

REVIEW ESSAY

Comparing Labor Politics in the US and Australia: New Light on an Old Question

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ROBIN ARCHER, *Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?* [Princeton Studies in American Politics.] Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 2008, 368 pp. \$38.50; £26.95.

For historians and historically minded social scientists in the US, the hallowed “Why no socialism?” question has come to be greeted with a roll of the eyes. Not another catalogue of reasons why the US was a bit player on the stage of world socialism! At least since Werner Sombart posed the question and an assortment of American scholars ranging from Selig Perlman (*A Theory of the Labor Movement*) to Louis Hartz (*The Liberal Tradition in America*) to the irrepressible Seymour Martin Lipset (*It Didn't Happen Here!*) piled on, historians of the left and labor have squirmed uncomfortably whenever the question is posed. The answers appeared to be both irrefutable and unconvincing. Something seemed missing. But what?

One set of responses simply ignored the question and proceeded to document the scale of class conflict and persistent left organization in the face of enormous government and corporate repression (Philip Foner). Another argued that European-style socialism is an inappropriate measuring stick. American workers invented their own brand of anti-capitalist republicanism that posed as fundamental a challenge to capitalist hegemony as Europeans did with their “socialism” (Sean Wilentz). A third, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, suggested that the US was not so much behind Europeans in the advent of social democracy as ahead in its decline (Eric Foner). It has seemed in many ways that little new light could be shed on Sombart’s question, that it posed a false dichotomy, and called for an answer to an essentially unanswerable question – why something that *should* have happened, didn’t.

Robin Archer has bravely entered the fray with a somewhat redefined question – Why no *labor party* in the US? And, remarkably, he has brought new insight and a carefully discriminating methodology that breaks new ground. This is a closely reasoned, carefully argued, and deeply researched study. More than any previous work, it is rigorously comparative, using a “systematic most-similar comparison” with Australia to winnow the explanatory variables down to a small set that promises a more persuasive explanation than we have previously had. While the exercise is not entirely successful, it advances the discussion significantly further and opens new possibilities for a richer and more nuanced comparative understanding of the US experience in the varied landscape of social democratic politics worldwide. Robin Archer offers a learned, densely packed, and in some respects difficult read. To make his case, he has mastered a vast literature on labor and politics in the US and Australia, but in the process additionally has had to reckon with satellite literatures on colonial settler societies, race and ethnicity, religion, liberalism, constitutionalism, the judiciary, and the internecine politics of the left in two countries.

The book is organized in a series of chapters that examine in depth, in both countries, one potential explanatory variable after another. Given the fact that Australia did form a “labor-based party” that, as early as 1891 (in New South Wales and somewhat later in the other colonies), became a viable, competitive party and the US did not, Archer’s persistent question from one chapter to the next becomes: Was Australia different enough from the US to account for the different political outcomes? The analysis of each variable proceeds from one case to the other, weighing similarities and differences.

For instance, Archer considers the standard of living of US workers in comparison with their Australian (and European) counterparts. Using indices ranging from GDP per capita, real wages, and per capita food consumption, he confirms that American workers, on average, had higher levels of wages and consumption than German or British workers. Sombart’s “roast beef and apple pie” thesis would seem to be confirmed. But, when the Australian case is introduced, he shows that Aussie workers had an even higher standard of living. So, Archer concludes, “with more beef and pies than was good for them, Australian workers set about forming a labor party” (p. 27).

