"Simply Irrepressible": The Life and Identity of Lucy Parsons

Abstract

While tensions rose between the working class and their capitalist industrialist bosses in America c. 1870-1920, those in power attempted to discourage the working class from joining the labor movement, especially radical factions espousing violence, by creating prejudicial images based on racial stereotypes and inhuman activities. Radical labor activist Lucy Parsons publically combated this anti-radical smear campaign and responded to the various claims against her by capitalizing on certain aspects of her identity and changing others throughout her life. By examining the figure of Lucy Parsons as her contemporaries, both friend and foe, saw and described her, how she presented herself in response to their claims, and the following scholarly treatment of her, or lack thereof, Lucy Parsons provides the perfect study in how an individual can shape their identity in response to their historical settings and how scholars navigate between the individual’s claimed identity and the identities imposed upon them by their historical contemporaries. Lucy Parsons’ activism is largely relegated to passing mentions and footnotes in scholarly works, showing the complicated effects of identity politics and the problems with identifying women primarily as the wives of their famous husbands. By reducing the complexity of a carefully and purposefully constructed identity such as Lucy’s, scholars end up with incomplete, oversimplified, and/or overly biased works of scholarship.