Build a Choo-Choo and a Union Too: a CHAT Analysis of the 1894 Pullman Strike

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On the South Side of Chicago, nestled against the banks of Lake Calumet, there is a neighborhood called Pullman. What today is a gentrifying residential neighborhood was, more than a century ago, a burgeoning industrial community. Pullman was built as part of a larger phenomenon in the late 19th century, that of the Company Town. Within this corporate municipality, Labor Unions also arose. In this article, Lynch will examine the Activity Systems through which both genres express themselves, and also how they were affected by the Pullman Strike of 1894.

Ever since I was just a boy, I've been fascinated by trains. My grandad had a model train set in his basement that occupied countless fond hours of my early childhood. I would gaze- and still do gaze- rapturously at passing freight trains, chugging along vigorously, their mighty wheels pounding the track, sparks flying and steel screeching as the mighty smoke-belching beast came to a grinding halt at the station. My dad takes the Metra to work every day, and it never gets old watching his train pull out of the station and into the horizon. Even down at ISU, I've maintained my affection for the train. I take the Amtrak in Uptown up to Chicago quite frequently, grinning just as widely at the passing cornfields as I did when I was a lad. Given my history of locomotive love, it was only fitting that I would write my CHAT article on one of the most important events in American railroad history. That event, of course, was the doomed Pullman Strike of 1894, and the ways in which the Strike affected the **activity systems** of the Company Town and Labor Unions.

Pullman is a community on the South Side of Chicago, founded in 1880 as a model company town by the Pullman Palace Car Company. The Pullman Palace Car Company, founded by George M. Pullman, was the leading American manufacturer of luxury locomotives at the close of the 19th century. The company was famous for their luxurious sleeper rail cars, which were sought the world over, as well as for employing African-American porters on their trains. A Pullman Sleeper Car was used to transport the corpse of President Abraham Lincoln from Washington DC to Springfield after his assassination. Hundreds of thousands of people came to see his body, and many of them were impressed by the palatial car on which he traveled. This, coupled with the post-war economic boom, helped propel the Pullman Company to the forefront of America's robust railroad transportation industry. For the next decade and a half, they produced countless rail cars for the country's well-to-do, and George Pullman made himself

a handsome profit. They persisted through the Panic of 1873, and by the end of the decade were ready to expand production further. In this context, George Pullman laid the first stones of the factory-city that would bear his name: Pullman, Illinois.

Feudalism 2: Electric Boogaloo

The town of Pullman was the most salient example of the Company Town, which emerged as a concept all over the United States in the latter half of the 19th century. Most early company towns developed in extraction industries in the hinterland, where resources were abundant but population was sparse. To ease logistical concerns, companies built, sometimes in a matter of weeks, entire towns and villages from scratch. That way, the workers lived at their job site and did not have to make time-consuming journeys for supplies to the nearest town, which very often could be many dozens of miles away. At first, the concept was localized to lumber camps, coal mines, and railway construction sites. But, in 1880, George Pullman decided to attempt to implement this concept in an urban industrial setting. Thus, the pioneering and experimental town of Pullman, Illinois was born.

The employees at the Pullman Car Works in Chicago worked, ate, slept, and lived on company property. They bought their groceries at Pullman-owned shops, and paid their rent to Pullman landlords. Churches, libraries, parks, and other public amenities thought to have a positive social effect were owned and operated by the Pullman company. Establishments they believed to have a deleterious effect on the morality of the workers were banned, most notably bars and taverns. Since the town was the private domain of the Pullman company, no municipal government existed. The worker-residents of the town of Pullman increasingly felt that the Pullman company was running the town like a dictatorship. This left the industrial workers feeling alienated. Politically, they were alienated from the affairs of their town, which they were

subject to, but over which they had no control. They were also evermore alienated from their individual humanity by the oligarchical nature of industrial capitalism, which they were subject to in its rawest form. These dual indignities began to rouse a sense of class consciousness among the workers.

The methods of control imposed by the Pullman company on the workers of their eponymous town formed what is know in **CHAT** (Cultural-Historical Activity Theory) as an **activity system**. An activity system is a sort of structured **genre** framework, existing within defined limits of what is and is not part of said activity system. The main purpose of an activity system is to put a genre into action. In other words, to make a static idea dynamic; to see how the genre moves, interacts, and behaves in the real world.