Another tried and true variable that Archer takes up is the impact of racial division and hostility on working-class solidarity and labor party formation. In most accounts the US is portrayed as exceptionally divided along racial and ethnic lines, and such divisions militated against the kind of working-class solidarity that would have made a labor-based party successful. But, by the Australian standard, the US looks much less exceptional. Indeed, if anything, racism permeated Australian society,

and workers bought into the idea of a “white Australia” in ways that reinforced the extreme exclusion of “blacks” (Aboriginals and “Kanakas”) and the Chinese. He documents the virulence of such attitudes and the persistent hostility they engendered. If anything, racism in Australia seems to have provided a hospitable medium for class identity and labor party formation. American workers’ antagonism toward the Chinese, the racial hostility directed at new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, and the Jim Crow segregation that infected many unions in the late nineteenth century are well documented. Was white racial solidarity – “whiteness” – comparable in the US? Archer answers, “Yes”. Did it provide a comparably hospitable medium in the US for labor party formation? The answer would, of course be, “No”. Archer is therefore prepared to discard the variable of racial hostility as of little explanatory value. However, his direct evidence is fragmentary and not altogether persuasive.

Archer’s comparative treatment of race fails to acknowledge the unique circumstances that the legacy of slavery posed for American workers. The size and regional concentration of the black population differentiates the US case from the Australian. Although racism and racial segregation were by no means confined to the South, the extreme difficulties that labor organizers and their political allies faced in that region significantly undermined their ability to build a viable national labor party. Recent work, like that of Matthew Hild, and C. Vann Woodward’s classic study of the New South, document the corrosive effects that race had on the capacity of aggrieved southern workers and farmers to build and sustain inter-racial, political farmer-laborism.¹ Queensland this was not. Archer’s choice to focus on the 1890s should accentuate the exceptionalism of the US side of the story, where rising numbers of lynchings and the massive disfranchisement of African Americans across the South eliminated black voters who were critical to sustaining a populist–labor alliance in the region.² The problem of Archer’s narrow temporal focus on the early 1890s is one to which I will return.

Archer distinguishes a set of “negative findings” – variables that do not significantly differentiate the US and Australian experiences and therefore are of no explanatory value – from a few “positive findings” that produce potentially explanatory differences. Among the negative findings, in addition to standard of living and racial hostility, he identifies the familiar issues of manhood suffrage (early achievement with modest restrictions),

1. Matthew Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor and Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth-Century South* (Athens, GA, 2007), and C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1951).

2. A powerful case study of the consequences of disfranchisement is Lawrence Goodwyn, “Populist Dreams and Negro Rights: East Texas as a Case Study”, *American Historical Review*, 76 (1971), pp. 1435–1456.

electoral systems (a mixed bag of forms of representation), and liberal values and tradition (common to both cultures and a rhetorical tool for resisting capitalist hegemony). In addition, he identifies other variables that, although distinctive to the US, could have promoted rather than deterred labor party formation. These include a presidential (versus a parliamentary) system and two-party rule. In his view this structure of governance did not preclude a nascent labor party pursuing a potentially successful “balance of power” legislative strategy. Similarly, a federal system, which Australia had not yet achieved in the 1890s, might either inhibit a national party-building strategy or create multiple points of access for regional or local party building. Finally, a powerful and hostile judiciary, largely immune from electoral control, may have channeled labor away from political activism toward narrower economic organization, as some scholars claim, or, alternatively, intensified labor’s efforts to build political pressure through executive and legislative initiatives and direct election of judges.

These negative findings, while intriguing, do not all achieve the same level of persuasiveness. On the question of the impact of liberalism, Archer challenges the well-entrenched idea that a dominant liberalism diffused class identity and consciousness. He argues, first, that a liberal, egalitarianism was equally well established in Australia and the US, but, more innovatively, he asserts that in both cultures the claims of egalitarianism and freedom reinforced the imperative for labor to organize on its own behalf in defense of these values against corporate usurpers and robber barons. The development of a “new liberalism” in both contexts rationalized increased state intervention against capitalist concentration in defense of “freedom” and “equality”. That Australian but not American workers organized politically cannot, therefore, be laid at liberalism’s doorstep.

