantly reiterates an understanding of evidence that is, on the one hand, strikingly Gradgrindian in its insistence that facts are facts, and, on the other, open to wildly inferential leaps. In his 2005 *Labor* article, for instance, Messer-Kruse actually suggested that bombs made in 1886 could have been "cast from the discarded letters" of a print shop, speculating that in shaping their arsenal out of the metal type of a newspaper like the *Alarm,* the anarchist defendants may well have been making bombs that had a symbolic as well as military purpose: "it would have been the literal transformation of their words into deeds." (That this kind of *speculative* contemporary social construction of the inter-related meaning of radical agitation and bomb making in Chicago's 1880s, which can hardly be 'proven' on the basis of anything approximating convincing evidence, is decisively related to the mindset of the prosecution in the Haymarket trial should be obvious. For the trial, as many historians have rightly suggested, *was* about words as much as it was about deeds.) I do hope Messer-Kruse, in his new books, either presents more evidence for this kind of loose prosecution of those brought to trial in 1886, or drops altogether such suggestions.

Messer-Kruse's representation of left historians who continue to believe that the Haymarket trial reveals the ugly underside of repression within the democratic Gilded Age American polity has added weight with those writing for magazines like the *National Review* because Messer-Kruse claims he is just an honest historian seeking truth and, in his quest for an objective history he has had to correct left historians' errors, fabrications, and refusal to engage with 'new' evidence. His revisionist journey to understand Haymarket commenced when he too held to the

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standard interpretation of injustice. “I believed” it all, he tells the *National Review’s* Henry J. Miller, adding, in a telling phrase, “I had drunk the Kool-Aid.” The left is thus presented as a cult, its ideology dispensing a lethal concoction of untruth that Messer-Kruse has had the perseverance and principle to resist.

This is heady stuff for the right. Messer-Kruse proclaims, according to a quote in Miller’s *National Review* article, that “My aim is not to prove that the police and the courts were right and the anarchists and their supporters wrong.” Left critics have said that this is exactly what Messer-Kruse is attempting to do, albeit not successfully. Kevin Boyle, a progressive whom I might place more towards the center than the left of the political spectrum (I am prepared to stand corrected), states unequivocally that Messer-Kruse does indeed try to establish that the courts and the police were right in 1886-1887, and both those on trial for their lives and their supporters were supposedly wrong. And right-wing advocates of Messer-Kruse most emphatically agree. Miller’s article states that Messer-Kruse does indeed confirm that the police and the courts were right and the anarchists and their supporters wrong. An author can say that what he has done is *not* what everyone, upon reasoned reflection, insists that he has done or tried to do, but he does so at some peril. And it becomes necessary to ask why an author is constantly reiterating what he has not done, why he seems to be in something of a state of denial?

If I can not yet offer commentary on Messer-Kruse’s two books, I can provide an assessment about his claims that left historians are uninterested in evidence. Messer-Kruse describes a 2005 October session at the North American Labor History Conference at Wayne State University in Detroit, devoted to a discussion of a paper he had prepared, revisiting some of the issues associated with interpretation of what happened on the Haymarket Square when the bomb exploded and shots were fired. His characterization of this session, reported in the *National Review*, is that “I encountered utter and complete denial of the evidence.”

Actually, the session was something different. Chair and commentator Melvyn Dubofsky was not at all in denial of evidence although, as I recall, he pressed Messer-Kruse not to be so dismissive of historians who had made some errors; Mel suggested, if I remember correctly, that all historians make mistakes, however careful they are. Neither was Beverly Gage denying evidence, either in 2005 or, more recently, in the *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* forum on Messer-Kruse’s book on the Haymarket trial. Jim Green and I were more critical, but that does not mean that we denied ‘the evidence’. I won’t speak for Green, but my own commentary was most emphatically NOT a denial of the evidence. Rather,

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it was an interrogation of what Messer-Kruse presented as evidence (within limits understandable in terms of a commentary on a paper at a conference session). In my view, Messer-Kruse's admittedly detailed and imaginative (at too many points, excessively imaginative) paper included a great deal of *speculation* (all of it running in one direction), inference drawn from 'facts' that were themselves capable of being questioned. I conducted an assessment of what I considered to be a flawed and one-sided analysis of the specific body of material presented by Messer-Kruse. I raised questions; and it was possible to inquire probingly about evidence from the past that, 120 years later, was being subject to scientific testing, but that was itself necessarily subject to scrutiny on the basis of how it had come to be accepted given the immense problems associated with issues that we might label 'chain of evidence' concerns. It was not evidence as indisputable truth that was denied. Rather, a construction of argument premised on specific views of a body of material orchestrated in particular ways, both by particular parties in the past and by Messer-Kruse in the present, was interrogated.