The town of Pullman, and company towns more broadly, can be filed into a distinguishable activity system. In each company town, the interactions between her denizen-workers and the owners reflected a rigid economic caste system. The class hierarchy already present in industrial-capitalist society became formal and institutionalized in Pullman. To consider the citizen-workers indentured servants is to be exceeding charitable to the bosses. If a worker never left Pullman town, he would never see anything that was not the property of the Pullman company. While it is a begrudgingly accepted fact of life that your boss can dictate what you do with yourself while you're on the clock, the town and company of Pullman extended that oppression further than had been seen since the abolition of serfdom. The personal lives of Pullman workers were strictly controlled by the company as well. The establishments that the citizen-workers were allowed to frequent were up to the whim of the company. A Pullman worker, after a twelve hour shift in a deafening, dangerous, and oftentimes deadly workplace, did not even have the luxury of a drink to ease his shaken nerves. Bars were prohibited by the

Pullman company. Even the roofs above their head at night belonged to George Pullman. If a worker were to fall into arrears, be he late on rent or a few dollars short at the company's grocery, he would become indebted to the company until he could pay off his debts. During this time, he no longer functioned as an indentured servant. He become George Pullman's serf.

Panic! At the Railroad

The tension between the workers and bosses in Pullman came to a head in the aftermath of the Panic of 1893. The Panic was a major economic recession that was caused primarily by railroad speculation and overbuilding. The Pullman company operated railways in addition to producing train cars, which made them one of the firms most responsible for the Panic. Demand for both of these sectors declined dramatically due to the Panic. In a gambit to remain profitable, the Pullman company slashed wages for workers. Pay decreased by more than twenty-five percent over a series of wage reductions. While losing up to a quarter of their income delivered plenty of hardship to the workers of Pullman, matters were made even worse by the Pullman company's refusal to lower the price of goods at company stores or, even more direly, rents at company lodgings. With their purchasing power dramatically diminished, and countless workers becoming indebted to the Pullman company, the status quo could no longer hold. By 1894, a strike was on the horizon.

Strikes, of course, do not happen by themselves. In order to make their voices heard, the workers had to stick together. The Pullman company could evict or fire a worker without blinking an eye, and for a long time that fear alone was sufficient to keep the workers in line. But when the entire shop floor stood up for themselves, or demanded a pay raise, their power was immense. The workers united could overcome the might of their bosses, but only when they are united. This notion was coupled with the solidarity that the workers felt with each other as a

result of the shared hardships that arose after the wage cuts. These two ideas played well off of each other, and a strong sense of class consciousness rapidly gestated in Pullman. Class consciousness arises when a social class, in this case the industrial workers of Pullman, becomes aware of their position, or class, in a stratified economic system, and begins to participate in the class struggle. In the early days of 1894, the workers of Pullman were taken into the fold of the ARU (American Railway Union), led by the eminent American socialist and trade unionist, Eugene V. Debs.

The Gang Organizes a Union

The ARU, and labor unions in general, functioned in accordance with a defined **activity system**. The first step, naturally, was organizing the workers. To organize the workers, it was necessary to first get them to realize that they needed a union. In other words, to rouse class consciousness. The wage reductions, coupled with the company's refusal to lower rents and the price of goods accordingly, were sufficient to rouse this sense within the workers of Pullman. With the workers finding a sense of solidarity with each other, they then would proceed to organize their workplace. These days, lots of union organizing is done via card-check, in which a union is allowed to form if a majority of workers on the shop floor sign an authorization form, referred to as a "card", expressing their desire for collective bargaining. It is unclear from my sources what exact mechanisms were used to organize the union at Pullman but, by the spring of 1894, they were affiliated with Debs's ARU. The harsh police measures taken against trade unionists in the 19th century are at least partially responsible for why we don't have reliable information on the specific organizational methods used at Pullman, such as whether card-check or another method were used in those heady days of early 1894.

Union organizing in 2018 has a very different character than union organizing in 1894. This is largely due to the Wagner Act of 1935, which legally protected the right of private sector employees to join and form trade unions, and mandated that employers engage in collective bargaining with said union. However, no such legal protections existed in 1894. Union organizing was a dangerous, secretive proposition. Bosses would frequently bring in private security firms, most notoriously the Pinkerton detective agency, to bust the burgeoning unions. The Pinkertons became so infamous for their brutal strikebreaking that the word 'Pinkerton' has become a byword in labor circles for strikebreakers in general, especially violent ones. The private security was brought in to beat up union members, crack skulls, and cow the workers into submission. When this did not work, the bosses would bring in replacement workers called 'scabs.' These scabs were often African-American or recent immigrants, which exacerbated racial strife in addition to economic unrest. Should both of these options fail, the bosses would persuade their allies in government to rally the national guard or the army to quash the strikers by force.

STRIKE!