Somewhat more problematic in my view is the set of arguments bundled as the “electoral system”. On the issue of suffrage, despite early (white) manhood suffrage in both countries, the mix of electoral restrictions in each was different and had different impacts. The fundamental similarity of having achieved “early” suffrage, as compared with Europe, stands as a common point of reference for the US and Australia. However, plural voting, a restrictive municipal franchise (not mentioned by Archer), and persistence of some property qualifications in Australia, must be weighed against a very different and more highly discriminatory set of restrictions in the US, where a growing immigrant population saw the elimination of the alien franchise in many states, and where massive disfranchisement of African Americans (discussed above) critically narrowed the electorate in the South. Rather than equating such different types of suffrage restriction, one might argue that the fundamentally discriminatory nature of the restrictions in the US reinforced racial and ethnic divisions that made class-wide mobilization around suffrage more problematic.

Archer also argues that the electoral structure of the US – single member districts, presidential governance, and federalism – proved no serious barrier to labor party mobilization. Here he resorts largely to conjecture and hypothetical argument – noting some instances of multi-member electoral districts and preferential voting, the possible use of balance of power strategies in maximizing the effect of minority congressional representation, and the opportunity of multiple points of entry in a federal system. While intriguing, these arguments have a largely abstract and hypothetical quality. They invite more detailed analysis of specific cases of the dynamics of labor mobilization at municipal, state, and federal levels in the face of the well-entrenched two parties.

In many respects the most intriguing and original analysis offered by Archer concerns those few variables that he identifies as “positive findings,” where Australian–US differences seem strong enough to be explanatory of different political outcomes. The three are: repression, religion, and left sectarianism. Each has some merit and some problems. Most persuasive, in my view, is Archer’s argument that repression in the US took a particularly heavy toll on labor and its capacity to organize politically. He quickly disposes of an older “soft repression” thesis, according to which repression of unions in Europe was more severe than in the US and therefore produced in the UK, Germany, and elsewhere a greater inclination on the part of labor to organize politically. The data simply do not support such a contention, and they are even less compelling when the US and Australia are compared.

Archer focuses on six major strikes of the 1890s, three in Australia – maritime (1890), Queensland shearers (1891), and Broken Hill miners (1892) – and three in the US – Homestead steel workers (1892), Coeur d’Alene miners (1892), and Pullman railway men (1894). The data he marshals are some of the most original and compelling in the book. By any of the measures he chooses – armed forces deployed, ratio of armed forces to strikers, union leaders and workers arrested, and workers killed – the US strikes witnessed dramatically higher levels of violence and more draconian state repression. This will hardly be surprising to students of US and Australian labor history. But when combined with historically contingent data – in other words, when they are put into motion – their impact and significance become more telling.

Archer documents the close business–military ties in the US but not Australia. More consequentially, repression of the strikes in Australia, significant if less violent, precipitated labor party organization in the different colonies according to their own needs and pace. Unions were defeated not destroyed and mobilized to fight another day – on both economic and political fronts. By comparison, in the US repression led to the “destruction” of those unions most severely repressed, consequentially the American Railway Union (ARU) following the Pullman

strike and boycott. In a counterfactual aside Archer argues that the loss of the ARU was particularly devastating to the prospects of labor party formation. A general union of skilled and unskilled workers, organized throughout the states west of Chicago, and committed to government ownership of the railroads, the ARU, had it survived, could have provided the “organizational ballast” for a successful labor party initiative – as the Shearers’ Union in Australia had – and forced a strategic accommodation from Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) stalwarts. This emphasis on historical contingency is in fact quite out of character in a book so heavily weighted toward structural factors. I will return to this point in conclusion.

Two other positive findings deserve mention. The first concerns religion, or more precisely the political salience of religion. Archer presents interesting data on the relative position of religion, especially evangelical Protestantism, in the two countries, some of which is worthy of debate (an 1895 Iowa state census, for instance, found levels of “no religious identification” to be higher than those in Australia). But, more importantly, he argues that religious differences – what American political historians referred to as “ethno-cultural” values – shaped partisan political loyalties more profoundly in the US and diverted workers and their trade-union leaders from independent political action out of fear that religious/political dissension would destroy their unions. Australians by comparison faced sharp partisan divisions over “fiscal” issues – free trade versus protectionism – which, although divisive did not carry the same “value” weight and were ultimately less threatening to a politicized labor movement.

