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REBECCA SOLNIT



# The Incomplete, True, Authentic, *and* Wonderful History of May Day



PETER LINEBAUGH



SPECTRE

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The Incomplete, True,  
Authentic, and Wonderful  
History of May Day  
**Peter Linebaugh**

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Peter Linebaugh

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# The May Day Punch That Wasn't

## Introduction and Acknowledgements

(2015)

Freight Train sprang up from the crowded picnic bench. Sputtering and dumbstruck he stared at the professor in the eye, then leaned across the table ready to throw a punch. Our May Day discussion came to an abrupt conclusion.

Freight Train was over six feet in height and 220 pounds in weight. Professor Elwitt, his senior by two or three decades, was a diminutive and unathletic man. As a possible fistfight it was a mismatch.

"They didn't die for me," the professor had said, his lips curling in malice. It was a well-targeted provocation.

Freight Train had just concluded his discourse to the comrades by saying, "they died for us." He was being courteous, restrained in his choice of words, but nevertheless direct and to the point. He recited the names of the martyrs, the leaders of the struggle for the eight-hour day. He told of those who fell to the hysterical violence that the government let loose upon the anarchists of Chicago. He spoke of the call for a general strike on May Day 1886, of the meeting on Haymarket Square a few days later when a stick of dynamite was thrown and a cop killed, of the trial of eight anarchists, of the hanging on "Black Friday" November 11, 1887, when four were hanged—Albert Parsons, George Engel, Adolf Fischer, and August Spies. These were the Haymarket martyrs, *los mártires*, who died for us, as Freight Train said.

We affectionately nicknamed Robert Harmon, the Chicago grad student, "Freight Train," because once he got going you couldn't stop him. He loved the IWW and liked to cast himself in a role familiar to young radicals, "the last of the Wobblies." He had deep loyalties to the Italian American community of Cicero, Illinois, and he'd explain how a combination of the Catholic Church and gangsterism during the 1920s extinguished the hot flame of Italian anarchism. Freight Train's personal mission was to keep that flame alight.

He loved Renaissance history and affected a nonchalance called *sprezzatura*, described in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528). Elwitt had been on his PhD oral examination. Freight Train wanted to explain the birthing stool. So he nonchalantly slid off his chair, spread his arms and legs out wide, starfish style, and from a position nearly on the floor, the heels of his shoes grasping the edge of the examining table and supporting his weight, he illustrated to the astonished examiners the posture of parturition as he imagined it to have been during the Italian Renaissance. "This was the way," he explained, "that Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the rest came into the world."

At the examining table and the picnic table alike Freight Train could make history come alive.

In the dimming of the day and the onset of evening, Professor Elwitt, the Marxist, made his way over to the table where we were listening to Freight Train. The professor was a socialist, the student was an anarchist, and they each claimed May Day. Elwitt offered fighting words. At a temporary loss for words himself, the anarchist could only act, and he lunged. It was the Red versus the Black.

A storm in a teacup? Or a near-ritual moment, like a wedding or a funeral, worthy of García Lorca? It was something of both. There was much to it of the academic spat, worthy of a novel of manners, except that to the participants much more was at stake, the weight of history. Or you could see it another way: it being springtime there were sexual and generational as well as political energies coursing



wildly about, not to mention Dionysus with his overflowing cups. The green budding force of winter end combined with political antagonism of at least a century or two, and the tension was ready to burst. Testosterone bubbled madly in that witch's brew.

Maybe it was the Red and the Green?

We celebrated May Day under a picnic shelter we had rented for the day in the ample and peaceful Ellison Park, Rochester, NY. It was a strictly bring-your-own, potluck affair. We played Capture the Flag across the meadow. Someone with a guitar led us in singing those old labor ballads and civil rights hymns. Beer and wine flowed easily. It was generally laid back, chill. Everyone was usually happy enough. Among the students and workers was the dyer and designer Bethia Waterman, the artist and athlete Joe Hendrick, the brakeman "Disco," and arriving on the back of a motorcycle driven by a lesbian physician, the fierce public health advocate, Michaela Brennan, with whom I was to fall in love. We professors had to put aside our theories and abstractions to speak in a way that even children could understand, so another year we organized a skit for them (as theatre it could hardly be called a play). That was the seed that grew into *The Incomplete, True, Authentic, and Wonderful History of May Day* as a flyer, a song, and a pamphlet found useful from Boston to San Francisco.

One year we had speeches. Christian Marazzi, a Swiss, all dressed in black leather pants and a black shirt to go with, stood and spoke. His accent and costume were memorable and maybe something to do about his analysis of the mysteries of finance capitalism left an impression even if it was incomprehensible to many of us.

In the mid- and late 1970s, having suffered defeats of various kinds, young organizers, activists, radicals, reformers, and revolutionaries heeded the call to study. Back in those days people from all over gravitated to the Rochester History Department to study with its soi-disant Marxists and leftists. If the university was not exactly at the commanding height of the ideological superstructure as the professors imagined it to be, it was certainly one of the sites in the battle of ideas.