In the process of reading and evaluating Messer-Kruse's entire set of arguments, some things were granted, others rejected, and still more issues of interpretation acknowledged but queried. I now think I was perhaps too accepting of the vehemence of Messer-Kruse's attack on Paul Avrich's admittedly all too cavalier and flawed account of the role of Albert and Lucy Parsons in demonstrations in Chicago on 1 May 1886, but that only establishes that Messer-Kruse's account of evidence did not meet with "utter and complete denial."

One problem with how Messer-Kruse has attacked past views of Haymarket and its meanings, as almost all commentators who are genuinely concerned with addressing his research as something other than a political football to kick around for their own amusement are agreed upon, is his narrowing of the focus to very specific questions, most of which boil down to reiterations of evidence amassed by the prosecution, evidence that is then elaborated upon and interpreted largely in the same ways that the prosecution interpreted it. Indeed, in what I have seen of Messer-Kruse's handling of evidence to this point, I have come to question whether he does not confuse the role of the historian with that of the lawyer. Lawyers are adversaries, advocates whose profession it is to argue zealously so as to defend or prosecute, discrediting witnesses, rebutting testimony, offering any and all evidence that can be presented so as to sustain a specific position. Much of Messer-Kruse's past writing has been of this kind. I do not mind historians taking up advocacy, but find it disconcerting when this is done under the banner of a search for undeniable,

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objective truth, and those who see other truths are held out to be engaged, not in the practice of doing history, but in falsifying it. In all the discussions that have unfolded over the past decades about the social construction of evidence and the complexity of 'truth claims', Messer-Kruse seems to be operating in something of a theoretical vacuum, in which historical meaning is constrained to claims about 'facts' that can never be the subject of discussion, debate, and difference. Perhaps Messer-Kruse's new books take a more two-sided approach, but if they do not, and he handles arguments about evidence the same way I have seen him handle it in the past, then the issue is not simply accepting Messer-Kruse's evidence, but dealing with it critically. Again, I look forward to reading his new books, in the hope that he can be more convincing than he has been in the past, but he can not insist that his reading of evidence is absolutely right and all other readings, supported by reason, are absolutely wrong.

Bryan Palmer has made available his comments delivered at the 2005 North American Labor History Conference in response to a presentation by Timothy Messer-Kruse about Haymarket.

- View them at Scribd

To establish that the commentary at the 2005 North American Labor History Conference session was NOT about denial of evidence, but was rather about engagement with evidence and offering reasoned argument against the kinds of interpretations Messer-Kruse was placing on specific kinds of evidence, I append the full, unaltered text of my commentary here. I do not do so, I want to stress, holding that everything I said to be above critical rejoinder. Some of what I alluded to in the commentary might well be challenged. For instance, I recall that on the panel discussion at the 2005 conference, Messer-Kruse snorted in derision when I brought up the testimony of Dr. Taylor, that this witness 'perjured himself' (or some such dismissal). Perhaps, but at the time all I got was an assertion of rejection of this evidence, which appeared in the trial transcripts. I had read the prosecution's claims that Taylor could not have seen what he said he saw given the place at which he said he was standing. It is possible that this is true, or it may well be that this is an entirely (un)red herring. What could be seen from a very specific location might be altered by the turning of a head, or the shift of a body, which a witness might not associate with moving a position, especially if he was not asked questions that directly posed this matter of physical sight lines. It is possible to explain discrepancies in witness testimony that turn on such spatial details, and not

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necessarily assume that because contradictions in one part of a witness record exists, all testimony of that witness is necessarily to be thrown out, such as Taylor's claim about bullet trajectories as revealed in markings on physical structures, some of which had been removed from the Haymarket site between the night of the bombing and gunfire and the gathering of evidence and eventual trial date.

