

"Only in Exceptional Cases": The Steel Workers Organizing Committee Remembers the Homestead Strike

Joel Woller

In *Capital*, Marx writes that

The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance. ... The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases.¹

This essay is about one of these exceptional cases, the Homestead Lockout and Strike of 1892. This essay is about the significance of extra-economic compulsion and the memory of it — in particular, the collective public memory of employer and state violence — in working class culture, social movements, and politics. Accepting the premise that the hegemonic bloc must from time to time resort to arms in order to enforce the economic laws of capital accumulation, via a narrative of the labor movement's commemoration of one such event I will suggest that public collective memory of these exceptional moments of overt violence can play a role in the maintenance, reconstitution, or *overthrow* of a hegemonic regime.

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The Homestead Lockout and Strike of 1892 is among the most significant and well-remembered labor actions in history. Despite the extraordinary support of the local community and some solidarity from the labor movement at large, in Homestead the power of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers (also known as “the Amalgamated”) was destroyed by Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, and the Pennsylvania militia, thus transforming a union town into a company-controlled town. This dramatic course of events in 1892 showed that even the mightiest craft union could be smashed by the combined power of a determined employer and a compliant state. The exceptional case of Homestead, moreover, exposed weaknesses in the anarchist movement of the nineteenth century and signaled the decline of the ideology of labor republicanism, opening the door for the emergence of the pure and simple business unionism of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the social movement industrial syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and the political activities of the Socialist Party.²

Of particular importance here is the role the Strike has played in working class activist culture. At several moments — for instance, during the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s and early 1940s, and again during the fight against the shutdowns in the 1970s and 1980s — collective public memory of the Homestead Strike of 1892 has informed and motivated labor activism. One of these moments, the Great Depression, is the focus of this essay, which intends to set the stage for discussion of why labor’s great defeat has loomed so large in working class cultural memory.

Damming Memory

For over four decades following the Homestead Strike, long after Carnegie’s mill became part of “The Corporation,” as US Steel was known, the Homestead works remained an open shop. Steelworker and community morale reflected what organizer William Foster called “a generation of defeat.” Foster dated the history of Homestead in terms of the Amalgamated Union’s victory during the strike of 1889 and the decline that followed its defeat in 1892. As he put it in 1919, “Official pessimism, bred of thirty years of trade-union failure in the steel industry, hung like a mill-stone about the neck of the movement in all its stages.”³

But what sustained the pessimism observed by Foster? Along with the sheer magnitude of the task of organizing such a large enterprise, company surveillance and punishment also took its toll on workers’ ability to organize the Homestead works. The actual extent of the Corporation’s surveillance of — and reprisals against — its union-minded employees is still not known for certain, as the files remain closed. However, even a very skeptical observer

of the effectiveness of the Corporation’s efforts to control its workforce admits that, in the period 1896-1910 alone, US Steel fired hundreds of workers in its six mills as a result of intelligence gathered from its informers.⁴

Corporate espionage had a discernible subversive effect on the conditions for solidarity within the working-class community of Homestead, as visitors reported a palpable sense of intimidation and fear in the decades following the 1892 strike. Charles Spahr, who spent several weeks in Homestead in 1900, found that, “Some of them men were afraid to talk; even the Catholic priest — to whose class I am accustomed to go for fair statements of the relations of men to their employers — was unwilling to make any statement.”⁵ In the Pittsburgh Survey, sociologists John Fitch and Margaret Byington made similar observations. “I doubt whether you could find a more suspicious body of men than the employees of the United States Steel Corporation. They are suspicious of one another, of their neighbors, and of their friends,” stated Fitch in 1910.⁶ Byington likewise reported that “One phrase current in town is: ‘If you want to talk in Homestead, you talk to yourself.’”⁷

Thus, public demonstrations of memories of the events of 1892 were rare in Homestead in the decades following the Strike. Memory of the extra-economic force deployed in the “special case” of 1892, when coupled with the ongoing extra-economic force made possible by the employer’s victory in 1892, tended to relegate memories of the Strike to a private, rather than public, realm. That is, sustained corporate repression reinforced depressing memories of the workers’ defeat in 1892 and isolated those memories from the public realm, where they might be transformed into an impetus for hopeful collective action.

Opening the Floodgates

The repressive atmosphere in Homestead, which was maintained by local government as well as by The Corporation, prevailed until the 1930s. Homestead’s chief executive from 1922-1938, Republican burgess John Cavanaugh, epitomized the collaboration between the party machine and US Steel. Eventually indicted for corruption, Cavanaugh, a coroner and police officer, was by the summer of 1933 preoccupied with the Steel and Metal Workers International Union (SMWIU). He accurately described the SMWIU as

a widespread communistic movement that has been gaining momentum for months past. I have known every move they have been

making lately, and I have been able to break up the organization in Homestead, but other districts are not so fortunate.⁸

In line with this policy, when Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins visited Homestead in July of 1933, Cavanaugh prevented her from meeting in Frick Park with those he called “undesirable reds.” Refusing to yield to the man she would soon dub “the nervous burgess,” Perkins, representing the New Deal Democratic administration of Franklin Roosevelt, met with 20 or 30 men at the Post Office. “I was an officer of the federal government and I must have some rights there” she later recalled.⁹ During the non-union era, free speech in Homestead could apparently be exercised only on Federal property, and only by Federal officials.