In the wake of the great municipal rebellions of the 1960s, led by African Americans, the racial nature of the American university—its curriculum, research, and personnel alike—was clear to all. Some of the professors at the University of Rochester tried to do something about it. Christopher Lasch, Herbert Gutman, Betsy Fox-Genovese, Eugene Genovese, Stanley Engerman were there to teach theory and practice, ideas and action, as we expected. At last these people, these *white* scholars, made academic contributions to Afro-American history. Important book reviews were published, and academic conferences were held for the books. But Marxism, not revolution, was their thing. They were not connected with the workers in the automobile plants, or the welfare mothers of public housing estates, or specific organizations like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers or the Wages for Housework campaign.

A key moment was when Herbert Aptheker, a distinguished member of the Communist Party of the USA, came to campus. He spoke in the Welles-Brown Room. Nobody was willing to introduce him, so they asked the most junior faculty member of the history department without even a PhD to do it, and that was me. Aptheker was running for the U.S. Senate in New York State. He understood what was going on within a pusillanimous history department, and he made the best of a bad situation. He took me aside and told me exactly what to say in my introduction. I was to begin by calling him "doctor," Dr. Herbert Aptheker, and then proceed by naming his major books. I was unfamiliar at the time with his scholarly work, including the classic *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943). To rectify my own ignorance I began to teach in the maximum-security prison, Attica, at the invitation of its African American Student Group.

Sanford Elwitt was the professor specializing in French labor history, and (what was more relevant

he was the chairman's right-hand man (some said hatchet man) in the department. The chairman was Gene Genovese. These folks had a pretty grandiose idea of themselves. As "revisionists" they were proud not to be stuck with economic determinism. Instead, Genovese had sought to struggle for "hegemony" the buzzword of the Marxist underground of the 1960s, becoming by the 1970s a cross-disciplinary shibboleth of university departments.<sup>1</sup> These Marxists, "Gucci Marxists" we called them for their expensive shoes, were not prepared to treat American slavery as part of the working class.

Yet the truth will out, and it did at that picnic in 1979. A fight in the department had been brewing for a while. Across the table there may have been a partial lunge but certainly the student did not swing. I know because I was in between them at the foot of the table while Freight Train and the professor were on opposite sides. To be sure, tempers flared and faces crimsoned, but flesh did not touch flesh, blood was not spilt. Consequently assault charges were never made, but later the history department met and voted to expel Freight Train. It was the beginning of the end for me too.

But not before another May Day when I sang an old English Labour Party song I had been taught as a child in England: to the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic,"

We will make the Dean of Canterbury  
Speaker of the House (3 times)  
When the Red Revolution comes!

"The Red Dean" of Canterbury was Hewlett Johnson (1874– 1966), a Church of England priest and Stalinist through and through. The problem came with the chorus, which was belted out with a full, ironic, beery shout:

Arson, rape, and bloody murder

it went, and then the line was repeated, only louder and even more obnoxiously. "Political correctness" had not yet been formulated as a devastating phrase but the thing itself was alive and healthy. This led later to an informal gathering among feminists to raise my consciousness and explain that such sentiment could not be uttered even in jest given the realities of violence against women. Humbled if not humiliated, I learned my lesson and have not sung it since. It is a foolish line even as a beer-driven music-hall shout.

What is to be our relationship to the Red or the Communist and Socialist traditions? Some things we want to keep from the past, and others to discard. Our class has a tradition of arson—think of the fire on the sugar plantations, think of the arson in the English agrarian, "moral economy," riots, and during some periods of history assassination or execution has been employed against class enemies—Robert Frost even has a poem about it, but rape, as I have learned from Andrea Smith, has always been a tool, an initial and necessary tool she would argue, of imperialism. Political principle can be strengthened by knowledge of the sacrifices in the past. This didn't mean we had to think *exactly* as they did, or sing with the same rough humor.

Later I moved to Boston. I wanted to preserve a tradition, to carry forward the lessons I had learned from the feminists of Rochester, from the African Americans of Attica, as well as the labor history of the Marxists, and the anarchist history of Freight Train. At Tufts University I met wonderful comrades in the antiapartheid struggle such as John Roosa, Bryn Clark, and Dan Coughlin. Dave Riker as part of Somerville Community Television had me talk about May Day. In Boston I wrote "The Silent Speak." In 1986 we organized the first ever University of Massachusetts celebration of May Day. I want to describe the persons and places because they became part of the global awakening to May Day. These are the people of the movement that I thank directly as inspiration for the essays below.

I invited George Rawick to speak at Law Day, as May Day was officially called. I invited him because ~~a) he edited about two dozen volumes of the American slave narratives, and b) he was closely associated~~ with the anticapitalist projects of C.L.R. James and the former Facing Reality group. He was fantastic because he reminded us how people can change. His example was Albert Parsons, who had been a Confederate cavalry officer defending the slave South, and then became husband to Lucy Parsons and an abolitionist of chattel slavery and wage slavery alike. Politically, Parsons was a socialist, an anarchist, and a trade unionist all rolled into one. So who's normal, Rawick wanted to know.

