

Altgeld and the Public

Over the summer of 1893 Chicago's and the national press vilified John Peter Altgeld for his decision as Illinois governor to pardon the surviving Haymarket prisoners. Altgeld's pardon coupled with his sympathetic backing the next year of workers during the 1894 railroad strike effectively brought his political career to an end. The public had abandoned the governor. While Altgeld's term as governor tells us much about his courage, the public's reaction to his pardon of the Haymarket prisoners may tell us even more about the character of "the public".

Today, it is hard to understand why Altgeld's action provoked such public hostility. After all, the Haymarket Riot, which had occurred in 1886, hardly qualified as a riot. True, several policemen had immediately been injured and one killed when a bomb went off in Haymarket Square following a rally that radicals had called in support of a strike against the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company. The rally itself was peaceful. A police captain, known for his hostility towards workers, led—on his own initiative—a column of police into the square to disperse the crowd. The climate in Chicago's working class districts was already tense. A day or two earlier, police had bludgeoned strikers outside McCormick's gates, killing four and wounding several others. Nonetheless, when police entered the square, the crowd appeared to be peacefully dispersing. Then, the bomb exploded and the police opened fire on the crowd and mayhem followed. By the time calm returned the deaths of seven policemen and four workers as well as scores of injuries could be added to the bomb's toll.

Although contemporary accounts agreed that the rally's speakers had taken care not to incite the crowd, eight union leaders and radicals were indicted for murder, including Albert Parsons, an anarchist, who had not even attended the rally. In the trial that followed, the prosecution made no attempt to prove that any of the defendants were in anyway linked directly to the bombing, but instead charged that they shared guilt as conspirators for having somehow encouraged the bombing. The jury agreed and all were judged guilty, with seven being condemned to death and one to life imprisonment.

The city and nation's newspapers generally applauded the decision, while few voices other than those coming from fellow radicals and labor leaders were raised in protest when four of the defendants were hung. One additional defendant had committed suicide on the eve of his execution, and two had had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment, leaving three of the original Haymarket defendants alive when Altgeld became governor. Altgeld first investigated what had occurred, concluded that the original trial had been a travesty, and then pardoned the three survivors.

Why the public reacted as strongly as it did against Altgeld is difficult to fathom today. The press certainly played a role, but it would be too easy to conclude that the public's outrage was the direct result of the harping of the press. Though, certainly, the press did much to shape the public's opinion, a more accurate assessment would be that the public's opinion was easily shaped by the press because the public itself was quite willing to have its opinion shaped—the public was a willing audience.

It was perhaps to be expected that the public would prove to be so prejudiced against the Haymarket defendants and labor generally. After all, Illinois and Chicago were in the nation's conservative Heartland. Nonetheless, radicalism had gained a strong foothold in Chicago. Chicago, in fact, had become by the time of the Haymarket rally a center of anarchism and socialism and within a few years both the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World would place their headquarters in the city. Still, Chicago was hardly a haven for radicals. Indeed, the city did boast a strong labor movement, which attracted radicals, but labor itself was not all that quick to adopt radical ideologies. Workers were, however, certainly eager to improve their status. They organized unions and struck repeatedly but by doing so sparked the often violent reaction of their employers, who could count not only on the Pinkertons and other hired thugs for support but also the city's police and, when needed, the state militia and the federal army. Striking workers and union organizers were the primary targets, but radicals, too, faced violence and they had few sympathizers. The city's public—its middle class and the governing elite—were less than sympathetic towards the workers and their unions and actively hostile towards anyone they came to consider a radical.

Anarchists and socialist radicals had, in fact, done much to alienate the public. They were, after all, radicals, and the public was hardly receptive to their revolutionary rhetoric. While workers themselves were fighting for little more than better pay and working conditions. Haymarket linked workers and their unions to radicals in the public's mind.

In fact, Haymarket aside, the public's sympathy for workers was limited. In Chicago and elsewhere, workers worked and lived in working class districts that had become increasingly isolated from those neighborhoods in which the middle class lived—out of sight, out of mind. Once more, the workers were becoming increasingly less skilled and poorer as industrialization took deeper hold across the American economy. Within the working class, those Americans who had abandoned the farm for the city and German and English immigrants held most of the higher paying skilled jobs but it was the immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, mainly Catholics and Jews, who filled the ranks of the unskilled. Those workers, even the poorest, may or may not have been radicals but the public viewed them as foreign and seldom worth their attention.

The public's lack of direct knowledge of what the working and living conditions were for these workers explained to a great degree the lack of public sympathy and the cultural distance between the middle class and the immigrant only deepened that divide. Ideology also separated the worker from the public. Whether or not a worker was a radical, the worker was himself responsible for his own plight or so the public believed. Ironically, radicalism was hardly foreign to Illinois or America. Harking back not only to the Declaration of Independence but to the earlier Regulator Movements, the Shay and Dorr Revolts, the Whiskey Rebellion and the more contemporary Populist Movement, radicalism was indigenous to America but nonetheless it had largely been supplanted by an ideology that stressed laissez-faire economics, the open market and a strong belief in

“rugged” individualism. Not all Americans may have subscribed to these beliefs but, clearly, the “public” did.

Isolation, cultural differences and changing ideology may go far towards explaining why the public had so little sympathy for workers, but explaining *why* the public was unsympathetic does little to explain *who* the public was and it is the answer to that question that will go far towards explaining what happened to Altgeld.

Historians casually refer to “the public” but seldom bother to define who the public actually was. The “public” may have indeed reacted with outrage when Altgeld pardoned the surviving Haymarket prisoners but just who was the “public”? The bankers, lawyers, plant managers, shop owners and industrialists who were undoubtedly members of the “public” may indeed have had scant sympathy for striking workers, much less radicals, but did they alone represent who the “public” was?

Altgeld’s pardon and his sympathetic support of striking workers during the 1894 railroad strike cost him his political career, but to assume that his actions somehow were unpopular is to dismiss the likelihood that he had the strong support of workers. When we equate the “public” with only those individuals who read Chicago’s newspapers we effectively dismiss those workers and others who stood outside that implicit definition. Were those workers who too “foreign” to be literate and who were denied the vote not members of the public? Altgeld’s pardon and support of workers cost him his political career but his support among the disenfranchised “public” was undoubtedly strong. Altgeld undoubtedly lost the “public’s” support with his pardon of the Haymarket prisoners but that is only to say that he lost the support of that portion of the public that could vote.

A too casual use of the term “public” implicitly declares that only the middle class and the elite counts in assessing such historical episodes as Altgeld’s pardoning of the Haymarket prisoners. In view of the key role that workers and radicals played in these years, shouldn’t we take greater care in our use of such terms as the “public”?