

New Perspectives on Socialism I

The Socialist Party Revisited

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The essays contained in this and the October 2003 special issues of the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* were originally delivered at a conference sponsored by Indiana State University, the repository of the Debs papers and site of his house, now a national landmark. Intended to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of Debs' first run for the presidency, the conference themes of socialism and dissent attracted a diverse group of scholars, intellectuals, and activists. Their contributions help us gauge the state of the field. They also suggest new departures in the study of socialism.

Socialism – in popular definition the political movement to replace private ownership of productive property and the profit motive with democratic and collective control of the modern economy – dated in the United States to the early nineteenth century. Prior to the Civil War, most socialists, inspired by such thinkers as Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, sought to withdraw from the existing market society and establish alternative communities. “Scientific” or working class-based socialism came to America with German-speaking immigrants. Initially divided between followers of Ferdinand Lassalle and Karl Marx, these socialists believed that the evolution of capitalist society itself created the basis for socialism by replacing household-based production with social production and by creating a large wage-labor class with no interest in the preservation of private property. In the Marxist version, which by the late 1880s had attained ascendancy, trade unions acted as the incubators of class-consciousness, which would unite the working-class in a struggle to overthrow the class rule of the capitalists. Before 1900, the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) served as the base for the trade union and political activities of these largely immigrant Socialists.¹

¹For introductions to the history of the Socialist Party see Howard H. Quint, *The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement* (Indianapolis, 1953); David

The decade of the 1890s was the critical turning point in the growth and development of the socialist movement in America. Responding to economic crisis, turbulent and violent strikes, agrarian unrest, the formation of the Populist Party, and the corporatization of business and industry, significant numbers of middle class reformers rejected the still-powerful politics of anti-monopolism and began a hesitant but eventually decisive acceptance of the changes brought by industrialization, nationalized market relations, and the rise of the corporation. Among the array of new political possibilities, many began a serious consideration of socialism. But rather than the Marxian socialism of the SLP, they turned to non-revolutionary, ethical forms of socialism, evident in the enormous popularity of Edward Bellamy's utopian socialist novel, *Looking Backward*. Meanwhile, the sectarian SLP leadership of Daniel DeLeon estranged many of the party's labor union members. In 1901 these dissidents, reinforced by middle class reform elements and ex-Populists, gathered in Indianapolis to create the Socialist Party of America (SPA).

A coalition of diverse elements – German skilled, unionized craftsmen, Jewish garment workers, Midwestern small-town Progressive reformers, Oklahoma tenant farmers, and Western anarcho-syndicalists who later affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) – the SPA nonetheless grew steadily in the first twelve years of the new century. Spurred on by a court-assisted, employer counterattack on the labor movement that pushed many militant trade unionists to the left and more generally the Progressive Era's reaction against competitive individualism, the SPA grew from fewer than 10,000 members at its founding to 118,000 in 1912. Notably, the majority of the party's new members were native-born.

Evidence that the party had become "Americanized" came in the 1911 elections when 700,000 voters in state and local elections elected seventy-four major government officials. In 1912, party presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs won 6 percent of the vote. Two major Socialist weeklies, *The Appeal to Reason* and *Wilshire's Magazine* each averaged over 250,000 readers. Popular novelists such as Jack London and Upton Sinclair published explicitly as Socialists, complementing such party leaders and publicists as Debs, Victor Berger of Milwaukee,

Morris Hillquit of New York City, William “Big Bill” Haywood of the Western Federation of Miners and the IWW, and Kate Richards O’Hare of Missouri.

By 1912, however, party growth had reached a plateau. A nasty internal dispute over the status of the IWW and its methods shook party solidarity. Just as importantly, the American Federation of Labor launched a vigorous national electoral and lobbying effort in support of the Democratic Party culminating in the administration of Woodrow Wilson that offered unionists a viable political alternative. Mainstream Progressive politicians adopted many of the SPA’s “immediate demands,” such as support for unemployment compensation and prohibition of child labor, and by 1916 pro-labor Democrats launched election appeals directly to the Socialist rank and file.

The large and growing gap between the party and the labor movement reached a crisis point with the advent of the World War I. While the SPA unrelentingly opposed America’s entry into the war, the AFL supported the Wilson administration in return for protection of the right to organize freely in the nation’s war-related industries, resulting in the addition of over one million members. The ensuing federal government repression of the SPA during the war decimated the party’s native-born membership, which was soon shored up by an accession of foreign-born members. Inspired by the success of the Russian Revolution, these new members formed a powerful constituency for the new Communist movement. Following an internal split in 1919 provoked by the growing belief in the imminence of revolution, the SPA’s presence in American life declined precipitously and henceforth was never more than a minor factor in electoral politics.