We had some local Morris dancers, the Black Jokers, with bells on their ankles and ribbons from their hats, do that English folk dance dating back to 1458. Named after Moors! They danced "to walk up the earth." A Somerville blues band, the Wicked Casuals, provided music. Soon everyone was shouting. We rented a small motor launch and sailed over to Quincy where the first Maypole in North America was erected in 1626.

On board our little ship a Brazilian band, El Echo, supplied gentle music. Dieri from Haiti came along. Teodros Kiros of Ethiopia joined us. Our indigenous comrade, Johnny Mañana of Peru, and his partner, Nancy Kelly, joined us. Sal Salerno had copies of *The Haymarket Scrapbook* for distribution. Randall Conrad embarked along with Christine and their child, Pete. Randall made a terrific film called *3,000 Years and Life* about the time when the prisoners ruled the maximum-security prison in Walpole, Massachusetts. He made another one too, *A Little Rebellion Now and Then*, about Shays' Rebellion 1786–87.

Margot Fitzgerald spoke on behalf of the work-study students whose pay "had run out." She called for a one-day work stoppage. Charlie Shively, the historian and gay rights advocate, read a poem about death row, and in words from Walt Whitman expressed our duty to "Cheer up slaves, Horrify despots." Monty Neill gave a terrific speech explaining the rainbow coalition of Merry Mount. Noel Ignatiev, who used to work at International Harvester in Chicago, gave us the inside story of the Haymarket bombing.

That year there was a boycott of Shell Oil, a parade to the shantytown against apartheid up on Harvard Yard, and a sit-in in Cambridge as well. By late afternoon news came to us, even at sea, that millions of people in South Africa were on strike. We sent greetings to them and to the people near Chernobyl in Ukraine. The art students at Massachusetts College marched to Boston Common chanting praises for the Nicaraguan revolution while Duncan Kenney lectured the Harvard Economics Department on "the fetishism of commodities."

May Day is about affirmation, the love of life, and the start of spring, so it has to be about the beginning of the end of the capitalist system of exploitation, oppression, misery, toil, and moil. Besides full affirmation May Day requires denunciation: the denunciation of capitalism, of patriarchy, of homophobia, of white supremacy, of war. For me Rochester had been about receiving this knowledge and Boston about transmitting it.

The essays in this book are all occasional essays (of course), and most were written the night or week before the occasion. They were written during decades of conservative repression when celebrations of Haymarket were few and far between. The title essay was published under the imprimatur of Midnight Notes, an anticapitalist collective that was also struggling to express itself during those leaden times. "May Day Meditation" referred to the *Auroras of the Zapatistas*, a book by Midnight Notes. I printed "X<sup>2</sup>" in a miniscule format and passed it out willy-nilly on street corners and at sporting events. Six of these essays were published in the online magazine *CounterPunch*, so I thank especially Jeffrey St. Clair. Special thanks also to Jeff Clark, who published "Ypsilanti Vampire May Day." "Obama May Day" was republished in the second edition of Dave Roediger and Franklin Rosemont's indispensable *Haymarket Scrapbook*.

The essay following this one (“The Incomplete, True, Authentic, and Wonderful History of May Day”) was first published as a pamphlet, some copies having a green and others having a red cover indicate its two themes, nature and labor. The Green is presented as Robin Goodfellow, the subversive spirit of the land at the time of the giant enclosures when state-sponsored monotheism sought to rout out pantheism and capitalism destroyed the commons. The last essay, “Swan Honk,” also has the Red theme of labor. Otherwise the Green theme is replaced by a geological rather than an agrarian perspective. It thus includes eons of time prior to the agrarian or the Neolithic with its empires and the religions of the “axial age.” It is dated April 30, not May Day, because bureaucrats wouldn’t let me date my retirement on May Day; it had to be the day before.

You’ll find no picnic in “Swan Honk” nor will you find a punch. May Day is no longer as dogmatic as “the punch that wasn’t” seemed to imply, neither a USA-USSR ding-dong, nor a brawl of fisticuffs between anarchists and Marxists. May Day, dear comrade-reader, like the author of these pieces, nowadays both bolder and more open to new meanings than before. To balance the machismo of the unthrown punch at the start of this intro, we might end with a deep note of anti-imperialist sisterhood from two expectant mothers from the axial age, Elizabeth and Mary. Mary’s “magnificat” anticipated a *individual messiah* where we might struggle instead for a *revolutionary class* whose solemn vow and every action is to rout the arrogant of heart and mind, to bring down the mighty from their thrones, lift up the humble, to satisfy the hungry with good things, and to send the rich empty away. That, the commons, and the eight-hour day!

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci was essential to that moment of the 1960s. John Cammett wrote a biography, John Merrington introduced him to the *Socialist Register*, and Trevor Griffiths wrote theatre about him then playing in London.

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# The Incomplete, True, Authentic, and Wonderful History of May Day

(1986)

The Soviet government parades missiles and marches soldiers on May Day. The American government has called May 1 "Loyalty Day" and associates it with militarism. The real meaning of this day has been obscured by the designing propaganda of both governments. The truth of May Day is totally different. To the history of May Day there is a Green side and there is a Red side.