Although Perkins had successfully challenged the atmosphere of repression in Homestead, the floodgates of collective public memory did not open until the day between US Independence Day and the 44th anniversary of the Battle with the Pinkertons — Sunday, July 5, 1936. Declared “Steel Workers’ Independence Day” by the Steel Workers’ Organizing Committee (SWOC), this event — a project established by the CIO less than a month earlier — united a commemoration of the Homestead Strike with the public inauguration of SWOC’s campaign to organize steelworkers in Homestead. Drawn by an appeal to demonstrate that had been initially issued by Steve Bordich, a Homestead steelworker, as many as four thousand gathered at the 17th Street playground. Under the watchful eye of the Homestead police and an assistant general superintendent of the Homestead works, the crowd listened with excitement to speeches by young maverick judge Michael Musmanno and Lieutenant Governor Kennedy, a New Deal Democrat. “We are going to see that the workers are granted their rights under the Constitution,” Kennedy announced; “The captains of steel can’t get away with the stuff they got away with before.”¹⁰

Next came music: as described by Edward Levinson, a miners’ band from Morgantown, Pennsylvania played “first a dirge for the Homestead martyrs, then strident marching airs.”¹¹ Charles Sharbo, steelworker and president of an Amalgamated Association lodge, then concluded the meeting by reading the “Steel Workers’ Declaration of Independence.” This statement, drafted by the Pittsburgh union organizer Tom Shane, stands in a tradition which identifies — or at least associates — the struggle for workers’ rights with patriotism.

We steel workers do today solemnly publish and declare our independence. We say to the world: “We are Americans.” We shall

exercise our inalienable right to organize into a great industrial union, banded together with all our fellow steel workers.¹²

Though conservative to the extent that class issues are subsumed by questions of nationality (and also male-centered in its emphasis on wage-workers rather than on working-class communities), this tradition of equating labor rights with “Americanism” nevertheless advances radical propositions. “Today we find the political liberty for which our forefathers fought is made meaningless by economic inequality. ... The lords of steel try to rule over us as did the royalists against whom our forefathers rebelled,” announced Sharbo on behalf of the SWOC. Locally and in print, this tradition had in the past already been appealed to repeatedly with respect to the Homestead Strike.¹³ Now, SWOC proclaimed, “Together with our union brothers in other industries, we shall abolish industrial despotism. We shall make real the dreams of the pioneers who pictured America as a land where all might live in comfort and happiness.”¹⁴

Much in the manner of the 1848 Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention’s “Declaration of Sentiments,” the “Steel Workers’ Declaration of Independence” makes its case for revolution by modeling itself on the form of the Second Continental Congress’ Declaration of 1776.¹⁵ Relying on the familiarity with and cultural standing of the Declaration of Independence in American collective memory, the steelworkers’ grievances against the lords of steel echo the colonists’ grievances against King George III:

They have interfered in every way with our right to organize in independent unions, discharging many who have joined them.

They have set up company unions, forcing employees to vote in their so-called elections.

They have sent among us swarms of stool pigeons ... even in our homes.

They have kept among us armies of company gunmen, with stores of machine guns, gas bombs, and other weapons of warfare.¹⁶

As with the colonists’ Declaration of Independence, which repeatedly implicates the King via its use of the pronoun “He,” the Steelworkers’ Declaration of 1936 employs a repetition of the pronoun “they” to create a monotonous, oppressive effect, while clearly naming the source of injustice, the “lords of steel.” The conclusion of the steelworkers’ resolution is like-

wise parallel in form and content to that of the “founding fathers” revolutionary Declaration of 1776: “In support of this declaration we mutually pledge to each other our steadfast purpose as union men, our honor, and our very lives.”¹⁷ By so boldly and clearly claiming the legacy of the revolutionary founders of the nation, SWOC calls not just for patriotism or Americanism, but also for a new American Revolution.

The grievances articulated in the Steelworkers’ Declaration of Independence were, if anything, understated. On October 5, 1933, near the company town of Aliquippa, Pennsylvania (just upriver from Pittsburgh on the Ohio), a private army in the service of Jones and Laughlin Steel had shot 21 men, killing one. This was not an isolated incident: within a year of Steel Workers Independence Day, during a 1937 Memorial Day demonstration in Chicago, ten Republic Steel strikers were fatally shot in the back, and many more wounded. But if the Steelworkers’ 1936 Declaration proved prophetic, its references to violence and sacrifice grappled at the same time with memories of 1892.