It is possible to distinguish two waves in the way historians have treated the Socialist Party during the Progressive Era. In both, it should be noted, the leading historians have been activists or former activists trying to construct a “usable past.”

Those writing in the 1950s viewed themselves much in the manner of coroners conducting an autopsy of an exhausted and dying movement. Chief among them was the sociologist Daniel Bell. A former Socialist himself, Bell in *Marxian Socialism in the United States*, wrote out of deep disillusionment with ideological Marxism and a strong antagonism to Soviet Communism and its American adherents. In Bell’s narrative the party, like reformation Protestants, was “in but not of” American society. Never feeling completely comfortable within

American reality and subject to fits of “chiliasm” (the belief in looming final conflict ushering in a utopian age), Socialists proved incapable of behaving like a democratically “responsible” American party. At every critical juncture – most notably the party’s response to World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution – Socialists ended up retreating from their country’s mainstream culture and taking flight from political reality. Bell, it should be pointed out, did not think socialism *had* to be a failure. It could have adapted to American society, but did not, because it never overcame an “ideological dogmatism” that derived from the role it played for its member-activists as a secular religion.

Other scholars of Bell’s generation who tried to answer the redoubtable question of “why no viable socialist party in America” pinned the failure on conditions external to the party. These American “exceptionalists” argued that something in the nature of American life precluded socialism from taking root. Unlike earlier, mostly nineteenth-century exceptionalists who viewed their country’s dispensation as a gift to be treasured, the new exceptionalists were highly critical. Louis Hartz, the most notable among them, attributed socialism’s limitations to American society’s lack of a feudal heritage, hence an inability to think outside the box of “Lockean” liberalism. In addition to an ideological consensus that precluded socialism, others pointed to the constraints created by America’s electoral system or to widespread social mobility. Exceptionalism continues to exercise a tight grip on some students of socialism, especially those in the social sciences.²

The second wave of scholarship arose from the needs of New Left intellectuals, beginning with the editors of *Studies on the Left*, to construct a usable, non-communist past. In a series of articles and in *The Decline of American Socialism* (1967), James Weinstein took on Bell’s assertion that the Socialist Party was not really “of” American society, and the view of Ira Kipnis that it was already in decline after 1912 due to a victory of its “right wing.” According to Weinstein, the party was genuinely revolutionary – witness its united stand against World War I. Just as important, Weinstein’s social history of the party revealed its surprising electoral strength, the breadth of readership of its

²Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955); Daniel T. Rodgers, “Exceptionalism,” in *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, eds., Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood (Princeton, 1998): 21-40.

press, and its ability to attract women, African-Americans, and a variety of ethnic groups.³

In the next two decades historians, typically relying on “the new social history,” developed the theme of the party’s diverse American roots by focusing on rank and file members and sympathizers. Many implicitly or explicitly contrasted the experience of socialism in the Progressive Era with the sectarianism and alienation of both the Socialist and Communist parties after 1925. A number of important books in this vein were published following Weinstein’s work, including those by Sally M. Miller, James R. Green, Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, John H.M. Laslett, Elliot Shore, and Richard Judd. Perhaps the most compelling book in the rehabilitation of the Socialist Party was Nick Salvatore’s *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*. Building on historians’ recovery of the “republican” tradition as a counterpoint to a dominant liberalism, Salvatore argued that Debsian socialism was more explicable in terms of American republicanism than Marxism.⁴

The essays in this and the October 2003 issue of the *JGAPE* fall into two categories. Those collected in this issue concern the socialism of the Socialist Party, which was a constituent part of an international movement, organized in the Second International. In some ways these essays presume and update our understanding of features of socialism that have been of interest to scholars since the advent of the second wave of scholarship. But, they also offer new perspectives and emphases, including the perspective offered by transnational studies, that challenge current understandings of Socialism.

³Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1915* (New York, 1952).

⁴Sally M. Miller, *Victor Berger and the Promise of Constructive Socialism, 1910-1920* (Westport, CT, 1973); James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1978); Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920* (Urbana, 1983); Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London, 1987); John H.M. Laslett, *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881-1924* (New York, 1970); Elliot Shore, *Talkin’ Socialism: J.A. Wayland and the Role of the Press in American Radicalism, 1890-1912* (Lawrence, KS, 1988); Richard Judd, *Socialist Cities: Municipal Politics and the Grass Roots of American Socialism* (Albany, NY, 1989); Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, 1982).