Under the rainbow, our methodology must be colorful. Green is a relationship to the earth and what grows therefrom. Red is a relationship to other people and the blood spilt there among. Green designates life with only necessary labor; Red designates death with surplus labor. Green is natural appropriation; Red is social expropriation. Green is husbandry and nurturance; Red is proletarianization and prostitution. Green is useful activity; Red is useless toil. Green is creation of desire; Red is class struggle. May Day is both.

## The Green

Once upon a time, long before Weinberger bombed North Africans, before the Bank of Boston laundered money, or Reagan honored the Nazi war dead, the earth was blanketed by a broad mantle of forests. As late as Caesar's time a person might travel through the woods for two months without gaining an unobstructed view of the sky. The immense forests of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America provided the atmosphere with oxygen and the earth with nutrients. Within the woodland ecology our ancestors did not have to work the graveyard shift, or deal with flextime, or work from Nine to Five. Indeed, the Native Americans whom Captain John Smith encountered in 1606 only worked four hours a week. The origin of May Day is to be found in the Woodland Epoch of History.

In Europe, as in Africa, people honored the woods in many ways. With the leafing of the trees in spring, people celebrated "the fructifying spirit of vegetation," to use the phrase of J.G. Frazer, the anthropologist. They did this in May, a month named after Maia, the mother of all the gods according to the ancient Greeks, giving birth even to Zeus.

The Greeks had their sacred groves, the Druids their oak worship, the Romans their games in honor of Floralia. In Scotland the herdsmen formed circles and danced around fires. The Celts lit bonfires on hilltops to honor their god, Beltane. In the Tyrol people let their dogs bark and made music with pots and pans. In Scandinavia fires were lit and the witches came out.

Everywhere people "went a-Maying" by going into the woods and bringing back leaf, bough, and blossom to decorate their persons, homes, and loved ones with green garlands. Outside theatre was performed with characters like "Jack-in-the-Green" and the "Queen of the May." Trees were planted and Maypoles were erected. Dances were danced. Music was played. Drinks were drunk, and love was made. Winter was over, spring had sprung.

The history of these customs is complex and affords the student of the past with many interesting insights into the history of religion, gender, reproduction, and village ecology. Take Joan of Arc who was burned in May 1431. Her inquisitors believed she was a witch. Not far from her birthplace, she told the judges, "There is a tree that they call 'The Ladies' Tree'—others call it 'The Fairies' Tree.' It is a beautiful tree, from which comes the Maypole. I have sometimes been to play with the young girls to make garlands for Our Lady of Domrémy. Often I have heard the old folk say that the fairies haunt this tree." In the general indictment against Joan, one of the particulars against her was dressing like a man. The paganism of Joan's heresy originated in the Old Stone Age when religion was animistic and shamans were women and men.

Monotheism arose with the Mediterranean empires. Even the most powerful Roman Empire had to make deals with its conquered and enslaved peoples (syncretism). As it destroyed some customs, it had to accept or transform others. Thus, we have Christmas trees. May Day became a day to honor the saints, Philip and James, who were unwilling slaves to Empire. James the Less neither drank nor shaved. He spent so much time praying that he developed huge calluses on his knees, likening them to camel legs. Philip was a lazy guy. When Jesus said "Follow me" Philip tried to get out of it by saying he had to tend to his father's funeral, and it was to this excuse that the carpenter's son made his famous reply, "Let the dead bury the dead." James was stoned to death, and Philip was crucified head downward. The martyrdom introduces the Red side of the story, even still the Green side is preserved because, according to the floral directory, the tulip is dedicated to Philip and bachelor buttons to James.

The farmers, workers, and child bearers (laborers) of the Middle Ages had hundreds of holy days which preserved the May Green, despite the attack on peasants and witches. Despite the complexities, whether May Day was observed by sacred or profane ritual, by pagan or Christian, by magic or not, by straights or gays, by gentle or calloused hands, it was always a celebration of all that is free and life.

giving in the world. That is the Green side of the story. Whatever else it was, it was not a time to work.

~~Therefore, it was attacked by the authorities. The repression had begun with the burning of women~~ and it continued in the sixteenth century when America was “discovered,” the slave trade was begun and nation-states and capitalism were formed. In 1550 an Act of Parliament demanded that Maypoles be destroyed, and it outlawed games. In 1644 the Puritans in England abolished May Day altogether. To these work-ethicists the festival was obnoxious for paganism and worldliness. Philip Stubbs, for example, in *The Anatomy of Abuses* (1583) wrote of the Maypole, “and then fall they to banquet and feast, leape and daunce about it, as the Heathen people did at the dedication of their Idolles.” When a Puritan mentioned “heathen” we know genocide was not far away. According to the excellent slide show at the Quincy Historical Society, 90 percent of the Massachusetts people, including Chief Chicatabat, died from chicken pox or small pox a few years after the Puritans landed in 1619. The Puritans also objected to the unrepressed sexuality of the day. Stubbs said, “Of fourtie, threescore, or an hundred maides going to the wood, there have scarcely the third part of them returned home again as they went.”