This memory of 1892 became explicit at the conclusion of SWOC rally. After the Steelworkers’ Declaration had been promulgated, the crowd marched up the hill to the Franklin Cemetery in Munhall. Steelworker Emmet Patrick Cush, a Communist and president of the SMWIU, led the way. Cush remembered where six of the seven strikers who had been shot dead nearly 44 years earlier were interred — five in unmarked graves. As he led the crowd to each grave, Cush, whose father, Dennis, had served on the Amalgamated’s Advisory Committee during the Strike of 1892, recalled particulars about the lives of the martyrs: “Silas Wain was a member of the strike committee. He had a wife and two young children. They went away after he was killed and nobody ever heard of them again.”¹⁸ After locating the burial sites, the crowd solemnly memorialized each of them by laying flowers at the burial places; the five unmarked graves were given headstones. SWOC organizer Patrick Fagan, president of District 5 of the UMWA and son of an 1892 strike leader, delivered the eulogies for Peter Fares, John Morris, Joseph Sotak, Henry Striegel, Silas Wain, and William Foy.¹⁹

“William Foy,” said Fagan, “we have come to renew the struggle for which you gave your life.”²⁰ “Let the blood of those labor pioneers who were massacred here be the seed of this new organization in 1937,” he concluded, “And may the souls of the martyrs rest in peace.”²¹ Here the slain strikers are represented as something other than, or more than, noble victims: they are *martyrs*, powerful, sanctified figures capable of likewise blessing and empowering the activities of those who act in their name.

The Depression period was by no means the first time that the 1892 strike had been commemorated in public, or had been voiced in connection

with contemporary labor activism. Mother Jones and William Foster, for instance, had appealed to memories of 1892 in their comments on the 1919 Steel Strike.²² During the 1930s, however, there is something different about the ways in which collective memory of the Homestead Strike, to borrow Walter Benjamin’s striking phrase, “flashes up in moment of danger.”²³ Three features distinguish the memories of 1892, which found public expression during the early years of the CIO, from earlier public articulations of the meaning of the Homestead Strike.

First, the 1936 demonstration was part of a mass movement rooted in part in memories of 1892. The extent and significance of steelworker self-activity in the 1930s and early 1940s must not be underestimated. The CIO was certainly a top-down organization, and Homestead workers were initially mistrustful of Lewis’ leadership after the enthusiastic July 1936 demonstration, even more so than in other steel towns; their guarded, wary attitude can be attributed in part to bitter memories of 1892.²⁴ But steelworkers, in Homestead and elsewhere, by no means stood by passively awaiting their saviors. Grassroots steelworker union organizing preceded the CIO drives; indeed, it was the success of local steelworker organizing that catalyzed the initiatives headed by Lewis. Despite inept and lethargic leadership, the Amalgamated underwent a resurgence, the first of its new lodges being founded in Homestead on June 16, 1933.²⁵ The thousand or so steelworkers and their allies who constituted the new organization chose an auspicious name for it: The Spirit of ’92 Lodge.²⁶

The name of the new lodge was of course chosen to memorialize the Amalgamated’s moment of greatest militancy. Moreover, the founders of the new lodge chose to identify with their union’s great defeat. They might have chosen to remind themselves that in the past they had won victories as well as endured losses; they might have named themselves after the militant and successful strike of 1889, for example, in order to rally optimism for their cause. Instead, they chose to identify with the *mission* of their ancestors rather than with their legacy, to cast themselves as *redeemers* of the sacrifices made by martyrs in the past rather than as the successors of yesterday’s heroes. Like the participants in the July 5, 1936 SWOC demonstration in Homestead, the founders of the Spirit of ’92 Lodge of the Amalgamated chose in 1933 to emphasize the bitter unfinished business left by past struggles rather than to recollect past glory.

A second feature which distinguishes the 1936 SWOC rally from previous public representations of the Homestead Strike is this: the 1936 rally and memorial took place amid a widespread explosion of artistic representation of the events of 1892. In 1933, the famous Mexican muralist Diego Rivera had painted a fresco entitled *Portrait of America* for the New Workers

School in New York. One panel, *Labor Fights During the '90s*, featured imagery of the Homestead and Pullman Strikes.²⁷ Also during the period of the rise of the CIO, versions of John Kelly's song "A Fight for Home and Honor" (also known as "The Homestead Strike") were republished in three separate anthologies, *Lost Chords* (1942), *Coal Dust on the Fiddle* (1943), and *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends* (1947). The first verse spells out the issues so urgently remembered in the 1930s:

We are asking one another as we pass the time of day,
 Why men must have recourse to arms to get their proper pay;
 And why the labor unions now must not be recognized,
 While the actions of a syndicate must not be criticized.
 The trouble down at Homestead was brought about this way,
 When a grasping corporation had the audacity to say;
 You must all renounce your unions and forswear your liberty,
 And we'll promise you a chance to live and die in slavery.