The unionized Pullman workers attempted to negotiate a pay rise, but management refused to meet with the union leaders or let a third party arbitrate the dispute. With formal discussions failing them, the union felt they had no choice but to strike. The workers of Pullman walked off the shop floor on the eleventh day of May. A month later, Debs' ARU voted to boycott Pullman cars to show solidarity with Pullman. The ARU refused to work on trains pulling Pullman cars, but railroad overseers refused to uncouple the Pullman cars from the rest of the train. Thus, the boycott rapidly expanded well beyond its original scope. The Strike touched twenty-seven of the forty-four states in the Union. As Chicago was the hub of the nation's rail

network, the primary mode of inland transportation at the time, goods such as food, industrial products, and raw materials backed up on the tracks for miles. Rail traffic, and therefore all interstate commerce, ground to a halt in the early summer of 1894. The bosses at Pullman, and all the other major rail companies, scrambled to find a way to clamp down on the strike. Even the ARU was surprised how effective the action was. Unfortunately for the labor leaders resting on their laurels, the tycoons of the rail industry had devised a nefarious plot to undercut the strike, all with the help of ole Uncle Sam.

Representatives from Pullman Palace Car Company and two dozen other leading companies of the railway industry approached the US Attorney General's Office in Chicago with a sly technicality that could implode the whole strike. Mail was delivered by train in those days, trains that the strikers had prevented from reaching their destination. Interfering with the delivery of the mail was interpreted as mail fraud, a federal crime. The Attorney General was persuaded to issue an injunction against the strikers, stating that they were in violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act and illegally preventing mail from reaching its destination. The ARU had offered to operate cars carrying mail so long as there were no Pullman-owned cars on the train- their issue was with Pullman, not with the government. The railway companies, however, refused to uncouple the Pullman cars. As the mail still wasn't getting where it needed to go, the injunction was granted the second day of July. The injunction was very broad in its scope, prohibiting any and all actions that might prevent the trains and the mail from getting to their destination.

To enforce the injunction, President Grover Cleveland called in the Army at the behest of George Pullman. He did not consult the Governor of Illinois, John Peter Altgeld, before making this decision. Altgeld was considered a friend of labor, as he worked as a manual laborer as a young man and was generally sympathetic to the plight of the working class. Federal troops

arrived within days, and violence erupted almost immediately between the armed soldiers and the unarmed workers. The tension peaked on the 4th of July, when soldiers fired on and killed as many as thirty workers who had allegedly damaged Pullman company property. Force was ruthlessly applied by the Army all across the country, breaking the backbone of the boycott with bullets and bayonets. The trains were crossing the nation almost as if nothing had happened by the middle of the month.

After things had settled down, several key leaders of the ARU were imprisoned. This included Eugene Debs, who was charged with "contempt." The union leaders who had skirted arrest were blacklisted, and the rank and file were only allowed to return to their jobs- at the pre-strike starvation wage- if they renounced their membership in the ARU. While the Strike failed to achieve its stated goal, it had a profound effect on the **activity systems** of both the Company Town and the Labor Union.

Strike Struck Down

The notion of a "company town" mostly ended with the century a few years later. Companies and workers alike discovered that the ills of industrial capitalism could not be ameliorated by utopian communities- they ran much deeper than public morals and vice. The activity system of the Company Town was part of, and subservient to, the activity system of Capitalism. One of the key features of capitalism is class antagonism, and company-funded parks could only Band-Aid that gash for so long. Company towns would limp along into the 1930's in the extractive industries, but the Pullman Strike had rung the death knell for these fleeting industrial utopias.

It is ironic that the activity system of the "winning" side of the Strike- the Company Town- would perish shortly afterwards, while the "losing" side- the Labor Unions- would come

out of the decade stronger than it had ever been. In the aftermath of the unprecedented national boycott, President Cleveland ordered a commission to investigate the causes and conduct of the Strike. The commission recommended that all future railway disputes be entered into compulsory mediation, an idea that was given the force of law in 1898 by Cleveland's successor William McKinley. This strengthened labor's position greatly, as management was now legally required to negotiate with the unions, instead of just calling in the Pinkertons to crack skulls.

This added another facet to the activity system of labor unions. The federal government was acting with increasing impartiality in labor disputes as the Gilded Age gave way to the Progressive Era, and labor movements began to really come into their own in the dawning twentieth century. While the Strike of 1894 failed to achieve the goals it set out to, it affected enormous change in how the government interacted with labor. While the government was by no means an enemy of Capital in this era, they were no longer the toadies of big business they were in the Gilded Age.

Those in power, such as the soon-to-be President Theodore Roosevelt, sympathized with the plight of the workers at Pullman and across the country. Over the next two decades the Progressive Movement would implement sweeping reforms prohibiting child labor, improving workplace safety conditions, ensuring only sanitary meat was sold, dismantling many monopolistic trusts, and more. The only labor action in American history with a longer shadow was the Haymarket Affair of 1886.

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