The people resisted the repressions. Thenceforth, they called their May sports the “Robin Hood Games.” Capering about with sprigs of hawthorn in their hair and bells jangling from their knees, the ancient characters of May were transformed into an outlaw community, Maid Marians and Little John. The May feast was presided over by the “Lord of Misrule,” “the King of Unreason,” or the “Abbot of Inobedience.” Washington Irving was later to write that the feeling for May “has become chilled by habits of gain and traffic.” As the gainers and traffickers sought to impose the regimen of monotonous work, the people responded to preserve their holyday. Thus began in earnest the Red side of the story of May Day. The struggle was brought to Massachusetts in 1626.

## Thomas Morton of Merry Mount

In 1625 Captain Wollaston, Thomas Morton, and thirty others sailed from England and months later taking their bearings from a red cedar tree, they disembarked in Quincy Bay. A year later Wollaston impatient for lucre and gain, left for good to Virginia. Thomas Morton settled in Passonagessit, which he named Merry Mount. The land seemed a "Paradise" to him. He wrote, there are "fowls in abundance, fish in multitudes, and I discovered besides, millions of turtle doves on the green boughs, which were pecking of the full, ripe, pleasant grapes that were supported by the lusty trees, whose fruitful load did cause the arms to bend."

On May Day, 1627, he and his Indian friends, stirred by the sound of drums, erected a Maypole eighty feet high, decorated it with garlands, wrapped it in ribbons, and nailed to its top the antlers of a buck. Later he wrote that he "sett up a Maypole upon the festival day of Philip and James, and therefore brewed a barrell of excellent beere." A ganymede sang a Bacchanalian song. Morton attached to the poem the first lyric verses penned in America which concluded:

With the proclamation that the first of May  
At Merry Mount shall be kept holly day

The Puritans at Plymouth were opposed to May Day. They called the Maypole "an Idoll" and named Merry Mount "Mount Dagon" after the god of the first oceangoing imperialists, the Phoenicians. More likely, though, the Puritans were the imperialists, not Morton, who worked with slaves, servants, and Native Americans, person to person. Everyone was equal in his "social contract." Governor Bradford wrote, "they allso set up a Maypole, drinking and dancing aboute it many days together, inviting the Indean women for thier consorts, dancing and frisking together (like so many faires, or furies rather and worse practise."

Merry Mount became a refuge for Indians, the discontented, gay people, runaway servants, and whom the governor called "all the scume of the countrie." When the authorities reminded him that his actions violated the King's Proclamation, Morton replied that it was "no law." Miles Standish, whom Morton called "Mr. Shrimp," attacked. The Maypole was cut down. The settlement was burned. Morton's goods were confiscated; he was chained in the bilboes, and ostracized to England aboard the ship *The Gift* at a cost, the Puritans complained, of twelve pounds seven shillings. The rainbow coalition of Merry Mount was thus destroyed for the time being. That Merry Mount later (1636) became associated with Anne Hutchinson, the famous midwife, spiritualist, and feminist, surely was more than coincidental. Her brother-in-law ran the Chapel of Ease. She thought that God loved everybody, regardless of their sins. She doubted the Puritans' authority to make law. A statue of Robert Burns in Quincy near to Merry Mount quotes the poet's lines,

A fig for those by law protected!  
Liberty's a glorious feast!  
Courts for cowards were erected,  
Churches built to please the priest.

Thomas Morton was a thorn in the side of the Boston and Plymouth Puritans, because he had an alternate vision of Massachusetts. He was impressed by its fertility; they by its scarcity. He befriended the Indians; they shuddered at the thought. He was egalitarian; they proclaimed themselves the "Elect." He freed servants; they lived off them. He armed the Indians; they used arms against Indians. To Nathaniel Hawthorne, the destiny of American settlement was decided at Merry Mount. Casting the struggle as mirth vs. gloom, grizzly saints vs. gay sinners, green vs. iron, it was the Puritans who won, and the fa



of America was determined in favor of psalm-singing, Indian-scalpers whose notion of the Maypole was a whipping post.

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Parts of the past live, parts die. The red cedar that drew Morton first to Merry Mount blew down in the gale of 1898. A section of it, about eight feet of its trunk, became a power fetish in 1919, placed as was next to the president's chair of the Quincy City Council. Interested parties may now view it in the Quincy History Museum. Living trees, however, have since grown, despite the closure of the shipyards.

## On Both Sides of the Atlantic

In England the attacks on May Day were a necessary part of the wearisome, unending attempt to establish industrial work discipline. The attempt was led by the Puritans with their belief that toil was godly and less toil wicked. Absolute surplus value could be increased only by increasing the hours of labor and abolishing holydays. A parson wrote a piece of work propaganda called "Funebria Florae, or the Downfall of the May Games." He attacked "ignorants, atheists, papists, drunkards, swearers, swashbucklers, maidmarians, morrice-dancers, maskers, mummers, Maypole stealers, health-drinkers, together with a rapsallion rout of fiddlers, fools, fighters, gamesters, lewd men, light women, contemners of magistracy, affronters of ministry, rebellious to masters, disobedients to parents, misspenders of time, and abusers of the creature, &c."