Later performed and recorded by Pete Seeger, the song had originally been copyrighted on July 16, 1892 by a Chicago steelworker turned minstrel who billed himself as "The Rolling Mill Man."²⁸

The most compelling and influential artistic recollection of the Homestead Strike during the era is Thomas Bell's epic *Out of this Furnace*, published in 1941. Based on the experiences of his own family, the Belaceks, this novel portrays the lives of three generations of Slovak immigrants and Slovak-Americans in the "steel valley" of the Monongahela River. Mainly set in Braddock, Bell's home town, *Out of this Furnace* also contains scenes set in Homestead — including a detailed account of the 1892 strike. Indeed, the Homestead Strike figures prominently in the narrative logic of the novel, which identifies the emergence of the CIO, the Americanization of the immigrant community, and the regeneration of America via a new revolution. Bell exaggerates the distance immigrants kept from the issues of 1892: his protagonist in the first section of the novel, the Slavic immigrant Kracha, sleeps through the battle of July 6, though in reality Slavic Homestead was solidly behind the union during the first months of the strike. Two generations later, his grandson Dobie becomes a union official in the Steelworkers', representing the extent to which Kracha's descendants have been accepted into both union culture and American culture — and at the same time, the extent to which they are actively transforming what unions and America mean. By misleadingly casting Kracha as uninvolved in the union and his grandson Dobie as the complete opposite, Bell underscores the very real changes which have taken place in Homestead between 1892 and

1941.²⁹

In the work of Rivera, Kelly, and Bell, fleeting, furtive memories of Homestead Strike were finally, during this 1933-43 period, becoming part of public culture; in art, literature, and published music, the memories of 1892 were at last being materialized, becoming tangible and communicable. The kind of remembrance of 1892 that was "flashing up" on the streets of Homestead on July 5, 1936 was happening in the arts as well.

The third distinctive aspect of the 1936 demonstration was that the working class community of Homestead chose the period of the rise of the CIO to more or less permanently alter its own built environment. The publishers of Arthur Burgoyne's 1893 account of the strike, Rawsthorne Engraving and Publishing, dedicated 5% of the book's profits toward a monument to the Homestead martyrs. The first edition, *Homestead*, even contains an illustration of the proposed monument — but the intended site of the memorial is not named, and the monument never erected.³⁰ After the initial set of funerals, which happened before the outcome of the strike of 1892 had been decided, Homestead made no further moves to change the landscape of the city in such a way as to honor the lives lost to the Pinkertons. In this context, the marking of the graves in 1936 was significant: the names of all seven martyrs were now finally etched in stone and on public display, albeit in a location available only to those who would seek it out.

The Crest of the Wave

This wave of Homestead Strike commemoration crested in 1941. By this point SWOC was already bargaining with the steel companies; United Steelworkers of America (USWA, now the USW) would be recognized the following year. On Labor Day, 1941 SWOC #1397, ancestor of USWA Local #1397, unveiled its monument to the Homestead martyrs. The four-ton grey granite shaft, about nine feet high, can still be viewed today in Homestead at the town's crossroads, the corner of 8th Avenue and the High Level Bridge (now the "Homestead Grays Bridge"). The ceremony featured a parade; music by high school marching bands; remarks by B. Frank Bell, a survivor of the strike; prayers led by a Roman Catholic priest and a Lutheran minister; a dedication by CIO Regional Director James Thomas; and a speech by CIO President Phil Murray read by David McDonald, secretary-treasurer of SWOC. In attendance were delegates from the mine workers and electrical workers unions and the burgesses of Homestead, West Homestead, and Munhall.³¹ Now the Strike had been commemorated, permanently — not in a remote graveyard, but in the heart of the town.

The generic form of the monument, echoing the design of war memori-

als, implicitly equates the Battle of Homestead with events such as those of the Civil War, lending a conservative sense of dignity, respectability, propriety, and cultural authority to the memorial and the issues it addresses. Yet, simultaneously, the impression that this monument is a kind of war memorial subtly conveys a radical “class warfare” sensibility, making it clear that the term is not always a “mere” metaphor. The image etched into the granite is one of masculinity, pride in work, optimism: a sun rises over a muscular steel puddler, “powerful and fully involved in his labor.”³² The verbal inscription asserts the patriotism of the 1892 strikers, and, by means of the passive voice, avoids clearly identifying the strikers’ antagonists. In this way, the verbal text supplements the form and the image:

ERECTED BY THE MEMBERS OF THE STEEL WORKERS ORGANIZING COMMITTEE LOCAL UNIONS IN MEMORY OF THE IRON AND STEEL WORKERS WHO WERE KILLED IN HOMESTEAD, PA., ON JULY 6, 1892, WHILE STRIKING AGAINST THE CARNEGIE STEEL COMPANY IN DEFENSE OF THEIR AMERICAN RIGHTS.



