Replacing May Day with Labor Day was part of a decades-long effort to stifle the vibrancy of populist movements.

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On May 1, 1933, the Catholic journalist and activist Dorothy Day went to New York's Union Square to distribute copies of the first issue of her newspaper The Catholic Worker. As she made her way through the crowd, she had a ready audience of thousands: men in coats, ties, and hats — as low-wage workers and radicals apparently used to dress — gathered around a maze of signs for labor unions, fraternal societies, and parties representing the various varieties of socialism then on offer. These groups disagreed in every way they could think to, but they shared the square regardless. For decades, in the U.S. and around the world, May Day was International Workers' Day, commemorating protesters killed in Haymarket Square, Chicago, during the 1886 strike for an eight-hour workday. It also had earlier roots as a spring holiday of maypoles and flower baskets.

Dorothy Day was only one among many at Union Square trying to suggest a way out of the economic crisis of the time. This was well into the Great Depression, when the breadlines and the legions of unemployed people posed an existential threat to American capitalism; skirmishes between fed-up workers and abusive employers were common and often bloody. Day proposed a synthesis of Christian love and communist solidarity, militant pacifism in pursuit of “a society where it is easier to be good.” The Catholic Worker quickly became the script for a new religious and political movement. Within months, circulation grew from a first run of 2,500 copies to 10 times that, and it reached 150,000 before Day's pacifist convictions caused subscriptions to drop during the lead-up to World War II. Each May Day, New York's Catholic Workers still celebrate the
May Day to Law Day

Since the presidency of Grover Cleveland, authorities have made a point of replacing May Day with the more innocuous observance of Labor Day in September — a time for barbecues, sales and last-ditch beach trips. Dwight Eisenhower declared May 1 to be Law Day (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_Day,_U.S.A.), an almost universally ignored opportunity to celebrate the rule of law. But immigrants, who still have connections to countries where May Day is celebrated, continue to use the first of May to claim their rights. In 2006, millions took part in the “day without an immigrant” strikes (http://www.democracynow.org/2006/5/2/over_1_5_million_march_for), and it is immigrants — impatient for meaningful reform from Washington — who will rally at Union Square today (http://www.may1.info/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2014/04/MayDay2014.pdf). But as May Day comes and goes each year, many in the United States don’t even notice.

Two years ago was an exception. In the fall of 2011, Occupy Wall Street captured the world’s attention (http://www.therowboat.com/books/thank-you-anarchy/) with its village-like encampments in public squares and slogans against economic injustice. After a wave of police raids evicted nearly all of the encampments in late fall, Occupy activists started planning for the following May Day. They even started talking about a general strike.

"As inequality widens and our democracy weakens, we are losing the spirit of May Day, and suffering the consequences”

The idea of a mass strike was something of a novelty: most of the core Occupy activists, like most young people nowadays, had never had the chance to join a union at work. The fierce kind of labor organizing visible at Union Square in 1933 was long ago repressed or domesticated during the Cold War’s witch hunts. The Occupiers, therefore, had to rely on their imaginations. They studied the history of May Days past and debated what a general strike in the 21st century could look like. The kind of strike they discussed in those meetings in New York was only partly a matter of pickets and labor songs; what they really wanted on the “day without the 99%” was to turn the city (and the Internet) into a canvas, a gigantic work of art painted by everybody — causing chilling economic disruption alongside proof that a better world is possible. “I’m totally in love with the general strike,” one organizer said during a planning meeting in January 2012. “To me, it’s analogous to seeing the face of God.”

Out of reach

When May Day came, pickets swarmed around midtown in the morning by the dozen. They merged with hundreds of guitarists marching south from Bryant Park, playing and singing in unison as an “Occupy Guitarmy,” past the classes of the “Free University (http://freeuniversitynyc.org/)” at Madison Square Park. They arrived at Union Square to find fellow activists dancing around a maypole, weaving together ribbons inscribed with the grievances from one of the movement’s early documents (http://www.nycga.net/resources/documents/declaration/). Throughout the square, union members and immigrants’ groups rallied together, thanks to months of marathon planning meetings led by Occupiers. Around 30,000 people marched from Union Square to the financial district, chanting into the exhaust of the NYPD scooters hemming them in on either side. Four police helicopters hovered overhead.

I walked part of the way with an elderly nun, one who’d been going to protests since Dorothy Day was leading them. “When did it become like this?” she kept asking as she marveled at the level of police intimidation at a peaceful march. The day amounted to more than what May Day has typically been, but far short of what the Occupiers had dreamed of. The march did not repeat itself the year after. The world remained untransformed. There was no measurable general strike.

But perhaps there should have been.

The eight-hour day that the Chicago strikers sought in 1886 is still out of reach for many Americans. Many of us are forced to work overtime or multiple jobs just to make ends meet. The economist Thomas Piketty has revealed (http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/021_01/12987) how profoundly wealth inequality is widening and deepening; a recent
Replacing May Day with Labor Day was part of a decades-long effort to stifle the vibrancy of populist movements. And Labor Day is not enough. As inequality widens and our democracy weakens, we are losing the spirit of May Day, and suffering the consequences. Occupy's May Day didn't catch on as some hoped, but what it aspired to was right: an organized population powerful enough to confront an entrenched elite, and hopeful enough to celebrate democracy in the streets.


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"For decades, in the U.S. and around the world, May Day was International Workers' Day, commemorating protesters killed in Haymarket Square, Chicago, during the 1886 strike for an eight-hour workday."

The sin of omission is still a sin.

May Day was chosen by the SECOND INTERNATIONAL Communists and Socialist to celebrate the Haymarket massacre. This is a Communist celebration...please do not attempt to downplay the dirty aspect of May 1.

May Day was replaced? DO not flatter yourself. May Day is ignored by those who value individuality, freedom and reality.

The prey herd isn't going to confront the predator pack. They just want to get to the waterhole and pasture. If half their number die from predation, more water and grass. Mayday died from humans believing they were sheep.

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