At about this time, Isaac Newton, the gravitationist and machinist of time, said work was a law of planets and apples alike. Thus work ceased to be merely the ideology of the Puritans; it became a law of the universe. In 1717 Newton purchased London's hundred-foot Maypole and used it to prop up his telescope.

Chimney sweeps and dairymaids led the resistance. The sweeps dressed up as women on May Day or put on aristocratic periwigs. They sang songs and collected money. When the Earl of Bute in 1763 refused to pay, the opprobrium was so great that he was forced to resign. Milk maids used to go Maying by dressing in floral garlands, dancing, and getting the dairymen to distribute their milk-yield freely. Soot and milk workers thus helped to retain the holyday right into the industrial revolution.

The ruling class used the day for its own purposes. Thus, when Parliament was forced to abolish slavery in the British dominions, it did so on May Day 1807. In 1820 the Cato Street conspirators plotted to destroy the British cabinet while it was having dinner. Irish, Jamaican, and Cockney were hanged for the attempt on May Day 1820. A conspirator wrote his wife saying, "Justice and liberty have taken their flight ... to other distant shores." He meant America, where Boston Brahmin, Robber Baron, and Southern Plantocrat divided and ruled an arching rainbow of people.

Two bands of that rainbow came from English and Irish islands. One was Green. Robert Owen, union leader, socialist, and founder of utopian communities in America, announced the beginning of the millennium after May Day 1833. The other was Red. On May Day 1830, a founder of the Knights of Labor, the United Mine Workers of America, and the Wobblies was born in Ireland, Mary Harris Jones a.k.a. "Mother Jones." She was a Maia of the American working class.

May Day continued to be commemorated in America, one way or another, despite the victory of the Puritans at Merry Mount. On May Day 1779 the revolutionaries of Boston confiscated the estates of the "enemies of Liberty." On May Day 1808 "twenty different dancing groups of the wretched Africans" in New Orleans danced to the tunes of their own drums until sunset when the slave patrols showed themselves with their cutlasses. "The principal dancers or leaders are dressed in a variety of wild and savage fashions, always ornamented with a number of tails of the small wild beasts," observed a strolling white man.

## The Red: Haymarket

The history of the modern May Day originates in the center of the North American plains, Haymarket, in Chicago—"the city on the make"—in May 1886. The Red side of that story is more well known than the Green, because it was bloody. But there was also a Green side to the tale, though the green was not so much that of pretty grass garlands, as it was of greenbacks, for in Chicago, it was said the dollar is king.

Of course the prairies are green in May. Virgin soil, dark, brown, crumbling, shot with fine black sand, it was the produce of thousands of years of humus and organic decomposition. For many centuries this earth was husbanded by the Native Americans of the plains. As Black Elk said, theirs "the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and the father is one Spirit." From such a green perspective, the white men appeared as pharaohs, and indeed, as Abe Lincoln put it, these prairies were the "Egypt of the West."

The land was mechanized. Relative surplus value could only be obtained by reducing the price of food. The proteins and vitamins of this fertile earth spread through the whole world. Chicago was the jugular vein. Cyrus McCormick wielded the surgeon's knife. His mechanical reapers harvested the grasses and grains. McCormick produced 1,500 reapers in 1849; by 1884 he was producing 80,000. Not that McCormick actually made reapers; members of the Molders Union Local 23 did that, and on May Day 1867 they went on strike, starting the eight-hour movement.

A staggering transformation was wrought. It was: "Farewell" to the hammer and sickle. "Goodbye" to the cradle scythe. "So long" to Emerson's man with the hoe. These now became the artifacts of nostalgia and romance. It became "Hello" to the hobo. "Move on" to the harvest stiff. "Line up" to the proletarians. Such were the new commands of civilization.

Thousands of immigrants, many from Germany, poured into Chicago after the Civil War. Class warfare was advanced, technically and logistically. In 1855 the Chicago police used Gatling guns against the workers who protested the closing of the beer gardens. In the Bread Riot of 1872, the police clubbed hungry people in a tunnel under the river. In the 1877 railway strike, federal troops fought workers at the Battle of the Viaduct. These troops were recently seasoned from fighting the Sioux who had killed Custer. Henceforth, the defeated Sioux could only "Go to a mountain top and cry for a vision." The Pinkerton Detective Agency put visions into practice by teaching the city police how to spy and to form fighting columns for deployment in city streets. A hundred years ago during the streetcar strike, the police issued a shoot-to-kill order.

McCormick cut wages 15 percent. His profit rate was 71 percent. In May 1886 four molders who McCormick locked out were shot dead by the police. Thus did this "grim reaper" maintain his profits.

Nationally, May First 1886 was important because a couple of years earlier the Federation of Organized Trade and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, "resolved ... that eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labor, from and after May 1, 1886."