Like the inscription on the memorial, the naming of the Spirit of ’92 Lodge in 1933, and the SWOC rally of 1936, Murray’s message suggests that the steelworker unionists of the 1930s and 1940s are the redeemers or avengers of the martyrs of 1892. It recognizes the present as much as it does the past. Referring to SWOC, Murray wrote:

The building of this powerful organization in the steel industry, the building of the great Congress of Industrial Organizations, in which most of you at this celebration have had a part — this work will erase the tragedy of 1892: and from now on Homestead will symbolize — not the home of non-unionism, but the citadel of true unionism.³³

Murray’s proclamation by no means denies the unfinished business of 1892, but his emphasis on *erasing* — rather than, or in addition to, avenging — the tragedy of 1892 differs from that of Fagan and the other embittered founders of the Spirit of ’92 lodge. By now the tone of the union message is far more triumphal than it had been half a decade earlier, and in announcing the completion of the mission set forth by the martyrs of 1892, Murray is also clearly attempting to move on, to lay to rest the issues of 1892. Having served its purpose, memory is already, and understandably so, becoming forgetfulness — at least for a while.

Despite Murray’s call for erasure of the tragedy of 1892, the 1941 SWOC monument to the martyrs of 1892 has remained a touchstone for members of the union and their allies, especially in moments of crisis, such as the deindustrialization era of the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this period of the shutdowns, a new generation of steelworkers, often with experience in the New Left, coalesced with older steelworkers who had long been dissatisfied with the union leadership.³⁴ “1397 Rank and File,” as the movement to democratize the union was called in Homestead, published a newsletter which it billed as “The Voice of the *Membership* of USWA Local Union 1397” (my emphasis). The newsletter repeatedly featured images of the SWOC marker — and sometimes also verbal interpretations of its meaning.³⁵ Furthermore, from 1979 through 1985, the Rank and File movement held an annual May Day rally and press conference at the site of the memorial.³⁶

The SWOC memorial still has significance today, though how much and what kind remain arguable. The corner on which it is located no longer encourages pedestrian traffic. Nevertheless, from 2005 to 2007 the Pittsburgh branch of the IWW has organized an annual May Day rally at the SWOC memorial in Homestead. Likewise, in the spring of 2007, the USW and the Battle of Homestead Foundation began discussing proposals for rededicating

the memorial as a public forum, a site for free speech, free association, and labor-community solidarity.³⁷

Ancestral Sources of Liberating Memory

At least two conclusions can be drawn from this story of how the founders of the United Steelworkers remembered the Homestead Strike during the 1930s and 1940s. First, what the exceptional case of 1892 meant to steelworkers in the 1930s and 1940s highlights the power of the past, as mediated by cultural memory, to intervene in the present. It suggests that the inspiration provided by a steelworker community's collective memory played a material role in the establishment of the USW. That matters, because — despite the compromises involved in any actual counter-hegemonic social movement — the establishment of the USW was a revolutionary act.

In *Striking Steel*, a superb book inspired by his ambivalence toward the centennial commemoration of the Homestead Strike,³⁸ Jack Metzgar passionately and aptly sums up the meaning of the USW (and in particular its notoriously “rigid” work rules) to a steelworker family in Johnstown, Pennsylvania:

All the discretion that the foreman and the company were losing was flowing right into our home. There were choices. There were prospects. There were possibilities. Few of these had been there before. Now they were. And because they came slowly, year by year, contract by contract, strike by bitter strike, they gave a lilting, liberating feeling to life — a sense that no matter what was wrong today, it could be changed, it could get better — in fact, by the late 1950s, that it was quite likely that it would get better. Hang in there. Stick with it. These moral injunctions to daily fortitude made so much more sense then when there were so many visible payoffs for doing so. And as my father would find out, my mother, my sister, and I — like nearly everybody else in American society — were learning to tolerate less and less repression from anybody or anything, including him. If what we lived through in the 1950s was not liberation, then liberation never happens in real human lives.³⁹

Metzgar's point is that the emergence and consolidation of the CIO, though not “the” revolution envisioned by labor radicals, was nevertheless a genuine moment of liberation. If *that* was not liberation, he contends, then there is no such thing. While capturing the essence of the CIO revolution (and revealing an intriguing continuity between the New Left and the culture of the 1950s),

Metzgar at the same time concedes that the definition of “liberation,” and its relationship to collective memory, is a contested one.⁴⁰ Metzgar's acknowledgment introduces the second conclusion to be drawn from this story of how the founders of the USW remembered the Homestead Strike: this story suggests that we might need to revise, or perhaps simply expand, our intuitive definition of a liberating (or revolutionary, or counter-hegemonic) memory.