Original cover of Michael Schaack's *Anarchy and Anarchists* (1889). Credit: ChicagoHistory.org

If Taylor was in error in parts of his testimony, and even if it could be ascertained decisively that he perjured himself (and I am unaware of whether Taylor was ever convicted of perjury), this does not mean that all of his testimony can therefore be dismissed as a fabrication. After all, Messer-Kruse has noted in one interview that while Captain Schaack was indeed proven to be a corrupt policeman and his book on the Haymarket events written in a lurid melodramatic style, he nonetheless provides evidence that Messer-Kruse considers illuminating. The prosecution, moreover, depended on testimony that was certainly tainted, evidence that Messer-Kruse wants us to address seriously. Much of the state's case, and much that Messer-Kruse has said outside of his two books demands close scrutiny, came from individuals who admitted to such acts as making bombs, figures like William Seliger, who was originally indicted for conspiracy and murder, but who received exoneration from all prosecution for his activities by testifying against his former comrades and for the state. This same prosecution, as well, presented socialists and anarchists who testified as without veracity, while police and informants were always credible. I look forward to reading Messer-Kruse's book on the trial to see how all of this is handled, but I would want to see Messer-Kruse grapple with all witnesses in the same way. If Messer-Kruse is truly engaged in a search for truth, surely he will exercise diligence in the examination of all sides.

My point is that I am willing to subject myself to Messer-Kruse's rebuttal (which will almost certainly happen, and be done in ways that narrow the discussion to what Messer-Kruse regards as relevant) to make the larger point. I would hope that he would recognize that all left commentary does not deny evidence, or its importance. Indeed, in my published rejoinder to Messer-Kruse's original statement on the forensic evidence on the bomb, I actually advocated examination of bullet fragments, to try to ascertain what might be determined about the issue of police wounds being a result of friendly fire or revolvers discharged from within the ranks

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of the working-class crowd, although issues of ‘chain of evidence’ problems should not, given the climate of the times in 1886 and the passage of approximately 125 years, be ignored. There is some suggestion in the prosecution’s briefs that bullet fragment examination might be a fruitful line of inquiry, and perhaps Messer-Kruse has indeed followed this up. In short, I valued the presentation of new evidence, but defended and engaged in the right to criticize interpretations that I did not think were valid or convincing based on the presentation of evidence. As naïve as this may sound, I do not think that anyone reading my previous commentaries (one published/one not), regardless of their disagreement with my interpretation, or their suggestion that I am impolite, can possibly come to the conclusion that I am denying evidence, rather than questioning a specific interpretation of it, and providing reasons for my subsequent rejection of Messer-Kruse’s positions.

This brings me to the *Labor* forum organized by Eric Arnesen, a roundtable in which Messer-Kruse’s book on the trial is commented on by four historians. The forum provided a fascinating set of conceptual queries as well as a number of analytic points and conclusions, some of which might certainly be challenged.

For instance, I am unconvinced by Richard Schneirov’s suggestion that the issues of jury selection and Altgeld’s pardon have been settled by Messer-Kruse (the two matters are obviously connected), largely because Schneirov clearly did not have the space to adequately address the evidence issues in such matters. In the case of jury selection, he concentrates *only* on Judge Gary’s conduct. Schneirov says nothing about the earliest days of jury selection and the pressured decision of the defense to agree to the appointment of a special bailiff Henry Ryce. There was evidence presented at the time that Ryce was determined to do what he could to secure a jury that would convict the Haymarket defendants. Carl Smith’s *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief* describes Ryce as having constructed a large pool of potential jurors overwhelmingly comprised of individuals highly likely to have determined views on the guilt of the accused. This all made it possible for Gary to allow the defense to excuse hundreds of jurors, but when things finally got whittled down to the end of the process the defendants’ counsel, William P. Black, was forced to use up his 160 peremptory challenges, resulting in a final jury selection that was prejudicial to the defense. This process of jury selection took up three weeks of trial time, and involved hundreds of people, and some may think this automatically shows that Judge Gary was fair-minded and practiced due diligence. But it needs to be pointed out that the seemingly huge numbers of jurors questioned (and excused) in the Haymarket trial was not necessarily uncommon in