The ethno-cultural school of American political history has been significantly criticized and now qualified even by some of its former proponents. By the “Era of Great Upheaval” (1877–1896), despite continued agitation around religiously salient issues like prohibition, parochial education, and anti-Catholicism, considerable evidence suggests that economic and class issues were disordering the reigning party system (“*pietists vs ritualists*”) by the 1890s and restructuring partisan loyalties around class identification. The cumulative effect of greenback labor, union labor, and populist party mobilizations, together with local municipal reform campaigns in key cities like Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Toledo, Cleveland, and scores of smaller industrial towns checked the disabling effects of religiously motivated partisanism. The net effect would be to qualify, if not discount, the significance Archer attributes to religion as a positively differentiating variable.

The final positive finding defined by Archer is both familiar and interestingly innovative. For a country in which “socialism” is supposed to have been such a marginal factor, Archer points with fascinating detail to the extraordinary levels of left sectarianism in the US that burrowed deeply into the labor movement and its political offshoots, however fragile they may have been. Stolid advocates of “pure and simple unionism” like

Samuel Gompers and his mentor from the Cigarmakers' Union, Adolph Strasser, rooted their trade-union consciousness in one sectarian strand of the International Workingmen's Association (First International).

While Marxists and Lasalleans had their respective followers in Australia as well, and factionalism between single taxers and socialists infected party debates, they seem, by comparison with the US, relatively tame, even innocent. Archer quotes one Australian would-be socialist in 1894 as recalling, "We were discussing *Capital*, not that either of us knew much about the famous work [...]. He had investigated the cover. I had probed further, just turned it over. To study Marx one requires a hard seat, a bare table and a head swathed in wet ice-cold towels" (213). With a wonderfully ironic sense, Archer notes that it may have been indigenous American ideological influences – Edward Bellamy, Henry George, and Laurence Gronlund – that contributed to an Australian climate conducive to labor party organization, and that it was the strength of ideologically polarizing versions of Marxism institutionalized in the AFL and the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) in the US that inhibited the political commitment of labor.

Here too there are naturally points of potential disagreement. Archer may exaggerate the strength of the SLP and the threat it posed to the AFL. Gompers was likely less concerned with whatever modest threat socialists in the 1890s posed, than with the possibility of a rival federation of general unions, with ties to his arch rivals – the Knights of Labor, the ARU, Western miners, and industrial unionists (brewery workers, machinists, boot- and shoemakers) within the AFL itself. Such a federation might well have been the launching pad for a successful labor party effort, but more immediately it threatened to submerge craft unionists within an expanded "House of Labor".³

Two further, more general, points about the limitations of this study deserve at least passing attention. First, this is unequivocally the work of a social scientist, and the systematic methodology it deploys is reflective of the author's disciplinary roots. For better or worse, the comparative cases are presented in relation to discreet variables, each carefully sliced and diced in terms of the relevant historical literature and some primary evidence. The variables are classified (negative and positive findings) and weighted accordingly. The comparison yields interesting, at times surprising, results that raise or lower one variable or another on the scale of importance. On the whole, the comparison between the US and Australia is usefully illuminating. But for historians an analysis that focuses

3. See David Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America", *Le Mouvement Social*, 111 (1980), pp. 201–215 and *idem*, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (New York, 1987).

attention on multiple variables must ultimately also take account of their interaction and impact on each other in real time.