Metzgar's well-researched yet very personal book provides a particularly clear and attractive articulation of the common intuitions which are challenged by the story of what the Homestead strike meant to the founders of the USW. A welcome counterweight to narratives of industrial decline and union corruption, Metzgar issues a call to remember and affirm the historical reality of liberated ancestors. Like Murray, Metzgar does not want to dwell on the tragedy of 1892. Instead, he suggests that we should focus on success stories, not simply for the academic pursuit of disembodied, idealized “truth,” but for strategic reasons.

Success stories, as all Americans know in their heart of hearts, are heartening. They help you believe in struggling on, in delaying gratification in hopes of achieving a future, sometimes hard-to-imagine goal. Remembering the achievements of collective struggle, and all the work that goes into achieving the always fragile unity necessary for such struggle, is particularly important — for everybody, in my view, but particularly for working classes.⁴¹

Nothing succeeds like success. This is American common sense, is it not?

Yet, curiously, and contrary to what Metzgar's theory would suggest, the steelworkers union he so vividly remembers in *Striking Steel* was not founded on such a memory of successful, liberated ancestors. Nor did the founders of the USW particularly emphasize the possibility of liberated grandchildren. Instead, their memory of the Homestead Strike focused, counter-intuitively, on enslaved ancestors — and they cast *themselves* as the liberated grandchildren. Their vision of history seems to be much closer to the perspective of Walter Benjamin, who in 1940 challenged Social Democratic opponents of fascism to see the “state of emergency” — rather than “progress” — as the historical norm.⁴² In particular, with respect to Metzgar's theme of the ancestral sources of liberating memory, Benjamin contends that

Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx it appears as the last

enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacist group [led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg], has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. Within three decades they managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui, though it had been the rallying sound that had reverberated through the preceding century. Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.⁴³

"Empathy with the victor," according to Benjamin, "invariably benefits the rulers."⁴⁴

To be sure, the vision of history relevant to the conditions of 1930s and 1940s is not necessarily pertinent today. Furthermore, we should question whether an emphasis on plural success *stories* entails empathy with "the" victor.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it is Benjamin, not Metzgar, who better articulates the philosophy of history embodied by the memorial practices of SWOC. It is Benjamin who captures the way in which a memory of ancestors bubbles up from the dark well of the seemingly forgotten to inspire the overthrow of a hegemonic regime. Likewise, it is Benjamin who more clearly indicates how an "exceptional case" such as the Homestead Strike can produce not only successful though despicable winners and hapless though noble victims, but also martyrs.

The story of how SWOC remembered the Homestead Strike during the 1930s and 1940s is important not only for the way in which it highlights the material force of collective memory, but also for the ways in which it challenges our intuitive, common-sense ideas about how collective public memory operates. It invites us to reconsider not only what to remember, but also *how* to remember. It's a story that encourages us to think about the past, and our contemporary memorial practices regarding the past, in fresh ways. It's a story that invites us to reflect on Marx's passing, enigmatic remark in the *Grundrisse*: "the concept of progress is not to be understood in its familiar abstraction."⁴⁶

Notes

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (1867; New York: Penguin, 1976) 899.

² For an analysis of the Homestead Strike, see Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead, 1880-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 1992); David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960); and James Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America* (Urbana: U of Illinois, 1998) for an account of the aftermath. For a narrative of the strike, see Jeremy Brecker, *Strike!* (Boston: South End, 1997); Joe White, *The Homestead Strike of 1892*, 16 August 2007 <<http://www.pittsburghafclcio.org/homestead.htm>>; Charles McCollester, *The Point of Pittsburgh: Production and Struggle at the Forks of the Ohio* (Pittsburgh: Battle of Homestead Foundation, 2008) 140-47; and the one-hour documentary video *The River Ran Red*, dir. and prod. Steffi Domike and Nicole Fauteaux, 1993. The Strike is rendered in poetry by Robert Gibb, "The Homestead Lockout & Strike, 1892," *World Over Water* (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas, 2007) 62-66. Linda Schneider, "The Citizen Striker: Workers' Ideology in the Homestead Strike of 1892," *Labor History* 23 (1982): 47-66 focuses on the ideological commitments of the strikers. For annotated primary sources, see David P. Demarest, Jr., ed. "*The River Ran Red: Homestead 1892* (U of Pittsburgh, 1992). Arthur Burgoyne, *The Homestead Strike of 1892* (1893; Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh Press, 1979) provides the definitive account from period.

³ William Z. Foster, *The Great Steel Strike* (1920; New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969) 235.

