

Letter from George Schilling to Lucy Parsons, December 1, 1893

George Schilling was the leading organizer of the effort to pardon the Haymarket anarchists. Though he did this, and was widely thought to be an anarchist himself, this letter shows clearly that he held deeply opposing beliefs to the rhetoric which justified violence, or sought to induce revolution. It is a letter to Lucy Parsons, the widow of Lucy Parsons. Parsons had just returned from delivering a fiery speech at the mining town of Spring Valley, Illinois, a coal mining town (just west of LaSalle-Peru around Highway 39 and Highway 80 intersections) where anarchist views flourished among the miners in the 1890s. Those miners continued to experience the use of police force to break strikes.

Springfield, Illinois December 1, 1893

Mrs Lucy E. Parsons,
Avendale, Chicago, ILL

...Your agitation conducted at times with great vigor and more than ordinary intellectual power has been a wasted force as far as any permanent results for good are concerned. ...The open espousal of physical force—especially when advocated by foreigners—as a remedy for social maladjustments can only lead to greater despotism.

When you terrorize the public mind and threaten the stability of society with violence, you create the conditions, which place the Bonfields and Garys' in the saddle, hailed as the savior of society. Fear is not the mother of progress and liberty, but oft times of reaction and aggression.

Your agitation inspires fear; it shocks the public mind and conscience and inevitably calls forth strong and brutal men to meet force with force. BY your mistaken methods you have the misfortune of repelling those you should attract, of antagonizing, where you should unite in mutual sympathy and co-operation for a common good. The immutable law of the Universe which governs alike the action of stars and men of mind and matter is to “move along lines of least resistance.”

Whatever runs counter to this, must expend itself in useless effort and sooner or later come to naught. You should therefore adopt more enlightened methods in harmony with the traditions of our national life and the innate forces of its evolution. There isn't a broad gauged thinker in the economic movement anywhere, that does not recognize this truth which I seek to impress, namely; that those seeking economic progress must shape their conduct in accordance with the traditions and environment of the country in which they live. . . .

I know you can reply by saying that this is all sentiment, bosh! That the American nation was born in revolution and carved out by the sword; that subsequently it was through the cannon, the musket and saber, midst blood and carnage, that determined the liberty of the slave.

Granted, but you must not forget that it was Americans who led the contest, Americans like

Jefferson, Franklin, Garrison and Phillips [abolitionists] who persistently for years and years worked and pleaded, not for force but for the recognition of those higher ethical relations of equal rights which should obtain in civilized society. Without this “new conscience” as a preliminary force, progress is impossible and all violence reactionary.

At Waldheim [cemetery in Chicago] sleep five men—among them your beloved husband—who died in the hope that their execution might accelerate the emancipation of the world. Blessed be their memories and may future generations do justice to their courage and motives, but I do not believe that the time will ever come when the judgment of an enlightened world will say that their methods were wise or correct.

They worshipped at the shrine of force; wrote it and preached it; until finally they were overpowered by their own Gods and slain in their own temple. The revenge circular of August Spies was met by the revenge of the public mind, terrorized by fear until it reeled like a drunken man, and in its frenzy swept away the safeguards of the law and turned its officers into pliant tools yielding to its will. . .

Respectfully,

Geo. Schilling

Source: From George A. Schilling Collection, Box: 1893-1894, Abraham Lincoln Library, Illinois State Historical Society, Springfield Illinois