Historical change ultimately has a significant element of contingency and agency. As the late Herbert Gutman put it, reiterating the “Sartre question” (with apologies for the gendered language): “The essential is not what ‘one’ has done to man, but what man does with what ‘one’ has done to him”.⁴ At a few key points, Archer in fact opens the analysis to consideration of precisely such contingencies. Given certain choices within the constraints at hand, other outcomes are imaginable, for instance the survival of the ARU to fight another day. As one militant railroad worker subsequently told Debs, “There was no reason for the American Railway Union passing out of existence on account of losing a strike – we lost one – we won one – other unions have lost many strikes [...] and have materially benefited the conditions of workers.”⁵

Archer acknowledges that the conditions at play in 1894 had a certain plasticity. But he gives them insufficient weight in his analysis. Ethno-religious loyalties were easing in the face of class demands. In a referendum earlier in the year, unions affiliated with the AFL had, by most accounts, voted overwhelmingly to support the new AFL Political Programme, which Gompers and his allies struggled mightily to bury in amendments at the December convention. A gathering of trade-union leaders at Briggs House in Chicago at the height of the Pullman strike had come close to calling for a nationwide work stoppage in sympathy with the beleaguered ARU. The political gravity of the moment, in the late months of 1894, could easily have shifted, despite the structural constraints working against the formation of a labor party and set in motion a whole different succession of events. As Archer himself puts it, “Had the railway union survived, Gompers and the AFL would probably have accommodated them pragmatically as they did with the mine workers, and a different attitude toward politics may have emerged from the industrial upheavals of the early 1890s” (133).

A second general concern about this study centers on the author’s decision to focus the comparison almost exclusively on the early 1890s. In some respects it represents a logical choice. A significant impetus to organize a labor-based party occurred in both countries in those years in the immediate aftermath of major national strikes. In Australia after the defeat of the maritime strike of 1890, the New South Wales Labor Party won 25 per cent of the seats in the colonial parliament the next year and,

4. Herbert Gutman, “Labor History and the ‘Sartre Question’”, in *idem, Power & Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, Ira Berlin (ed.) (New York, 1987), p. 326.

5. William John Pinkerton, “Debs’ Treachery to the Working Class” (Washington DC, 1911), quoted in Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana, IL, 1987), p. 96.

although its success ebbed and flowed in succeeding years, the Labor Party had established a firm footing and would do so in short order in Queensland and South Australia. In the US the great depression of 1893 and the volatile labor conflicts of the years following the nationwide rail strikes of 1877 set the stage for what became the most massive conflict between labor and capital in the era – the Pullman strike of 1894.

Occurring in the context of a new farmer–labor political movement that seemed to be gathering steam and the positive results of a referendum of members of AFL-affiliated unions, all signs pointed toward the formation of a British- (or Australian-) style labor party. Archer quite appropriately gives considerable attention to the days-long debate over the political programme at the December 1894 AFL convention. But, by that time the Pullman strike had been lost, its leaders under indictment, and the labor populists had seen disappointingly modest gains in the fall election. When the programme failed adoption through clever maneuvering of the AFL leadership, a propitious moment for establishing a labor party had passed. These parallel sequences of developments provide the opening for Robin Archer to compare divergent outcomes and the underlying factors that may account for them.

As compelling as this “moment” was, it also represented but one possible point of comparison out of many. In the US case, political experimentation by the labor movement and its socialist and reform allies continued with considerable vitality for the next twenty years and more. A more robust and less sectarian socialist movement emerged that was capable of significant electoral success at the local level. By 1912 the Socialist Party of America (SPA) was a nationally significant party in a crowded field of reform interests. Labor-based parties of varied stripes governed scores of cities, even as labor and socialist parties across much of the industrializing world, including Australia (and New Zealand) enjoyed more mixed municipal success. Whether a rising tide of labor and socialist political success at the municipal level might have continued, save for the onset of World War I, as some scholarship suggests, is a historical contingency worthy perhaps of the same systematic treatment Robin Archer has offered us for 1894.⁶

But, despite its limitations, this deeply researched and closely reasoned study sets a new bar for the comparative study of labor politics and breaks the logjam of explanatory variables other studies of the “why no socialism” question have left us. By narrowing the field of explanation through a pair of “most similar” cases, albeit for one “moment” in time, Archer has illuminated possible pathways for future comparison. And that is no small feat.

6. See, for instance, James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912–1925* (New York, 1967).