⁴ Richard Oestreicher, "The Spirit of '92: Popular Opposition in Homestead's Politics and Culture, 1892-1937," *Pittsburgh Surveyed: Social Science and Social Reform in the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Maurine W. Greenwald and Margo Anderson (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 1996) 193.

⁵ William Serrin, *Homestead: The Glory and Tragedy of an American Steel Town* (New York: Random House, 1992) 91.

⁶ John A. Fitch, *The Steelworkers* (1910; Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 1989) 214.

⁷ Margaret F. Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (1910; Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 1974) 175.

⁸ Serrin, *Homestead* 174-76.

⁹ Demarest, *River* 215; Edward Levinson, *Labor on the March* (New York: University Books, 1956) 188.

¹⁰ Serrin, *Homestead* 189-92; Demarest, *River* 216-17.

¹¹ Levinson, *Labor on the March* 188.

¹² United Steelworkers of America (USWA), "*We Are Americans!*" *The Homestead Workers Issue a Declaration of Independence in 1936*, 16 August 2007 <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/133/>>.

¹³ For example, in 1892, the labor leader (and soon-to-be socialist) Eugene Debs

concluded his essay on the Homestead Strike as follows: "It required Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill to arouse the colonies to resistance, and the Battle of Homestead should serve to arouse every workingman in America to a series of dangers which surround them." Eugene V. Debs, "Homestead and Ludlow," *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Y. Tussey (New York: Pathfinder, 1970) 224. In that same year, Samuel Gompers, longtime president of the AFL, made a speech in Homestead in which he addressed the charges of treason that had been lodged against several of the strikers. Referring to the Boston Tea Party of 1773, he asked: "Shall patriotism be measured by the yard-stick of the Carnegie firm or be weighed as their pig iron? Is it because these men in those latter days like those in Boston harbor, declared they had some rights and dared maintain them that they shall be declared traitors?" (qtd. in Burgoyne 217).

¹⁴ USWA, "We Are Americans!"

¹⁵ Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention, "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," 1848, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Papers Project*, 16 August 2007 <<http://ecssba.rutgers.edu/docs/seneca.html>>; United States of America, Second Continental Congress, "Declaration of Independence," 1776, *Charters of Freedom*, 15 October 2008 <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html>.

¹⁶ USWA, "We Are Americans!"

¹⁷ USWA, "We Are Americans!"

¹⁸ Levinson, *Labor on the March* 187.

¹⁹ Demarest, *River* 216-17, 219-20; Serrin, 191-92; Levinson, 187-89.

²⁰ Levinson, *Labor on the March* 188.

²¹ Demarest, *River* 219.

²² Foster, *Steel Strike* 59; Mother Jones, "Speech at a convention of the United Mine Workers of America, Indianapolis, Indiana, 16 September 1919," *The Speeches and Writings of Mother Jones* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 1988) 203.

²³ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 255.

²⁴ Ronald L. Filippelli, "The History is Missing, Almost: Philip Murray, the Steelworkers, and the Historians," *Forging a Union of Steel: Philip Murray, SWOC, and the United Steelworkers*, eds. Paul F. Clark, Peter Gottlieb, and Donald Kennedy (Ithaca, New York: ILR, 1987) 11.

²⁵ Curtis Miner, *Homestead: The Story of a Steel Town* (Pittsburgh: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1989) 56-58, Staughton Lynd, "The Possibility of Radicalism in the Early 1930s: The Case of Steel," *Living Inside Our Hope: A Steadfast Radical's Thoughts on Rebuilding the Movement* (Ithaca: ILR, 1997) 143.

²⁶ Serrin, *Homestead* 193.

²⁷ The panel was moved to a summer retreat of the International Ladies' Garment Workers in 1941. Although eventually destroyed by fire, photographs remain (Demarest 218).

²⁸ Demarest, *River* 222-23; Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy, ed., *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2007) 149, 153; Pete Seeger, "The Homestead Strike," rec. 1991, *Shaped by Steel: Traditional Music and Stories from Southwestern Pennsylvania*, Steel Industry Heritage Corporation, 2005.

²⁹ Thomas Bell, *Out of this Furnace* (1941; Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 1976)

³⁰ Burgoyne, *Homestead* 299.

³¹ Few steelworkers were in attendance, "due to the steel mills' decision to keep operating through the holiday for the sake of defense," observed the *Daily Messenger* of Homestead (Demarest 221).

³² James Catano, "Articulating the Values of labor and Laboring: Civic Rhetoric and Heritage Tourism," *Who Says? Working-Class Rhetoric, Class Consciousness and Community*, ed. William DeGenaro (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 2007) 15.

³³ Demarest *River Ran Red* 221.

³⁴ Issues included: poor representation of workers at grievance hearings; the policy of approving contracts without benefit of a rank and file vote; concerns about financial accountability of the local union's administration; the long tenure of union officers; and a general sense that the union bureaucracy was complacent and out of touch with the rank and file. See Irwin Marcus, "The Deindustrialization of America: Homestead, A Case Study, 1959-84," *Pennsylvania History* 52: 169.