On May 4, 1886, several thousand people gathered near Haymarket Square to hear what August Spies, a newspaperman, had to say about the shootings at the McCormick Works. Albert Parsons, typographer and labor leader, spoke next. Later, at his trial, he said, "What is Socialism or Anarchism? Briefly stated it is the right of the toilers to the free and equal use of the tools of production and the right of the producers to their product." He was followed by "Good-Natured Sam" Fielden who as a child had worked in the textile factories of Lancashire, England. He was a Methodist preacher and labor organizer. He got done speaking at 10:30 p.m. At that time 176 policemen charged the crowd that had dwindled to about 200. An unknown hand threw a stick of dynamite, the first time that Alfred Nobel's invention

was used in class battle.

~~All hell broke loose, many were killed, and the rest is history.~~

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“Make the raids first and look up the law afterwards,” was the sheriff’s dictum. It was followed religiously across the country. Newspapers screamed for blood, homes were ransacked, and suspects were subjected to the “third degree.” Eight men were railroaded in Chicago at a farcical trial. Four men were hanged on “Black Friday,” November 11, 1887.

“There will come a time when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today,” said Spies before he choked.

## May Day Since 1886

Lucy Parsons, widowed by Chicago's "just-us," was born in Texas. She was partly Afro-American, partly Native American, and partly Hispanic. She set out to tell the world the true story "of one whose crime was that he lived in advance of his time." She went to England and encouraged English workers to make May Day an international holiday for shortening the hours of work. Her friend William Morris wrote a poem called "May Day."

*Workers:* They are few, we are many: and yet, O our Mother,  
Many years were wordless and nought was our deed,  
But now the word flitteth from brother to brother:  
We have furrowed the acres and scattered the seed.

*Earth:* Win on then unyielding, through fair and foul weather,  
And pass not a day that your deed shall avail.  
And in hope every spring-tide come gather together  
That unto the Earth ye may tell all your tale.

Her work was not in vain. May Day, or "The Day of the Chicago Martyrs" as it is still called in Mexico "belongs to the working class and is dedicated to the revolution," as Eugene Debs put it in his May Day editorial of 1907. The A.F. of L. declared it a holiday. Sam Gompers sent an emissary to Europe to have it proclaimed an international labor day. Both the Knights of Labor and the Second International officially adopted the day. Bismarck, on the other hand, outlawed May Day. President Grover Cleveland announced that the first Monday in September would be Labor Day in America, as he tried to divide the international working class. Huge numbers were out of work, and they began marching. Under the generalship of Jacob Coxey they descended on Washington, DC, on May Day 1894, the first big march on Washington. Two years later across the world Lenin wrote an important May Day pamphlet for the Russian factory workers in 1896. The Russian Revolution of 1905 began on May Day.

With the success of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution the Red side of May Day became scarlet, crimson for ten million people were slaughtered in World War I. The end of the war brought work stoppages, general strikes, and insurrections all over the world, from Mexico to Kenya, from China to France. In Boston on May Day 1919 the young telephone workers threatened to strike, and twenty thousand workers in Lawrence went on strike again for the eight-hour day. There were fierce clashes between working people and police in Cleveland as well as in other cities on May Day of that year. A lot of socialists, anarchists, Bolsheviks, Wobblies, and other "I-Won't-Workers" ended up in jail as a result.

This didn't get them down. At "Wire City," as they called the federal pen at Fort Leavenworth, there was a grand parade and no work on May Day 1919. Pictures of Lenin and Lincoln were tied to the ends of broomsticks and held afloat. There were speeches and songs. *The Liberator* supplies us with an account of the day, but it does not tell us who won the Wobbly-Socialist horseshoe-throwing contest. Nor does it tell us what happened to the soldier caught waving a red ribbon from the guards' barracks. Meanwhile, one mile underground in the copper mines of Bisbee where there are no national boundaries, Spanish-speaking Americans were singing "The Internationale" on May Day.

In the 1920s and 1930s the day was celebrated by union organizers, the unemployed, and determined workers. In New York City the big May Day celebration was held in Union Square. In the 1930s Lucy Parsons marched in Chicago on May Day with her young friend, Studs Terkel. On May Day 1946 the Arabs began a general strike in Palestine, and the Jews of the Displaced Persons Camps Landsberg, Germany, went on hunger strike. On May Day 1947 autoworkers in Paris downed tools, and an insurrection in Paraguay broke out, the Mafia killed six May Day marchers in Sicily, and the Boston

Parks' commissioner said that this was the first year in living memory when neither Communist nor Socialist had applied for a permit to rally on the Common.

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Nineteen sixty-eight was a good year for May Day. Allen Ginsberg was made the "Lord of Misrule" in Prague before the Russians got there. In London hundreds of students lobbied Parliament against a bill to stop Third World immigration into England. In Mississippi police could not prevent 350 black students from supporting their jailed friends. At Columbia University thousands of students petitioned against armed police on campus. In Detroit with the help of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement the first wildcat strike in fifteen years took place at the Hamtramck Assembly Plant (Dodge Main) against speedup. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, black leaders advocated police reforms while in New York the mayor signed a bill providing the police with the most sweeping "emergency" powers known in American history. The climax to the '68 Mai was reached in France where there was a gigantic general strike under strange slogans such as

Parlez a vos voisins!  
L'Imagination prend le pouvoir!  
Dessous les pavés c'est la plage!