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the trials of the era and should in no way be considered as proof of some kind of fairness. It is undoubtedly true, as Henry David revealed 75 years ago, that Judge Gary, in the narrow legal sense, did indeed have the legal right to make the kinds of decisions he did, under established Illinois statue from 1874, with respect to the impaneling of a jury. Yet it is also true that jurists debated the sagacity of exercising precisely the kind of judicial authority that Gary wielded. In an 1889 Chicago murder case, for instance, in *Couglin v. People* (a trial that lasted longer than the Haymarket proceedings and involved more people, over 1,000, in the jury selection process) it was ruled on appeal to the Illinois Supreme Court that a judge had indeed erred when he refused to excuse some of the chosen jurors objected to for cause by the defense. But in the red scare climate of 1886-1887, with the howl for anarchist blood that arose from press, pulpit, and other powerful corners, Judge Gary was not going to be overruled on such appeal. The law, then, was not decisive, but was somewhat malleable, and the notion of what constituted fair procedures was open to different interpretation in different contexts. Perhaps Messer-Kruse sorts all of this out in ways that, again, establish that what historians have considered unfair was actually fair, 'by the standards of the time'. I will, again, have to read his account, but in the way it has been posed by Schneirov, I am not yet convinced. And if the jury was constituted unfairly, which was, I believe, a weighty consideration in Altgeld's mind, I am not convinced that his pardon can be dismissed on the grounds that Altgeld held some personal grudge against Gary (which he may well have nursed, but which might not be the decisive point in whether or not his pardon was justified.)

The main point that I wish to stress here is that roundtable forums of the kind that appeared in *Labor* do not allow for the detailed interrogation of Messer-Kruse's presentation of evidence that is actually required. Rather, they tend to sidestep this difficult and time-consuming task as more abstract discussion unfolds. We can debate endlessly the foibles of eye witness testimony (drawing on contemporary evidence) or play off the 'big picture' context of the era against the restricted canvas of the trial and its endless details. This is all legitimate, but it will never really get to the heart of whether Messer-Kruse's revisionism takes us forward in understanding or backward into subservience before the politics of power as it was expressed in an earlier time. The consensus of the forum, not altogether surprising given the nature of academic life, is that such an oppositional construction of the issues is counterproductive, and that Messer-Kruse both advances scholarship, but is either unconvincing or wrong in his larger arguments, something the *National Review* summary of the forum understates.

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I am not, admittedly, much of a fan of sitting on fences. I suppose we can, like Richard Schneirov, suggest that Messer-Kruse is right and that the trial was 'fair' according to the standards of the time, and hold that the Haymarket defendants were nonetheless 'still not guilty'. But this seems to me an evasion. Are historians of slavery expected to accept the treatment of slaves as acceptable because slavery was indeed practiced, and buttressed by law, 'at the time'?

We can go back to Messer-Kruse's origins story to pose the question differently. Messer-Kruse was pushed to reconsider the meaning of Haymarket by an unnamed student (let us call her 'Jane the Student', and, in the spirit that animates Messer-Kruse, that of questioning everything, wonder lightly if she might not be a metaphorical daughter of 'Joe the Plumber') who asked in a lecture hall how it was that if the trial was such a foregone conclusion and there was no evidence of guilt, how did they manage to have weeks of testimony provided by scores of witnesses. 'What did they talk about?' asked 'Jane the Student'.

2007 Cover of Carl Smith's *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief* (1995). Credit: University of Chicago Press

Messer-Kruse was, oddly, stumped by this question, and so he embarked on his truth quest. There were, of course, ways of answering Jane the Student: it was useful to have a lengthy trial, for it confirmed that the state was handling the anarchist threat seriously, as well as providing an endless stream of ideologically invaluable comment on bloodthirsty social revolutionaries; or, less bellicosely, that in fact no historical account has really ever reduced the trial to a blunt statement that *no evidence* existed – only that the evidence gathered (much of it in questionable ways and some of it provided through testimony of witnesses that were bought and/or coerced), however abundant, was not credible to convict the defendants. In the Stalinist purge trials of the 1930s there was certainly an abundance of evidence marshaled, although little of it was untainted. The point is not so much that the Haymarket trial can be reduced to a one-word designation — 'sham' — but that a guilty verdict was in fact assured from the outset, the trial procedures and the climate of bitter anti-revolutionary hatred 'overdetermining' the outcome. Messer-Kruse might have pointed the student in the direction of Carl

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Smith's 1995 book which, for all the 'errors' in it that Messer-Kruse might detail, actually answered the student question. A lot was there to be performed before the public in the trial, and much more was at stake than proof of guilt or innocence in terms of a specific violent act and the relationship of the defendants to it. Show trials have political as well as legal purpose, consolidating a cultural climate, and Haymarket was a trial of this kind, as Smith shows. And radicals were executed as a consequence.