Stephen Burwood's "Debsian Socialism Through a Transnational Lens" departs from the scholarship that has emphasized the Americanness or indigenous nature of the Socialist Party. He does so by drawing on the new scholarship of transnationalism, while building on the older concept of internationalism. In arguing for a "transnational socialist congruity," Burwood challenges the thrust of the latest generation of scholarship on the party that views the Debsian socialism of the heartland as more American (or republican) than European or Marxist. Burwood, relying on his reading of three newspapers popular in heartland socialism and examining them for phrasing, tone, style, and content, makes a persuasive case for viewing the controversies and discussions occurring within the American party as mirroring those that animated European parties. Using his transnational lens, Burwood concentrates on the rise of revisionism, the land question, and the role of religion, finding in each case that American positions were far from unique. After reading this essay, future scholars of Socialism will find it difficult to continue contrasting American Socialist politics and intellectual content with a presumed theoretically more sophisticated and predominantly Marxist political culture of European Socialists.

Sally Miller, who has long studied and published works about the Socialist Party, offers a more critical view of the SPA in "For White Men Only: The Socialist Party of America and Issues of Gender, Ethnicity and Race." While acknowledging the advanced positions taken by the party on these issues viewed in contemporary context, Miller persuasively draws our attention to the limitations of these positions and the party's practices. Miller portrays a Socialist movement unable and unwilling to draw on the energies and talents of women, new immigrant ethnic groups, and African Americans and notes the paucity or complete absence of any affirmative or special organizing policies and messages directed to these groups by national party leadership. In its commitment to the all-encompassing goal of working-class revolution, party leaders assumed that all such inequalities would ultimately disappear. The result was a segregated and marginalized presence within the party for each of these groups. Borrowing from Bell, she writes that Socialist women, new immigrant groups, and African Americans were "in but not of" the Socialist Party. Critical to Miller's analysis is her suggestion that the party's limitations might be attributed not merely to prevalent American racist, nativist, or sexist attitudes, but to the very nature of the Marxist categories then dominant

within the Second International. In shifting our attention from uniquely American issues, Miller thus contributes to the transnational theme that runs through the essays contained in this issue.

Since Bell's book on Marxism, many students of socialism have looked askance on a religious orientation to socialism. Some have attributed the putative dogmatism of the party and its alienation from American life to the party's chiliastic belief in the imminence and inevitability of revolutionary transformation. Jacob H. Dorn's "In Spiritual Communion: Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Christians" turns this position on its head by shifting his attention from the religious character of official Marxism to the relation of the party to Christian progressivism and socialism. Dorn's topic is the "reciprocal admiration" and mutual embrace of Eugene Debs and the party's small but significant cadre of committed religious socialists. Many of them former ministers, they viewed Debs as a transcendent symbol of the potential redemption of a fallen society through Jesus-like martyrdom and love of humanity. Debs returned the favor despite, and more likely because of, his hostility to *organized* religion. The party's very openness to Christian themes, suggests Dorn, "flavored it" with a vitality and zeal that help explain its achievements in Progressive Era America. In his emphasis on American religion, Dorn seems to offer a counterpoint to the transnational emphases of the other essays in this issue. But the careful reader will remember Burwood's suggestion that an openness to domestic religious currents was widespread among the parties affiliated with the Second International and hardly need cause surprise.

The last essay, Jason Martinek's "'The Workingman's Bible': Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England* and the Making of Debsian Socialism, 1895-1900," returns readers to a transnational theme. In examining the never-before explored success in America of the British book, *Merrie England*, Martinek draws our attention to a trans-Atlantic socialist print culture, what he terms an "extensive printed culture of dissent." Martinek reminds us that the late nineteenth century was marked by the transformative power of the printed word, exemplified in the popular impact of tracts and books, such as Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and William Coin Harvey's *Coin's Financial School*. The wide influence of such literature, Martinek tells us, owed not simply to mass literacy, but to more specific developments such as lowered postal rates and costs of

publishing. Socialists relied heavily on the conversion potential of books and invested precious movement resources in advertising, distributing, and selling *Merrie England*, which unlike Bellamy's novel, was written in language accessible to working people. In drawing our attention to *Merrie England* and its influence, the article contributes to a cultural analysis of the rise of the socialist movement in the 1890s, while also suggesting a transnational context.

The October 2003 special issue on U.S. socialism will include essays that explore socialism as it developed in the Progressive Era *outside* the confines of the party and beyond the ideology of Marxism. They will deal with developments not normally viewed as "socialist," most notably the notion of socialism as a set of social relations developing within and through capitalism in the corporate stage of its development. Insofar as it does so, the next issue will invite and challenge scholars and students of socialism and the period to rethink the place of socialism in American life.