On May Day in 1971 President Nixon couldn't sleep. He ordered ten thousand paratroopers and marines to Washington, DC, because he was afraid that some people calling themselves the May Day Tribe might succeed in their goal of blocking access to the Department of Justice. In the Philippines four students were shot to death protesting the dictatorship. In Boston Mayor White argued against the right of municipal workers, including the police, to withdraw their services or stop working. In May 1980 you may see Green themes in Mozambique where the workers lamented the absence of beer, or in Germany where three hundred women witches rampaged through Hamburg. Red themes may be seen in the thirty thousand Brazilian autoworkers who struck, or in the 5.8 million Japanese who struck against inflation.

On May Day 1980 the Green and Red themes were combined when a former Buick automaker from Detroit, one "Mr. Toad," sat at a picnic table and penned the following lines,

The eight-hour day is not enough;  
We are thinking of more and better stuff.  
So here is our prayer and here is our plan,  
We want what we want and we'll take what we can.

Down with wars both small and large,  
Except for the ones where we're in charge:  
Those are the wars of class against class,  
Where we get a chance to kick some ass.

For air to breathe and water to drink,  
And no more poison from the kitchen sink.  
For land that's green and life that's saved  
And less and less of the earth that's paved.

No more women who are less than free,  
Or men who cannot learn to see  
Their power steals their humanity  
And makes us all less than we can be.

For teachers who learn and students who teach  
And schools that are kept beyond the reach  
Of provosts and deans and chancellors and such  
And Xerox and Kodak and Shell, Royal Dutch.

An end to shops that are dark and dingy,  
An end to Bosses whether good or stingy,  
An end to work that produces junk,  
An end to junk that produces work,  
And an end to all in charge—the jerks.

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For all who dance and sing, loud cheers,  
To the prophets of doom we send some jeers,  
To our friends and lovers we give free beers,  
And to all who are here, a day without fears.

So, on this first of May we all should say  
That we will either make it or break it.  
Or, to put this thought another way,  
Let's take it easy, but let's take it.

## Law Day USA

Yet May Day was always a troubling day in America; some wished to forget it. In 1939 Pennsylvania declared it "Americanism Day." In 1947 Congress declared it to be "Loyalty Day." Yet these attempts to hide the meaning of the day have never succeeded. As the Wobblies say, "We Never Forget."

Likewise in 1958, at the urging of Charles Rhyne, May 1 was proclaimed "Law Day USA." As a result the politicians had another opportunity for bombast about the Cold War and to tout their own virtues. Senator Javits, for instance, took a deep historical breath in May 1960 by saying American ideals were the highest "ever espoused since the dawn of civilization." Governor Rockefeller of New York got right to his point by saying that the traditional May Day "bordered on treason." As an activity for the day Senator Wiley recommended that people read statute books. In preaching on "Obedience to Authority" on May Day 1960, the chaplain of the Senate believed it was the first time in the twentieth century that the subject had been addressed. He reminded people of the words carved on the courthouse in Worcester, Massachusetts: "Obedience to Law is Liberty." He said God is "all law" and suggested watching the hymn, "Make Me a Captive, Lord [and then I shall be free]." He complained that TV shows made fun of cops and husbands. He said God had become too maternal.

Beneath the hypocrisy of such talk (at the time the Senate was rejecting the jurisdiction of the Worcester Court), there were indications of the revolt in the kitchens. In addition to the trumpeting Cold War overtones, frightened patriarchal undertones were essential to the Law Day music. Indeed, it attempted to drown out both the Red and the Green. Those who have to face the law-and-order music on a daily basis, the lawyers and the orderers, also have to make their own deals.

Among the lawyers there are conservatives and liberals; they are generally ideologues. On Law Day 1964 the president of the Connecticut Bar wrote against civil rights demonstrators, "corrupt" labor unions, "juvenile delinquency," and Liz Taylor! William O. Douglas, on the other hand, on Law Day 1962 warned against mimicking British imperialism and favored independence movements and the Peace Corps by saying, "We need Michigan-in-Nigeria, California-in-the-Congo, Columbia-in-Iran," which has come true, at least judging by what's written on sweatshirts around the world. Neither the conservative nor the liberal, however, said it should be a holiday for the lawyers, nor did they advocate the eight-hour day for the workers of the legal apparatus. In Boston only the New England School of Law, the Law and Justice Program at UMass., and the College of Public and Community Service celebrate the Green and the Red.

Among the orderers (the police) Law Day isn't much of a holiday either. Yet police, men and women, all over the United States owe a lot to May Day and the Boston police. It is true that more than a thousand Boston men of blue lost their jobs owing to Calvin Coolidge's suppression of the Boston police strike of 1919. They had been busy earlier in the summer during May Day. At the same time there were lasting gains: a small pay increase (\$300 a year), shorter hours (73-90 a week had been the norm) and most important, free uniforms!



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