We can ask a question similar to that of 'Jane the Student'. If the trail was fair 'in its time', then why did so many people in the workers' movement of the day insist that in actuality the legal procedures were flawed, violated standards, necessitated challenge, and resulted in a verdict that should be overturned? Why were there labor movement leaders and working-class people who, as much as they despised and reviled the politics of those on trial in Chicago, nevertheless felt constrained to defend them against what was presented, in many quarters, as an infamous travesty? What motivated people who were not anarchists and certainly not advocates of the 'social revolution' to sign petitions by the tens of thousands? Why were defense lawyers adamant in their citation of procedures as improper? Why did one of the central issues surrounding the defense appeal of 1887 fall on deaf ears in the Supreme Court, contributing to the sending of four Haymarket defendants to the gallows, only to be, a few short years later, essentially accepted as grounds for appeal in an 1889 murder trial, resulting in the overturning of a guilty verdict? Why did two elected governors of the state of Illinois (not just one) use their authority to commute sentences and offer pardons? Messer-Kruse's new books may address such issues, and I look forward to reading them.

On the issue of evidence consider, for instance, how past discussions of the bomb that exploded on the Haymarket are handled in the *Labor* forum. Eric Arnesen, who organized the forum, introduces the issue by stating that Messer-Kruse maintains that "Forensic and other evidence implicates some of the 'martyrs' in the manufacturing of bombs," but he does not tell us what this forensic and other evidence is, nor does his use of a word like "implicate" establish decisively all that much. He does not acknowledge that many other historians have indeed written of the Haymarket anarchists in ways that commented clearly on their relationship to dynamite. Avrich's chapter on 'the cult of dynamite' in his *The Haymarket Tragedy* hardly fudges the matter of the social revolutionaries willingness to argue that violence was necessary to defeat violence. And Avrich acknowledges that Lingg, and possibly a couple of other Haymarket defendants, made bombs. The key

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questions are who made the bomb that exploded on the Haymarket, who threw it, and how did he get it? Arnesen cites Messer-Kruse's earlier essay in *Labor* and states that it "previewed the evidence implicating Louis Lingg in making the bomb that exploded in Haymarket Square," but he does not even cite my rejoinder article, which interrogates the presentation of this forensic evidence, suggests the need for more caution in the utilization of this evidence, and challenges Messer-Kruse's interpretation. In an introduction to this forum in *Labor* that cites a previous Messer-Kruse article is it not appropriate to reference an article that challenged Messer-Kruse's findings and that appeared in this very same journal? Kevin Boyle's contribution to the forum does just this, citing both articles, acknowledging that *Labor* readers know that the issue of Lingg's ostensible making of the bomb thrown in Haymarket Square is "contentious." But he says this in a footnote, and in the text he states that one of the defendants "probably made the bomb." How, given the evidence, are we to know that it was not Selinger or some other individual who had as much of a hand in making the bomb as any of those brought to trial? I will, again, have to read Messer-Kruse to establish whether Boyle's probability claim is warranted. And, again, it will very much depend not just on the evidence cited, but on an interrogation of the nature of that evidence, how it is being 'read' by Messer-Kruse, and how it might be considered alternatively. And is 'probably' to be the foundation of execution?

In reading the forum in *Labor* on the Messer-Kruse book on the Haymarket trial I was frustrated by the inability of this kind of roundtable to actually get to the heart of the matter. In this kind of exchange, in which an historian is allowed a few pages, it is not possible to critically engage Messer-Kruse's arguments, through an interrogation of the evidence that he is presenting (which is, I think, largely the evidence the prosecution had assembled, subject, at times, to new testings) and the interpretation he places on it, without going back to the evidence. Praising Messer-Kruse for having done important research, and then accepting uncritically his use of evidence when there is – to my mind – adequate suggestion that in times past his interpretation of evidence has been partial and skewed, might be an easy way out of the challenge his revisionism poses.

Whether or not anyone is willing and able to actually interrogate the evidence Messer-Kruse constructs and assesses remains to be seen. This kind of thing has been done in the past. Labor historian Herbert Gutman, in his review of *Time on the Cross,* invested a great deal of time in showing why historians who amassed a certain kind of evidence to put forward specific revisionist views, had done so in

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ways that warranted rigorous challenge. I will have to read Messer-Kruse's books to ascertain whether his research is convincing, or whether, as I found in past encounters with him, there was the need to raise flags of doubt and put forward counter-arguments. Perhaps Messer-Kruse's books are of comparable significance to *Time on the Cross.* But perhaps not.