³⁵ For instance, a photograph of the SWOC monument accompanies 1397 Rank and File president Ron Weisen's "Labor Day Message" in the September 1982 issue of *1397 Rank & File*. "Labor Day, 1982 is no cause for celebration," Weisen writes. He continues: "In 1892, Homestead steelworkers fought and died for the cause of unionism. They fought against a powerful Company and great odds, for the right to earn a decent living, with respect and dignity on the job. Today, 90 years later, we are again under attack by the same greedy Companies. Only this time, instead of using Pinkerton guards to shoot us down with rifles, they use Contract Administrators and Industrial Engineers who silently but just as viciously eliminate our jobs and our futures" (Collection of the United Steel Workers of America Local Union 1397 1950-90, Indiana University of Pennsylvania Labor Archives, Box 62, Series J, Folder 4).

³⁶ Catano, "Articulating Labor" 18.

³⁷ I have been a member of the Battle of Homestead Foundation board since its founding in 1997.

³⁸ "I had planned to write a book about the rise and fall of a steel town — a sad story with a tragic ending," Metzgar writes. "On July 6, 1992, in Homestead, I knew I no longer had the heart for it" (152). What's especially notable about Metzgar's interpretation of the Homestead Strike centennial commemoration is his insistence that "what we were commemorating one hundred years later on that uncomfortably hot July day" was "the one-day victory, not the eventual defeat." Jack Metzgar, *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000) 150. This despite the fact that he concedes that he "could not get the defeat out of [his] head"

(150). Similarly, Metzgar emphasizes the strikers' moment of victory despite his admission that the muse of *Striking Steel*, a former steelworker and union activist named Tony Tomko, was moved by a speaker at the centennial commemoration who "intoned the standard messages about honoring those who fought in 1892 by continuing their struggle" (152); in other words, Tomko was moved by a speaker whose message was remarkably similar to that of Pat Fagan in 1936. This speaker did not appeal to Metzgar in the same way, apparently by virtue of his failure to emphasize labor's successes. For an alternative interpretation of the meaning of the Homestead Strike centenary, consider the homily delivered by Monsignor Charles Owen Rice at the Homestead Centennial Mass: "Here in Homestead we commemorate, not celebrate, because this is the centenary of the defeat of freedom; the waging of a civil war which decided whether money or the people, the workers, would prevail. Money won." Charles Owen Rice, "Homestead Homily," *Fighter with a Heart: Pittsburgh Labor Priest*, ed. Charles McCollester (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 1996) 222. For Metzgar's full account of how his change of heart in 1992 led him to write *Striking Steel*, see 149-54.

³⁹ Metzgar, *Striking Steel* 39.

⁴⁰ His topic, the 1959 Steel Strike, is the largest strike in US history when measured in terms of "man hours lost" — 116 days, over 500,000 strikers, or about 1% of the workforce, including his own father. Resolved only via the intervention of President Eisenhower and the Supreme Court, it was the last of the series of post-World War II steel strikes that confirmed the CIO revolution of the 1930s and early 1940s. And yet it has been virtually forgotten. With a passionate sense of what it might take to once again make the labor movement something that large numbers of working-class people might want to join or support, and with a provocative and compelling explanation of why the strike has been sentenced to oblivion, Metzgar makes the strongest possible case (a very compelling one indeed) for the achievements of people such as his father, representatives of the bureaucratic "big labor" in the postwar period. In short, he eloquently describes a world in which history is divided into two eras — before the union, and after the union.

⁴¹ Metzgar, *Striking Steel* 153.

⁴² Benjamin, "Theses" 257.

⁴³ Benjamin, "Theses" 260.

⁴⁴ Benjamin, "Theses" 256.

⁴⁵ Metzgar, for instance, celebrates the USW's victory in the 1959 Steel Strike, but he does not identify with the apparent prospective victor in the larger meta-narrative of conflict between capital and labor. Despite prescribing that the labor movement remember its success stories, Metzgar's emphasis (as the subtitle of his book suggests) is really on the importance of remembering *solidarity* rather than *victory*. He concludes *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* by admitting that the kind of working-class hopefulness characteristic of the 1950s is "not coming back until we have a bigger and stronger labor movement than the one we have now. I took it for

granted once, but now I remember" (229). This is the ending of a success story only with respect to the triumph of memory, not of labor. Though not a tragic conclusion, in the end Metzgar, like Benjamin, emphasizes labor's contemporary state of emergency, even as he insists that a study of the past shows that labor victories are possible.

⁴⁶ Tom Bottimore, Laurence Harris, V.G. Kiernan, and Ralph Miliband, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1983) 398.