I will move towards a conclusion that, again, could well be altered by a close and judicious reading of Messer-Kruse's two volumes. At this point, however, I reject the view that appears in the *Labor* forum that Messer-Kruse has somehow rescued the Haymarket social revolutionaries from the clutches of those who have, in an act of romantic folly, reduced them to victims. This appears in the commentary of both Richard Schneirov and Beverly Gage.

I don't think the denial of the revolutionary substance of the Haymarket martyrs has been a part of the entire historiography in the ways that Messer-Kruse has suggested in past writings, and that apparently persists in his current views. A reading of Avrich and others does not sustain this position. Moreover, Messer-Kruse misunderstands the nature of these social revolutionaries, and he does so in ways that may well be rooted in his affinities for the prosecutorial stand of 1886. According to Thai Jones, Messer-Kruse defines anarchists of the 1880s as (and here he is quoting Messer-Kruse directly) "distinguished by their complete rejection of ameliorative reforms and the voting systems that bring them about, by their advocacy of violence both collective and individual, and by their belief in the imminence of mass insurrection." Messer-Kruse has declared recently of the Haymarket social revolutionaries that "They weren't philosophical," but "were grab-your-gun revolutionists who wanted capitalism … overthrown." In the *National Review,* John J. Miller writes that Messer-Kruse shows that the Chicago revolutionaries believed that "only bloodshed could bring social change." Messer-Kruse told *In These Times* that the Haymarket defendants were, "advocates of a particular philosophy of violence – vanguardist violence. It was that a small, committed group of individuals could employ violence to spark a general workers insurrection and lead the masses to their liberation. It was a proto-Leninist sort of view that I think is particularly dangerous."

This simplifies, startlingly so, the ideas, commitments, values, politics, and practices of those tried and executed in the mid-1880s, and it homogenizes the Haymarket anarcho-communists in ways that are reminiscent of the climate of red-baiting attack of 1886. The men tried and convicted as a result of the Haymarket events of 1886 were not a unified lot, although they undoubtedly shared some common

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ground. But there were important distinctions among them; a strong case could be made that some of the defendants in the 1886 Haymarket trial were, from the start, at personal and political loggerheads, and had been for some time, making their common involvement in any meaningful "conspiracy" rather unlikely. And of course, contrary to Messer-Kruse's statement, there were those among the convicted who were defiantly (and impressively) "philosophical." How can it be said, given what Albert Parsons wrote in his cell, and the speech he delivered in the courtroom, that he was not "philosophical," whatever Messer-Kruse means by that term? Others were different. But to categorize the social revolutionaries of 1886 in this simplified and rather dismissive gloss is, it must be said bluntly, wrong. It does not restore dignity to the Haymarket revolutionaries, or convey adequately what they were about. On the basis of what I have seen of Messer-Kruse's writing on this subject to date, it is difficult not to see him as caricaturing the revolutionaries, not unlike the prosecution and the press did in 1886-1887. Hopefully his new books will address the nature of these social revolutionaries in more sophisticated and nuanced ways.

In the meantime, the left-bashing that is associated with this discussion should be repudiated. Historians in the past have often questioned Messer-Kruse's arguments because they have deserved questioning. They have not rejected specific 'facts' and the pursuit of a fuller understanding of their meaning because they are ideologues, habitually get things wrong, and refuse to believe 'evidence' that runs counter to their views. Historians who have studied Haymarket have undoubtedly made errors, and at times they have perhaps failed to interrogate the sources at their disposal fully, or utilized adequately the evidence they have relied on. I daresay the same holds for Messer-Kruse. This problem is not a monopoly of the left. Moreover, historians who have written books that were not primarily concerned with the Haymarket trial, but assess wider patterns of historical experience into which the struggles and legal proceedings of the mid-to-late 1880s fit, can hardly be castigated for not addressing every detail that Messer-Kruse considers pertinent. They are not part of a cult imbibing "the Kool-Aid."

Whatever Messer-Kruse has done, he has not torched "a century of scholarship." Thinking of himself in this way suggests, indeed, that he wants to dispense a kind of "Kool-Aid." For this is a truly inflammatory, sensationalist, claim, and making it, or accepting it, is an *ideological* project of socially constructing the terrain of analysis. Doing this has little to do with a search for truth, however that may be conducted and whatever that may mean, and much more to do with a determined effort to stifle argument and exchange and, in the context of this debate, to silence the left,

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be it in the past or in the present.

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